

## 5. Spirit Love and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Spirit and Psychic Love

This chapter is a commentary on paragraphs from Chapter One of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* published by Harper and Row in 1954. I have selected paragraphs and parts of paragraphs which illuminate the difference between Spirit love or *agape* and psychic love or *eros*. The translation I am quoting uses the term "human love" rather than "psychic love." The translator's footnote says that the term "psychic" is "more precise but perhaps alien to our ears." But I feel that the term "human love" is more misleading than "psychic love," because Spirit love is also human love. We misunderstand Bonhoeffer if we imply that Spirit love is not part of the essential being of humanity. So I will make this one change in the translation: wherever the word "human" is used to modify "love" I will insert "psychic" instead.

I will begin on page 31, halfway down the long second paragraph of a section entitled "A Spiritual not a Psychic Reality."

. . . In the community of Spirit (*i.e. Holy Spirit*) there burns the bright love of brotherly service, *agape*; in the psychic community of spirit there glows the dark love of good and evil desire, *eros*. In the former there is ordered, brotherly service, in the latter disordered desire for pleasure; in the former humble subjection to the brethren; in the latter humble yet haughty subjection of a brother to one's own desire. In the community of the Spirit the Word of God alone rules; in the psychic community of spirit there rules, along with the Word, the man who is furnished with exceptional powers, experience, and magical, suggestive capacities. There God's Word alone is binding; here, besides the Word, men bind others to themselves. There all power, honor, and dominion are surrendered to the Holy Spirit; here spheres of power and influence of a personal nature are sought and cultivated. It is true, in so far as these are devout men, that they do this with the intention of serving the highest and the best, but in actuality the result is to dethrone the Holy Spirit, to relegate Him to remote unreality. In actuality, it is only the psychic that is operative here. In the spiritual realm the Spirit governs; in the psychic community, psychological techniques and methods. In the former naive, un-psychological, unmethodical, helping love is extended toward one's brother; in the latter psychological analysis and construction; in the one service of one's brother is simple and humble; in the other service consists of a searching, calculating analysis of a stranger.<sup>1</sup>

The contrast Bonhoeffer draws between these two forms of love and the community based on them could hardly be more definite, and yet Bonhoeffer is not devaluing *eros*. He is not holding our natural desires in contempt. The psychic processes pointed to with the word "love" are not being disparaged. Let us be clear what Bonhoeffer means by "psychic love" or "*eros*." He means the desire for friendship, sexual union, delight in the qualities of others, and other quite normal and rich aspects of human life. Bonhoeffer is not disparaging psychic love; he is simply describing the difference between psychic and Spirit love and two types of community based on these those two types of love.

So what is he saying is the difference? Spirit love is not desire. It does not desire others for the sake of satisfying some want or need in the loving person. It does not bind the loved to the lover. Spirit love is completely outgoing toward the loved person. It serves the other. And it serves the other as another person, not as an arms-length stranger whose life is being shaped by this "service." Bonhoeffer insists that Spirit love is simple; it is simple like giving a thirsty child a

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer used the now obsolete convention of employing "man," "his," "brethren" to mean both men and women. I have not attempted to upgrade his language, for I want the reader to understand that my commentary is based on his words, not on some paraphrase of them.

drink of water, like providing a sick person some care, like visiting a criminal locked away from society. As we read further Bonhoeffer will spell out how Spirit love serves the other on the Spirit level as well as the physical and psychological levels. But even on the Spirit level the service is simple, straight forward, not manipulative, not calculating, not from a haughty position of healthy therapist to sick client, but from a humble position of one human/Spirit person to another. In later paragraphs Bonhoeffer will say all these things more clearly. In the paragraph just quoted Bonhoeffer has, I believe, sought to grab our attention by drawing sharp contrasts. In the next three paragraphs Bonhoeffer spells out the difference between Spirit love (which includes the detachment of freedom) and psychic love (which involves fusion, absorption, and rulership).

