THE IMPACT OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER ON TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PREACHERS AND PREACHING

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is to show the impact Dietrich Bonhoeffer can have on twenty-first century preacher’s view of the cost of discipleship and how that view influences their preaching. Dr. James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* writes that 1,500 pastors in America leave the ministry every week because of burnout, conflict or moral failure.¹ That statistic indicates that the call to costly discipleship needs to be revisited. Bonhoeffer was a man who understood and truly lived a costly discipleship.

Bonhoeffer was born on February 6, 1906, in Breslau, Germany. He was a theologian, pastor, spiritual writer, and one of the key figures in the Protestant church’s resistance against Nazism.

To many people, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a spiritual hero. Two of his most popular works, *The Cost of Discipleship* (written in 1937) and *Life Together* (written in 1938) have been read and cherished by people for decades.

People are also challenged by the fact that Bonhoeffer, a Christian, was executed by the Nazis because he was part of an unsuccessful plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. But people are mainly attracted to him of his emphasis on total devotion to Jesus. For example, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* he wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”² That familiar phrase is a

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reminder that being a follower of Jesus means that he demands all my heart and soul and mind and strength. There is no room for a compromising faith which Bonhoeffer described as “cheap grace.”

My thesis will focus on the Impact that Bonhoeffer can have on preachers and preaching in the 21st century. That is a valid quest even though there already is a wealth of published information about both the man and his works. According to the International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Society, there have been 18 publications about Bonhoeffer since 1990 and seven translated works of Bonhoeffer since 1997.

The abundance of resources indicates not only our interest in him, but also the profound impact Bonhoeffer has already had on the church and world since his execution over 60 years ago. The life and works of Bonhoeffer have influenced both Christians and non-Christians. Countless pastors, Christian leaders and followers of Jesus would testify that Dietrich Bonhoeffer has impacted their lives and ministries. He already is a model for us. So is there room for another work about Bonhoeffer?

I believe there is an important need for a work that will specifically focus on the influence that Bonhoeffer can have on contemporary preachers’ understanding of what discipleship costs. That influence on preachers will have a subsequent impact on the church through their preaching. There are six reasons why Bonhoeffer can impact preachers today.

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3 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 43.

First, Bonhoeffer placed a high premium on the discipline of meditating on the Scriptures. He believed that when a preacher or teacher meditated on the Word of God, it not only benefited the preacher but also the congregation. In *Life Together* he wrote:

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us this day and for our Christian life, that it is not only God’s Word for the Church, but also God’s Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally…”

Second, he stressed the importance of Christian fellowship (or life in the Body of Jesus). To Bonhoeffer, we cannot be a follower of Jesus unless there is a devotion to one another in a fellowship of believers. A pastor is more than a preacher. He is also a member of the local body of Jesus.

Third is what he referred to as “costly grace.” Bonhoeffer wrote that the greatest enemy of the church is “cheap grace” which is the very opposite of “costly grace.” Certainly, modern-day preachers must not only model a non-compromising faith, but they must also faithfully proclaim that theme from the pulpit.

Fourth is the importance of calling God’s people to stand against evil in society. When Bonhoeffer’s fellow church leaders in Nazi Germany rallied to support Hitler and the Third Reich, he took a stand against Hitler. He also worked to get Jews out of the country. The “evils” we face are certainly different, but Bonhoeffer’s example still lives. As preachers, we can sometimes shrink away from

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the hard issues of the day, like abortion. Bonhoeffer’s example can encourage us to face these issues head–on. This courage will also mean that there will be more sermons that call God’s people to be the salt and the light in a dark world.

Fifth, he exemplifies what it means to serve Jesus even in the severest of trials. Bonhoeffer took a stand for Jesus in a society that wanted to be great without acknowledging God. Even when he had opportunities to escape Germany for a safer place, Bonhoeffer decided to remain.

In 1939, his American friends got Bonhoeffer out of Germany, and they urged him to stay and wait out the war in America. But he refused. He could not comprehend rebuilding the church in Germany after the war unless he suffered along with his brothers and sisters in Jesus during the war. Bonhoeffer’s fire-tested faith is an example for preachers today, regardless of the various trials we face. The fire-tested faith of a preacher will, no doubt, carry over into the pulpit.

A sixth reason why Dietrich Bonhoeffer can impact 21st century preachers and preaching is his grace of living well and dying well. He did more than write about the cost that is involved in following Jesus. He lived it. Even as he risked his life opposing Nazi tyranny, he was characterized by a Christ-like character. He cared more for other people than himself. In prison, waiting for his execution, he was calm. He knew at this point that his days were numbered. Yet, one fellow prisoner remarked “Bonhoeffer was all humility and sweetness.”8 Another reported that “his eyes were quite unnatural.”9 As a prisoner, Bonhoeffer often ministered to and encouraged those who were distraught.10

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On April 9, 1945, he was put to death by the S.S. Black Guard at the Flossenburg concentration camp. The day before, he led a worship service for his fellow prisoners, and according to one officer, Bonhoeffer said just the right words to encourage their hearts. He died the next day with dignity and calmness. Thus, to the very end, he lived for the glory of the Lord Jesus.