Before turning to those paragraphs, I want to reflect on what Bonhoeffer is pointing to with the phrase “the Word of God alone rules.” What is the “Word of God” and what does it mean for it to rule communal life? Unlike Tillich and Bultmann who seek to reinterpret in modern metaphor every biblical phrase, Bonhoeffer simply uses the traditional language but uses it in new ways. In actual life meanings, however, Bonhoeffer’s usage points to the same things being pointed to by these other theologians. “You are accepted” – “accepted by the Ground of our being” is Tillich’s expression of the Word of God. Bonhoeffer in another essay suggests that Christ, the Word of God, is the place where the good and the real intersect. “All that is, is good” is another expression of this Word. Trusting the News that the Final Actually we all confront is trustworthy is trusting the Word of God. So for the Word of God to rule does not mean worshiping the literal words of the Bible. It means trusting that each person is Welcome Home to Reality, to the Awesome Ground of our being. True community and true Spirit love are rooted in this Word alone and not in this Word plus other things. This is Bonhoeffer’s thesis. As we read further, let us ask how this is so.

Perhaps the contrast between spiritual and psychic reality can be made most clear in the following observation: Within the spiritual community there is never, nor in any way, any “immediate” relationship of one to another, whereas psychic community expresses a profound, elemental, human desire for community, for immediate contact with other human souls, just as in the flesh there is the urge for physical merger with other flesh. Such desire of the human soul seeks a complete fusion of I and Thou, whether this occur in the union of love or, what is after all the same thing, in the forcing of another person into one’s sphere of power and influence. Here is where the psychically strong person is in his element, securing for himself the admiration, the love, or the fear of the weak. Here human ties, suggestions, and bonds are everything, and in the immediate community of souls we have reflected the distorted image of everything that is originally and solely peculiar to community mediated through Christ.

The statements in this paragraph can seem preposterous to those of us who have worked hard to overcome our reserve and emotional distance and thereby learned to make more contact with other people. Bonhoeffer is not denying the validity of such personal changes. He is simply saying that such emotional, sensual, or sexual contact is not Spirit community. Furthermore, the psychic form of community can stand in the way of Spirit community, can eclipse what we mean by Spirit community and Spirit love. Spirit community is mediated through Christ. What does he mean by that? Such community is not “immediate;” it is “mediated.” Each person involved in the communal relation must pass through the mediator before reaching the other person. What does that mean? It means that the relation is comprised of the fact that both parties are forgiven or welcomed home by the ground of their Being. This makes the community Spiritual, not the desire each may or may not have for one another, not the delight that each may or may not take in one another, not the personal force each may or may not possess. All Spirit connection needs is Christ. In other words, Spirit connection happens when two persons are both Awed – that is, in touch with the Awe with which the Awesome is Awe-ing them, choosing to accept their welcome home to the family of the Awed

Ones. This connection takes place in spite of, and in no way because of, all the other ways that humans can connect to one another. Let us read on.

Thus there is such a thing as human absorption. It appears in all the forms of conversion wherever the superior power of one person is consciously or unconsciously misused to influence profoundly and draw into his spell another individual or a whole community. Here one soul operates directly upon another soul. The weak have been overcome by the strong, the resistance of the weak has broken down under the influence of another person. He has been overpowered, but not won over by the thing itself. This becomes evident as soon as the demand is made that he throw himself into the cause itself, independently of the person to whom he is bound, or possibly in opposition to this person. Here is where the psychically converted person breaks down and thus makes it evident that his conversion was effected, not by the Holy Spirit, but by a man, and therefore has no stability.

Perhaps each of us can think of illustrations of religious bodies that are held together by one or two strong persons who bind people to them. Such community, Bonhoeffer says, has no stability. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer implies that a Holy-Spirit-based community does have stability. When communal connection is built of Spirit love, of the Awe that is given by the Infinite Awesomeness, then people have been “converted” to an infinitely stable structure. Each person is given strength to stand on his or her own, even over against the perversions of the strongest people in the community. Each person has autonomy within their own relationship with the Ground of being. In the next paragraph Bonhoeffer returns more directly to the topic of love.