These are six of the many reasons why Dietrich Bonhoeffer can impact preachers and preaching in this century. One may wonder whether or not the Nazi Germany context of Dietrich Bonhoeffer can relate to our own context in the 21st century. Can Bonhoeffer really make a difference in the life and ministry of a pastor in America where there is a much safer context to proclaim the Word of God? I believe that these six reasons speak louder because of the historical context of Bonhoeffer. He realized that even before Hitler took power, Germany was on her way towards a society that would eventually focus more on man than God. A similar principle of self-sufficiency exists today in America. A call for a costly discipleship is just as important today as it was in Germany in the 1930’s.

Bonhoeffer’s relevance for 21st century preachers and preaching is strengthened, I believe, by the ability he possessed to clearly see how the church can be weakened by compromise. The church in Germany allowed herself to be eroded by National Socialism. As the church became weak in faith and in character, Bonhoeffer would not be fooled. There was no room for the followers of Jesus to possess a “cheap grace” because it was the greatest enemy of the church. The cross of Jesus Christ demands a costly grace in his followers. Grace is “costly” because it

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cost men and women their very lives. And it is “grace” because grace is vital for Christ’s followers to live for him.

The message of “costly” grace is timeless and appropriate for all generations whether or not there is tyranny in society. Because the church in America needs to hear the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer this thesis will attempt to bring his writings closer to hearts and minds of 21st century preachers.

This will be accomplished through the exploration of the writings, sermons and life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Dietrich Bonhoeffer can impact preachers and preaching in the 21st century. Bonhoeffer was both a theologian and a pastor. He was careful to make sure that scripture was the foundation of all that he did in the world. It was his insistence on obeying scripture that often separated him from his fellow pastors.

Meditation on the Word

To Dietrich Bonhoeffer, meditation on God’s Word was absolutely essential for every follower of Jesus. In his work, Meditation of Psalm 119, he wrote: “Therefore, it is never sufficient simply to have read God’s Word. It must penetrate deep within us, dwell in us, like the Holy of Holies in the Sanctuary, so that we do not sin in thought, word or deed.”

To Bonhoeffer, scripture meditation was even more important for pastors and preachers because if the word of God did not become full in his heart through meditation and prayer, how could he expect to properly explain the word to his congregation. He wrote, “I will offend against my calling if I do not seek each day in prayer the word that my Lord wants me to say that day.”

Meditation on the scriptures is a biblical theme based on passages such as Joshua 1. As Joshua succeeded Moses and was about to lead Israel into the Promised Land, God said to him:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be


12 Bonhoeffer, Meditating on the Word, 31.
strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go (verses 8-9).

God made it clear to Joshua that success and obedience will grow out of meditation on God’s word.

The Hebrew word for “meditate” means to “ponder” and “study.”¹³ The word can be translated “recite it quietly.”¹⁴ Matthew Henry wrote that Joshua was granted a “great trust” by God. Therefore, “he must find time…for meditation.” In regards to us, Henry continued: “Whatever affairs of this world we have to mind, we must not neglect the one thing needful”¹⁵

Psalm 1 also makes it clear that God will bless those who consistently meditate on his word:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

There is a connection between scripture meditation and being blessed by God. The Hebrew word for “meditate” is the same word in Joshua 1:8. God will bless the person who recites slowly and studies and ponders the word of God. To be blessed by God is more than being happy. Charles Spurgeon pointed out that the word “blessed” in Psalm 1:1 is a “very expressive word”:


The original word is plural...Hence we may learn the multiplicity of the blessings which shall rest upon the man whom God hath justified, and the perfection and the greatness of the blessedness he shall enjoy. We might read it, “Oh, the blessedness!” and we may regard it...as joyful acclamation of the gracious man’s felicity. May the like benediction rest on us!\(^{16}\)

As seen in Joshua 1, God will also bless with success and fruitfulness. Bonhoeffer knew that the promises of Joshua 1 and Psalm 1 were true. He offered the following reasons why he meditated on the word of God:

Because I am Christian. Therefore, every day in which I do not penetrate more deeply into the knowledge of God’s Word in Holy Scripture is a lost day for me.

Because I am a preacher of the Word. I cannot expound the Scripture for others if I do not let it speak daily to me. I will misuse the Word in my office as preacher if I do not continue to meditate upon it in prayer.

Because I need a firm discipline of prayer.

Because I need help against the ungodly haste and unrest which threaten my work as a pastor. Only from the peace of God’s Word can there flow the proper, devoted service of each day.\(^{17}\)

Bonhoeffer’s years of scripture meditation may have benefited him in his final years, months and days in prison. Even when he knew he would be executed, he continued to be characterized by joy and peace. Bonhoeffer’s outlook was witnessed by British officer Captain S. Payne Best. Best was captured by the Gestapo in 1939. They were fellow prisoners during Bonhoeffer’s final weeks. Best wrote that Bonhoeffer: “…was all humility and sweetness; he always seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in the very smallest event in life, and a


\(^{17}\) Bonhoeffer, Meditating on the Word, 30-32.
deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive...He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him.”

In a letter to Bonhoeffer’s family, Captain Best wrote that “Bonhoeffer was different (from the other prisoners); just quite calm and normal, seemingly perfectly at ease...his soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison.” No doubt the promise of Psalm 1:1 was fulfilled. Bonhoeffer was blessed because he meditated on the word of the Lord day and night; and he was a tree planted by streams of water that yielded fruit (Psalm 1:3).

Because 21st century preachers and pastors face many demands on their time, it is crucial that a portion of time be set aside daily to meditate on God’s Word. What would this look like in the daily schedule of a preacher? John Piper explains the process of scripture meditation:

Now what does this meditation involve? The word “meditation” in Hebrew means basically to speak or to mutter. When this is done in the heart, it is called musing or meditation. So meditating on the Word of God day and night means to speak to yourself the Word of God day and night and to speak to yourself about it—to mull it over, to ask questions about it and answer them from the Scripture itself, to ask yourself how this might apply to you and others, and to ponder its implications for life and church and culture and missions.

One simple way to do this is to memorize a verse or two and then say them to yourself once, emphasizing the first word. Then say them to yourself again, emphasizing the second word. Then say them a third time, emphasizing the third word. And so on, over and over again, until you have meditated on the reason why each word is there. Then you can start asking relational questions. If this word is used, why is that word used? The

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possibilities of musing and pondering and meditating are endless. And always we pray as we ponder, asking for God’s help and light.\textsuperscript{20}

Piper’s understanding of biblical meditation is similar to Bonhoeffer’s perspective. In \textit{Meditating on the Word}, he defined it as:

In the same way that the word of a person who is dear to me follows me throughout the day, so the Word of Scripture should resonate and work within me ceaselessly. Just as you would not dissect and analyze the word spoken by someone dear to you, but would accept it just as it was said, so you should accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation…Do not ask how you should tell it to others, but ask what it tells you! Then ponder this word in heart at length, until it is entirely within you and has taken possession of you.\textsuperscript{21}

A 21\textsuperscript{st} century pastor and preacher must possess the discipline to set aside portions of the day to meditate on God’s Word. In doing so, “we are taking the time to ponder the Word of God, allowing for the Holy Spirit to reveal the riches of wisdom.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Fellowship}

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was convinced that it was impossible to be a follower of Jesus Christ apart from life in the fellowship of local believers: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{23} This was more than mere theory for Bonhoeffer because he had the opportunity to develop a community of believers while he was the director of the Preachers’ Seminary.


\textsuperscript{21} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Meditating on the Word}, 32-33.


The Seminary was located at Zingsthof by the Baltic Sea when it opened on April 26, 1935. It relocated in Finkenwalde, near Stettin in Pomerania on June 24 of the same year. The Gestapo eventually closed the Seminary in September of 1937. During the period of its existence, Bonhoeffer desired a “genuine experiment in communal living.”\textsuperscript{24} It was Bonhoeffer’s desire that the experiment in the Seminary would provide a foundation for the German church after the war. Bonhoeffer realized that biblical community would provide the fresh life the church would need.

This realization led to a burning desire to put the findings of this “experiment” into writing. This led to his classic book, \textit{Life Together}, which was written a year after the Seminary was shut down. Bonhoeffer wrote the book in only four weeks, while he stayed in the home of his twin sister, Sabine, in Gottingen. The book was first published in 1939.

In \textit{Life Together}, Bonhoeffer appealed to a variety of Biblical references that point to the fact that community with fellow followers of Jesus is a crucial element of Christianity. For example, chapter one begins with Psalm 133:1: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.” Psalm 133 is a song of ascents. That is, it spoke of pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship together.

An important component was that people of different backgrounds were to be united in fellowship. Derek Kidner writes that “all Israelites, including even debtors, slaves and offenders…were brothers in God’s sight. The psalm is surely

\textsuperscript{24} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Testament to Freedom}, 27.
singing…of living up to this ideal, giving depth and reality to the emphasized word, ‘together’.  

The psalmist then gave two rich images that illustrated the unity of diverse people. The first rich image is in verse 2: “It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes.” This is a picture of Aaron being anointed as the high-priest of Israel. The oil was “precious” because it was a “sacred anointing oil, a fragrant blend” produced by a “perfumer” (Exodus 30:25).