Likewise, there is a psychic love of one’s neighbor. Such passion is capable of prodigious sacrifices. Often it far surpasses genuine Christian love in fervent devotion and visible results. It speaks the Christian language with overwhelming and stirring eloquence. But it is what Paul is speaking of when he says: “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned”—in other words, though I combine the utmost deeds of love with the utmost of devotion—“and have not charity [that is, the love of Christ], it profiteth me nothing” (I Cor. 13:3). Psychic love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ’s sake. Therefore, psychic love seeks direct contact with the other person; it loves him not as a free person but as one whom it binds to itself. It wants to gain, to capture by every means; it uses force. It desires to be irresistible, to rule.

Bonhoeffer surprises us here with his picture of the force and enthusiasm that psychic love can have. Yet this strong force counts for nothing as far as Spirit community is concerned. It does not set others free, but binds them, rules them, desires them. Spirit Love and Spirit Freedom are two aspects of the same Holy Spirit. Psychic love is opposed to Spirit Freedom. Bonhoeffer turns next to the topic of love and truth.

Psychic love has little regard for truth. It makes the truth relative, since nothing, not even the truth, must come between it and the beloved person. Psychic love desires the other person, his company, his answering love, but it does not serve him. On the contrary, it continues to desire even when it seems to be serving. There are two marks, both of which are one and the same thing, that manifest the difference between spiritual and psychic love: Psychic love cannot tolerate the dissolution of a fellowship that has become false for the sake of genuine fellowship, and psychic love cannot love an enemy, that is, one who seriously and stubbornly resists it. Both spring from the same source: psychic love is by its very nature desire—desire for psychic community. So long as it can satisfy this desire in some way, it will not give it up, even for the sake of truth, even for the sake of genuine love for others. But where it can no longer expect its desire to be fulfilled, there it stops short—namely, in the face of an enemy. There it turns into hatred, contempt, and calumny.

In no other paragraph is Bonhoeffer more clear about the difference between these two types of love. Psychic love clings to false relationships when it desires them and is averse to

relationships in which it is seriously and stubbornly resisted. This should certainly sound familiar to all of us. How many of us have avoided being genuine or telling the truth in relationships we did not want to lose? Spirit love has a profound effect on those relationships our psychic love passionately desires to keep. It brings truth to those relationships. Psychic love alone is inclined to dispense with the truth if it gets in the way of what is desired. But Spirit love is consistent with the love of truth, and it creates relationships that are genuine in the sense of allowing truth to outweigh desire.

How many of us have puzzled over the years about how loving an enemy could even be possible? Here is Bonhoeffer's answer: if psychic love is your understanding of love, loving the enemy is impossible. That could be a relief to any of us who have been trying to make our psychic love feel affectionate toward our serious and stubborn enemies. This is the nature of psychic love: when faced with a serious and stubborn enemy, it becomes hatred, contempt, and calumny. "Calumny" means figuring out ways to defame, dismiss, or dehumanize. We all use calumny even in seemingly small family arguments with lovers, parents, and children. To love the enemy requires a quality of love that is different from psychic love. Spirit love is a quality of love that can forgive and affirm an enemy, and it can do so even while our own psychic love hates and despises and tries to demean that person. In the next paragraph Bonhoeffer deals with the relationship between these two forms of love.

Right here is the point where spiritual love begins. This is why psychic love becomes personal hatred when it encounters genuine spiritual love, which does not desire but serves. Psychic love makes itself an end in itself. It creates of itself an end, an idol which it worships, to which it must subject everything. It nurses and cultivates an ideal; it loves itself, and nothing else in the world. Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ; it serves him alone; it knows that it has no immediate access to other persons.