According to Exodus 30:30-33, this “sacred” oil could not be put on any person except those consecrated as high priests. Only the best of the best oil could be used to anoint the high priests of God. It was a sweet and holy and blessed moment when they were anointed. The fragrance of the oil would be enjoyed by those who witnessed the event. Michael Wilcock writes that “Aaron’s anointing oil of verse 2 had a pervasive fragrance.”

This sweetness is also experienced when God’s people are unified. C.H. Spurgeon comments:

In order that we may the better behold brotherly unity David gives us a resemblance, so that as in a glass we may perceive its blessedness. It has a sweet perfume about it, comparable to the precious ointment with which the first High Priest was anointed at his ordination.

It is a holy thing, and so again is like the oil of consecration which was to be used only in the Lord’s service. What a sacred thing must be brotherly love when it can be likened to an oil which must never be poured on any man but on the Lord’s high-priest alone!

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It is a diffusive thing: being poured on his head the fragrant oil flowed down upon Aaron’s head, and thence dropped upon his garments till the utmost hem was anointed therewith; and even so doth brotherly love extend its benign power and bless all who are beneath its influence. Hearty concord brings a benediction upon all concerned; its goodness and pleasure are shared in by the lowliest members of the household; even the servants are the better and the happier because of the lovely unity among the members of the family.

It has a special use about it; for as by the anointing oil Aaron was set apart for the special service of Jehovah, even so those who dwell in love are the better fitted to glorify God in his church. The Lord is not likely to use for his glory those who are devoid of love; they lack the anointing needed to make them priests unto the Lord.²⁷

The second rich image is in verse 3: “It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.” Mount Hermon is the “highest mountain in Israel”²⁸ and is known for the fact that heavy dew descends to the lower parts of the mountain during the summer when the snow condenses to vapor.²⁹ This moisture benefited the plant life.³⁰ The city of Jerusalem, also known as Mount Zion, was a recipient because the Jordan River was supplied with water from the snow of Mount Hermon.³¹

In the same way that the elevations below Mount Herman were blessed with wetness, God’s people will be blessed when they live in harmony. Wilcock summarizes the application of these two rich images: “For brothers, that is, the


²⁸ Kidner, 453.


³⁰ Wilcock, 244.

people of God, thus to live together in unity is good (like the dew) and pleasant (like the oil).” A.F. Kirkpatrick adds that “from such dwelling together individuals draw fresh energy; the life of the community, social and religious, is revived and quickened.” Spurgeon wrote that Christian unity opens the window to God’s anointing on a fellowship: “Never shall we know the full power of the anointing till we are of one heart and one spirit; never will the sacred dew of the spirit descend in all its fullness till we are perfectly joined together in the same mind.”

Unity was a key to how Bonhoeffer understood the Church because Jesus died on the cross to secure such fellowship. The whole purpose of redemption in Jesus Christ was to save the enemies of God throughout the world, and in anticipation of eternal life, believers “are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians.”

It is a privilege because “the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.” The early Christians understood this truth. Even before the Holy Spirit was poured out on the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem there was community for “they all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). This group included the eleven disciples (verse 13) “along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus

32 Wilcock, 244.
34 Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, 6:169.
35 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 18.
36 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 19.
and with his brothers.” It is significant that both genders were represented here because the cultural barrier between male and female was abolished through mutual participation in the church.37 Verse 15 indicates that the total number of disciples was around one hundred and twenty. Thus, within weeks of the resurrection of Jesus, his people, made up of varied backgrounds, gathered waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then on the day of Pentecost, the brothers and sisters “were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). The Holy Spirit came upon them with power. Peter, empowered with the Holy Spirit, stood before thousands and proclaimed the Good News about Jesus. The result was that about three thousand people turned to Jesus for salvation (Acts 2:41).

Among the foundational disciplines of the early church was a devotion to the “fellowship” (Acts 2:42). The Greek word for “fellowship” is “koinonia”. It means “fellowship”, “communion”, “participation”, “sharing in” and “close relationship”.38 This “communion” is possible only because believers are united through their salvation in Jesus.

Bonhoeffer wrote: “without Christ we would not know other Christians around us; nor could we approach them. The way to them is blocked by our own ‘I’. Christ opened up the way to God and to one another. Now Christians can live with each other in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one.”39


Thus, fellowship is much more than simply being together. Since Christians are joined together in Jesus, they are devoted to love and serve one another.

Theologian Millard J. Erickson writes: “The body is to be characterized by genuine fellowship. This does not mean merely a social interrelatedness, but an intimate feeling for and understanding of one another. There is to be empathy and encouragement (edification). What is experienced by one is to be experienced by all.”

The early believers modeled this kind of fellowship. Acts 2:44-47 gives us a beautiful picture of their fellowship:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Luke believed that this picture of the early church was so important that he gave a similar description in Acts 4 where the unity and care of the Christians for one another is stressed once again: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything.”

This devotion to one another in the early church in Jerusalem is what the apostle Paul advocated in Ephesians 4:1-3: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble

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and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Verse 3 is the punch line in this statement. Paul equated walking worthy of the calling we have received with making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. John R.W. Stott writes that God’s work in history leading up to the cross of Jesus Christ lays the foundation for the unity in the church:

For three chapters Paul has been unfolding for his readers the eternal purpose of God being worked out in history. Through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners and was raised from death, God is creating something entirely new, not just a new life for individuals for a new society. Paul sees an alienated humanity being reconciled, a fractured humanity being united, even a new humanity being created. It is a magnificent vision.⁴¹

As an apostle, under house arrest, Paul begged his readers to fulfill this “vision” and live a life worthy of their calling in Jesus. Such lives were required because of their “high destiny.”⁴² Paul had in mind a “new humanity” composed of both Jews and Gentiles. In Jesus, they would form the “single family of God” that reflected the character of “him who called it into being and the purpose for which he so called it.”⁴³⁴⁴

One way to live a life worthy of the Lord is “to show humility and gentleness in their dealings one with another, along with patience and mutual


forbearance and tolerance. They are urged, in short, to let the fruit of the Spirit be seen in their lives.”

Concerning verse 2, Stott writes that humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and love are “five foundation stones of Christian unity. Where these are absent no external structure of unity can stand. But when this strong base has been laid, then there is good hope that a visible unity can be built.”

Again, verse 3 is the punch line of Paul’s statement. Unity in the church is to be fought for: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Paul describes the church’s unity as the “unity of the Spirit (meaning a unity which the Holy Spirit creates).” Stott writes that this:

Unity is as indestructible as God himself. Yet in the same context (Paul) also tells us that we have to maintain it! What can he mean? What is the sense of urging the maintenance of something indestructible and urging us to maintain it, when it is “a unity of the Spirit’, which he created and is therefore presumably responsible for preserving?

There seems to be but one possible answer to these questions, namely that to maintain the church’s unity must mean to maintain it visibly. Here is an apostolic exhortation to us to preserve in actual concrete relationships of love (in the bond of peace, that is, by the peace which binds us together) that unity which God has created and which neither man nor demon can destroy. We are to demonstrate to the world that the unity we say exists indestructibly is not the rather sick joke it sounds but a true a glorious reality.

The apostle John took it a step further: fellowship with other followers is linked to our relationship with God and his Son Jesus: “We proclaim to you what

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we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). John and the other apostles proclaimed to the readers of 1 John what they saw and heard when they were with the Lord Jesus. The acceptance of that proclamation not only brought them into fellowship with John and the rest of the church, but also with the “Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

To Bonhoeffer, fellowship with our brothers and sisters within the church was a way for Jesus to minister to his people. Fellowship with God’s people provides opportunities to bless and serve and love others. The pastor and preacher in the 21st century must not only preach on the necessity of Christian fellowship, but he also must be personally devoted to the fellowship throughout the week.

A preacher who avoids people or is superficial in his relationships with church members will most likely earn the reputation of one does not really care about his people. This can eventually have an adverse affect on his preaching because the people in the pews may read into each message a lack of genuineness. Bonhoeffer is an example for pastors because he was devoted to other Christians. While the students at the Preachers’ Seminary were not always thrilled about Bonhoeffer’s insistence that they spend time daily in scripture meditation, it was indisputable that he genuinely loved and cared for them.

As the preacher builds loving relationships with people in the church, his weekly proclamation of the word will be eagerly received because the man in the pulpit is seen as God’s spokesperson for them. Jesus made it clear that his followers were to be characterized by their love for one another. In John 13:34-35, he said, “a
new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love another.” Jesus reiterated that command in John 15:12—“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” Francis A. Schaeffer describes this characteristic of loving one another as the “mark” of Christians “at all times and all places until Jesus returns.”

The pastor and preacher must set the example for the church to follow.

Costly Grace

Bonhoeffer spoke against the “cheap” grace within the church. His classic statement is found in the Cost of Discipleship: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

To Bonhoeffer, this was basic Christianity. It was impossible to be a follower of Jesus and not live a self-sacrificing life out of obedience and love to him. Jesus said in Luke 9:23-25: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”

Robert H. Stein comments that three conditions for following Jesus are laid out in this passage:

The first involves a need to deny oneself. This is much more radical than simply a denial of certain things. This mandates a rejection of a life based on self-interest and self fulfillment. Instead a disciple is to be one who seeks to fulfill the will and the teachings of Christ.


The second condition involves the need to take up one’s cross...Jesus’ own crucifixion reveals more fully to Luke’s readers that this call is a commitment unto death. There needs to be a willingness to suffer martyrdom if need be.

The final condition is the need to follow Jesus. In contrast to the other two conditions, indicating that following Jesus must be continual\textsuperscript{51}

Jesus made it clear later in Luke chapter 9 that following him could actually mean sacrifice to the point of homelessness. In verse 57, a man came to Jesus and boldly declared: “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Most people have a home to go to, but Jesus made it clear that some of his followers will be kicked out of their homes because of their commitment to him.