Bonhoeffer implies that there is a profound conflict within our own being between our psychic and our Spirit love. Our own psychic love hates our own Spirit love insofar as our Spirit love seeks to serve others in ways that deny what our psychic love desires. Bonhoeffer also implies that our Spirit love can love our psychic love even when our psychic love has turned to personal hatred toward this "higher angel" of our being. Spirit love loves the enemy even when that enemy is our own psychic love. But loving our own psychic love does not mean indulging it; it means serving it with the functionality of detachment and discipline. Where is this detachment and discipline rooted? Spirit love comes from Jesus Christ. What does this mean? Bonhoeffer is provoking us to probe into a fresh understanding of what these words "Jesus Christ" mean. Jesus Christ is the Word, the Ultimate Message about the love of God for us and for everyone. If we serve this Message, we serve everyone. We even serve our own being in its light: all aspects of our being are loved by God. The Word of Ultimate Benevolence toward ourselves and all others has become the meaning of our lives. We see that our reality is loved by Reality. We see that realistic living is good for us, good for everyone. We see that delusory living is not good for us. Reality which is always working in opposition to our delusions is thereby working for our good. To surrender our delusions and let Reality be is a death experience, but also a resurrection to newness of life. Even if we must grieve the loss of our deluded life for three days or so while it lies dead in some tomb, on the third day a new quality of life can arise and walk out of that tomb. Herein is the Message that Spirit love serves. Hence, when we serve others we do not serve them directly in terms of their desires and their delusions, we serve them in the light of this Word – that is, we serve Jesus Christ. Rather than immediate access to other persons, seducing them with our affection, we stand at a respectful distance and call them to access their own freedom to live their own real lives, complete with their own Spirit love. Bonhoeffer expands on this deep topic.

Jesus Christ stands between the lover and the others he loves. I do not know in advance what love of others means on the basis of the general idea of love that grows out of my psychic

desires—all this may rather be hatred and an insidious kind of selfishness in the eyes of Christ. What love is, only Christ tells in his Word. Contrary to all my own opinions and convictions, Jesus Christ will tell me what love toward the brethren really is. Therefore, spiritual love is bound solely to the Word of Jesus Christ. Where Christ bids me to maintain fellowship for sake of love, I will maintain it. Where his truth enjoins me to dissolve a fellowship for the love's sake, there I will dissolve it, despite all the protests of my psychic love. Because spiritual love does not desire but rather serves; it loves an enemy as a brother. It originates neither in the brother nor in the enemy but in Christ and his Word. Psychic love can never understand spiritual love, for spiritual love is from above; it is something completely strange, new, and incomprehensible to all earthly love.

“Jesus Christ standing between” is a rather strange image. Here I am hugging another person and Jesus Christ is standing between us. What on earth does this mean? It means that I keep my distance. Even if I am having sexual intercourse with the loved person, I am me; and she is she. We are not joined at the hip. We are not one person. We are not connected except through a very strange connection that Jesus Christ alone can provide. We are connected through a common acceptance of the Word that both are forgiven, that both are loved, that the reality of each of us is good no matter how different or how strange it may feel to the other. And such profound love is also freedom – freedom from my own ideas of what loving means. I do not know before the moment of actual loving what love means in some abstract settled sense. I look to see what I am being told by the Word about what love means in each particular instance. This guidance may prove contrary to my own opinions and convictions. It may prove contrary to my own desires. This love is a radical obedience to the Word that Reality is benevolent and that realistic living is best. But since Reality is always larger than my sense of reality, I never have this sort of loving wrapped up in a set of neat guidelines. In my profound freedom I have to choose what love requires of me in each moment. Bonhoeffer's examples provide a profound contradiction to the desires of my psychic love. If Christ's truth enjoins me to maintain a relationship, I boldly do so in spite of all the aversions of my psychic desires. If Christ's truth enjoins me to dissolve a relationship, I boldly do so in spite of all the protests of my psychic desires. Indeed, our own psychic love will perpetually find Spirit loving strange, new, and incomprehensible.

Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them. As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others, too, can be saved only by Christ himself. This means that I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain his independence of me; to be loved for what he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ bought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for my brother, before I could begin to act, I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him only as the person that he already is in Christ's eyes. This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ. Psychic love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.