It was this commitment that Bonhoeffer wrote about. He wrote that “cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church.”\textsuperscript{52} To Bonhoeffer, grace should be “costly” because it cost Jesus Christ his very life. Grace is also costly because it costs people their very lives if they follow Jesus. Yet cheap grace had reduced discipleship to mere doctrine. Following Jesus has been cheapened by deemphasizing repentance, baptism, church discipline and the Lord’s Supper.

It is grace without biblical discipleship, that is, without the renouncing of personal ambition in order to follow and obey Jesus. The way of the cross means that we give up everything to be a Christ follower (Luke 14:25-35).


\textsuperscript{52} Bonhoeffer, \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, 43.
The Apostle Paul described it this way: But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that, I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:7-8). It was Paul’s desire to discard everything that was once important and meaningful so he could be a better follower of Jesus.

Gerald F. Hawthorne interprets Paul’s words:

…were Paul to place the whole world with its wealth and power and advantages, its prestige and accolades and rewards in one scalepan of the balance and Christ in the other, Christ alone would overwhelmingly outweigh everything else in terms of real worth. Hence, from the standpoint of simple logic Paul cannot afford to gain the whole world if it means losing Jesus.\(^\text{53}\)

Bonhoeffer saw discipleship much like the Apostle Paul did. His own commitment to Jesus was tested in 1939, when professors Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Lehmann asked Bonhoeffer to come to New York City to assume a teaching position at Union Seminary and thus, escape the perilous situation in Germany. This would certainly keep Bonhoeffer out of harm’s way. With great hesitation, Bonhoeffer accepted the position. So in June of 1939, Bonhoeffer and his brother Karl-Friedrich made the voyage to the United States.

However, he quickly realized that it was a mistake. His time in America was short-lived. He explained his decision to return to Niebuhr:

It was a mistake for me to come to America…I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Germany after the war if I do not share the tribulation of this time with my people…Christians in Germany are faced with the alternatives either of willing their country’s defeat so that Christian civilization may survive, or of willing its victory and destroying

our civilization. I know which of the alternatives I have chosen but I cannot make the choice from a position of safety.\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in Mark Devine, \textit{Bonhoeffer Speaks Today} (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005) 19-20.}

To Bonhoeffer, true and biblical discipleship had to be costly and self-sacrificing. There really was no other way to follow Jesus. He returned to Germany because he was a “German and a Christian.”\footnote{Devine, \textit{Bonhoeffer Speaks Today}, 20.} As a Christian, he had to follow Jesus regardless of the cost to his own safety and position. If he had to suffer, then so be it in order to follow Jesus.

In \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, he wrote: “Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his Master…If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow him.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, 91.}

While 21\textsuperscript{st} century followers of Jesus are not threatened by Hitler and Nazism, they do face the possible threats of materialism, pride and cheap grace. Thus, preachers must make doubly sure that their own commitment to Jesus is non-compromising and that their preaching and teaching does not side-step the costly demands of Jesus.

Further, the New Testament is clear that suffering will be experienced by the followers of Jesus. James 1:2-4 assumes that Christians will suffer: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its
work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” J.A. Motyer writes that “trials of many kinds” is a “true picture of life!” Trials often bring distress and discouragement. Yet, according to James, since they are interwoven into the very fabric of our lives, they should be seen as a reality of life. Motyer continues: (James) “appeals, therefore, not for the adoption of a superficial gaiety in the face of life’s adversities, but for a candid awareness of truth already known.”

Life’s adversities will result in the development of a perseverance that can lead to mature Christian character. That is, the faith of the Christian will be refined through the “slow and painful” process of testing. This refining through testing will lead to a “new facet of the believer’s character that could not exist without testing.”

Suffering, to James, can result in true joy when trials are seen as essential tests for our faith. Joy can be experienced even at the onset of “various trials” because they can lead to positive results. The trials will vary from believer to believer depending on one’s circumstances. Yet, there will always be a cost in following Jesus.

**Standing Against Evil in Society**

Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany on January 30, 1933. Bonhoeffer was among the first to realize that Hitler’s reign may mean persecution and even death to Christians: “We should not be surprised if the time comes for our church

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too, when the blood of martyrs will be called for.”

In the mind of Bonhoeffer, if the church actively opposed the policies of Hitler, then God’s people could expect to be persecuted. Of course, persecution would never come if the German Christians passively allowed Hitler to see his vision for Germany fulfilled.

Bonhoeffer actively opposed Hitler’s plan to eventually rid society of the Jewish people. On April 7, 1933, anti-Semitism officially became German government policy when Jews were banned from civil service. This was known as the “Aryan Clause”. Six days before that, there was a boycott of Jewish merchants. The Aryan Clause directly affected the German church because non-Aryans were not only baptized members of the church, but some also held offices in the church. Non-Aryans were all Jews. Thus, the door was wide open for discrimination and rejection even by fellow Christians.