Bonhoeffer's use of classical language needs some decoding for most of us. If we substitute for the word “Christ” words like “the authentic human” or “the Awed One” we begin to avoid most of our misunderstandings. For Bonhoeffer, “Christ” or “the Awed One” is an eternal dynamic in the fabric of the cosmos. This dynamic became Jesus or appeared in Jesus in order that we might discover this dynamic as the “true image” of our own lives. This is the meaning Bonhoeffer gives to being “saved.” “Saved” means saved from our estrangements from our true self and saved for being our true self. Christ is our true self as well as the secret to understanding who Jesus is. So with such interpretations in mind, what is Bonhoeffer saying in this paragraph? He is saying that my enactment of Spirit love does not seek to remold other persons in the light of my images of what is best for them. Rather Spirit love seeks to call forth

in the loved persons their own freedom to be their own true nature. And that true nature includes the Spirit freedom and the Spirit love that Bonhoeffer is describing in these paragraphs. Bonhoeffer continues this theme in the next paragraph.

Therefore, spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says and does commends Christ. It will not seek to move others by all too personal, direct influence, by impure interference in the life of another. It will not take pleasure in pious, human fervor and excitement. It will rather meet the other person with the clear Word of God and be ready to leave him alone with this Word for a long time, willing to release him again in order that Christ may deal with him. It will respect the line that has been drawn between him and us by Christ, and it will find full fellowship with him in the Christ who alone binds us together. Thus this spiritual love will speak to Christ about a brother more than to a brother about Christ. It knows that the most direct way to others is always through prayer to Christ and that love of others is wholly dependent upon the truth in Christ. It is out of this love that John the disciple speaks. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (III John 4).

For Bonhoeffer "Christ" means a reality, THE REALITY of authenticity for which all human beings are made and to which all human beings are called. This has nothing to do with being a Christian, although a true Christian is someone who is "in Christ." But anyone of any religion or without religion can be "in Christ," for Christ is simply who we essentially are underneath all the habitual escaping from who we essentially are. So Spirit love, as Bonhoeffer describes it, means something vastly different from getting someone to join our religious group or believe our favorite dogmas or practice our favorite moralities or live up to our favorite ideals. We do not try to move others with our gushiness or our genuine affection. We avoid such impure interference. That is, we witness to the TRUTH as we have heard it from REALITY and then we leave the other person alone to hear that TRUTH for themselves from the REALITY which they confront as surely as we. We do not hold their hands. We do not coax or cajole. We leave them alone. Bonhoeffer expresses this in a colorful way: in our own solitary prayer practices, we speak to the REALITY of Christ about the brother or sister more than we speak to the brother or sister about the REALITY of Christ. Bonhoeffer is not talking about having some magical influence over the brother or sister through prayer. He is not talking about influence at all. He is talking about spending more time and energy deciding what to say to someone than you spend saying it. And after saying it, we do not stand around wringing our hands in the hope that we have been heard. Nor do we fuss over the person's willingness or unwillingness to deal with the Message. We leave them alone, for it is only the Message they receive in their aloneness that heals. If our words to another are not echoed by REALITY, then our words are not fruitful words. And if the person we have loved with our words does hear REALITY, our Spirit love does not rejoice that we have been listened to, but that this person "walks in truth."

I will conclude my quotations from this Bonhoeffer passage with the first three sentences of the next paragraph.

Psychic love lives by uncontrolled and uncontrollable dark *desires*; spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by the *truth*. Psychic love produces human subjection, dependence, constraints; spiritual love creates *freedom* of the brethren under the Word. Psychic love breeds hothouse flowers; spiritual love create the *fruits* that grow healthily in accord with God's good will in the rain and storm and sunshine of God's outdoors.

I take this poetry to mean that Spirit love is entirely natural. Spirit love is in accord with the optimal functioning of the cosmos. Spirit love is our true nature. We do not have to achieve it. We do not have to invent it. We only have to let it loose. And if we plant even a small seed of Spirit love in the good soil of our actual lives, it will grow. And it will grow in the storms as well as in the gentle rains. Spirit love is indestructible, strong, victorious, everlasting. Every other form of love passes away, comes and goes, or perhaps turns into some disappointed malice. But Spirit love never fails, never goes away, never becomes anything other than its own enduring goodness.