Later that month, Bonhoeffer addressed a group of pastors with an essay entitled: “The Church and the Jewish Question.” In this essay, Bonhoeffer argued that the church had the right to question and rebuke the state. Further, the church must stand up for the rights of victims of injustice regardless of their religious background. Even further, Bonhoeffer advocated the possibility of jamming the spokes of the wheel of the state. In other words, the church in Germany must be open to the possibility of taking action on behalf of the Jewish people. At this point, Bonhoeffer seemed to be alone in his criticism against the state. For some of

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60 Devine, 13.


Bonhoeffer’s colleagues, his suggestion to jam the spokes of the German government was simply too much because it pointed towards “revolution and sedition.”63

For twenty-first century Christians in comfortable North America, we may cringe at the idea of revolting against the government. Of course, we can hardly imagine living in a culture controlled by an administration like the Nazis. We really cannot understand fully what Bonhoeffer and his fellow Christians faced.

Bonhoeffer’s opposition eventually would lead him to take the radical action to stop Hitler’s “design for world conquest.”64 What was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s biblical justification for his opposition to Hitler’s policies and eventually to be part of a plot to take Hitler’s life? Certainly, there is a theological mandate to protect and rescue the innocent in society. Proverbs 24:11 helps in this regard: “Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.”

Does this proverb provide sufficient evidence that God holds his people responsible to rescue those who are in danger of death? Proverbs are usually seen as general guidelines on how to fear God in day to day life. What does this verse teach us? On January 15, 1989, Pastor John Piper preached on this verse at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. Here is his understanding of the Proverb 24:11:

The duty of verse 11 could be stated like this: ‘If a group of humans is being taken away to death who ought not be taken away to death, the people who fear God ought to try to rescue them.’ Or, to use the words of the second


half of the verse, ‘If there is a group of humans who are stumbling (literally: slipping) to the slaughter who ought not to be slipping to the slaughter, the people who fear God ought to try to hold them back from the slaughter.’ What is being command here is some kind of intervention from us when we become aware of humans being killed who ought not to be killed.

Piper applied this proverb to the rescuing of the unborn. The unborn are considered a group of humans being led off to slaughter. According to Proverbs 24:11, God’s people must try to rescue them. Certainly the Jews in Germany during the reign of Hitler were such a group who needed to be rescued by God’s people.

Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount that his followers were not to sit back and watch the events in society unfold. Rather, they are to permeate and influence it. In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus said:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

John R.W. Stott remarks that these words of Jesus point to the “essential difference” between Christians and non Christians. Stott continues…

The Sermon is built on the assumption that Christians are different, and it issues a call to us to be different. Probably the greatest tragedy of the church throughout its long and chequered history has been its constant tendency to conform to the prevailing culture of developing a Christian counter culture.

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…You simply must not fail the world you were called to serve. You must be what you are. You are salt, and so you must retain your saltiness and not lose and not lose your Christian tang. You are light, and so you must let your light shine and not conceal it in any way, whether by sin or by compromise, by laziness or by fear.  

…Jesus calls his disciples to exert a double influence on the secular community, a negative influence by arresting its decay and a positive influence by bringing light into its darkness. For it is one thing to stop the spread of evil; it is another to promote the spread of truth, beauty and goodness.

The metaphors of “salt” and “light” teach that the church has a great responsibility in the world: “the function of salt is largely negative: it prevents decay. The function of light is positive: it illumines the darkness.” Eberhard Arnold describes the metaphors further:

Our mission on behalf of the kingdom is to be the salt of the earth: to stem its injustice, prevent its decay, and hinder its death. The world must perish in order to be born again. But as long as salt remains salt, it restrains the fulfillment of evil in the world and acts as the power that will one day renew the earth. If the church were no longer to act as salt, it would no longer be the church—it would succumb to death and have to be stamped out.

…Salt can have power only as long it is different from the surrounding mass and does not fall into decay itself. If it becomes tasteless, it must be spat out. The salt of the earth is where God is, where the justice of the future kingdom is lived out and the powers of the coming order promote organic life and growth.

In other words, salt is present where the victorious energy of God’s love is at work. God himself is the creative spirit who awakens the dead. He is the God of miracles who can bring forth new birth out of corruption and degeneration, replacing nausea and disgust with joy and well-being.

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67 Stott, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount, 63.


69 Stott, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount, 64.

A light on a candlestick consumes itself to give light to all in the house. It serves the intimate unity of the household because its light consists in dying...Light is characteristic of the people of Jesus in its total brightness and warmth. The old life, consumed, turns into life-giving strength. Shameful things can only live in the dark. Brightness leads to clarity and frankness, simplicity and purity, genuineness and truth. Where Jesus’ influence makes people real, their life becomes genuine and pure. It shines into the darkness of the world around, unmasking everything that is spurious and untrue, everything that tries to hide.71

To Bonhoeffer, there was only one way to approach the Sermon the Mount: It had to be lived out. In a letter to his brother, Karl-Friedrich, he wrote that he had “begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount...There are things for which an uncompromising stand is worthwhile. And it seems to me that peace and social justice, or Christ himself, are such things.”72

The Biblical mandate for the people of God to take a stand against social injustices is also found in the words of the Old Testament prophet Amos. Amos, a layman, was called by God to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In Amos 5:1-17, the prophet lamented over the fact Israel has been judged for idolatry and social injustices. In verses 4 to 7, Amos encouraged the nation to repent of the wrongs they have committed towards others:

This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live; do not go to Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing. Seek the Lord and live or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire; it will devour, and Bethel will have no one to quench it. You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.

71 Arnold, 12-13.

72 Kelly and Nelson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Testament to Freedom*, 305
Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba were traditionally places of worship where the blessings, power and promises of God were experienced. The Israelites have become comfortable going to these sites to seek help from the Lord in time of trouble. Yet, Amos startled his audience by telling them to not seek Bethel but to seek out the Lord instead. The worship at these sites became syncretistic and were “not in line with what the Lord required.” Yet, the problem was deeper than that. Thomas J. Finley asked: “Can it really be the Lord who is sought at Bethel if the people do not practice the demands He has made on them for justice and mercy?”

Even though the Israelites traveled to Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba, they essentially kept God out of the picture because they continued to allow injustices in the society to persist. They would journey to the places of worship and sing songs of praise and “they come away, and nothing, simply nothing has changed. Justice is still turned sour…and righteousness is still overthrown.”

According to Amos, God was ready to judge the people and completely destroy the places of worship if they did not repent of their hypocrisy and establish righteousness and justice in society.

God will judge all false forms of worship; his fury will come like fire that consumes everything in its path. It will come against all those who have pretended to seek after the Lord through religious actions but who show


75 Finley, 228.

76 Finley, 228.

77 Motyer, The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Amos, 112.
their true heart condition by perverting justice and that which is right. Justice and righteousness were the only ingredients in Israel that could have quenched the burning heat of God’s wrath, but instead the Israelites converted them into evil.\(^7\)

In verses 11 and 12, Amos further highlighted the injustices:

You trample the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offences and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the court (5:11-12).

The “poor” were those “without resource, and therefore, without redress.”\(^7\)

The rich took advantage of them. For example, they were able to build their extravagant homes by oppressing the poor. The stone mansions were “quite costly, a sign of the great wealth accumulated through unjust gain…The Lord must judge the wealthy who have acquired such fine houses by oppression, and He will do this by taking the houses from them.”\(^8\)

The rights of the poor were also violated within the court system. These were considered “great sins.” Finley writes that: “The parallel structure in v. 12: transgressions // sins; many // numerous reinforces the thought that the transgressions are too numerous even to be counted. The Lord has not reacted to a few isolated instances. All Samaria and the whole country is filled with misdeeds.”\(^9\)

\(^7\) Finley, 229.

\(^8\) Finley, 238.

\(^9\) Finley, 239.
Because of these violations, Amos exhorted his audience to change their ways and begin to obey God in verses 14 to 15: “Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.”

This is a call to repent and to receive grace from the Lord. Amos’s audience claimed that God was with them because of the Lord’s covenant with them at Beersheba. But the promise is voided “as long as evil prevails over good.” Yet, there is hope because once again, “the Lord could be Israel as her God” if the people turn back to the Lord.

The reference to Joseph in verse 15 is an offer of hope in a couple of ways. First, it offers hope because a remnant will remain even though the nation is decimated. “Perhaps Amos referred to the northern Kingdom as descendants of Joseph because he realized that the patriarch stood under the blessing of the Lord and preserved alive a remnant of Israel during a crucial threat to their existence (Genesis 45:7).”

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82 Finley, 241.
84 Finley, 242.
85 Finley, 242.
86 Finley, 242.
Secondly, Israel is offered hope because in the same way the Lord was with Joseph (Genesis 39:2, 21, 23; 41:38), God will be with the remnant of Joseph after the nation is destroyed.⁸⁷

Even though destruction is certain, Amos, in verse 24, calls for the people to seek justice in society: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-ending stream.” Finley writes:

“Justice” in the context of Amos encompasses reparation for the defrauded, fairness for the less fortunate, and dignity and compassion for the needy. “Righteousness” indicates the conditions that make justice possible: attitudes of mercy and generosity, and honest dealings that imitate the character of God as He revealed Himself in the law of Moses. Here is what it means to “seek Yahweh” and to “seek good” and “hate evil.”⁸⁸

Does the call to justice by the prophet Amos apply to us in 21st century America? The church today should be earnest in her call for justice in both word and action. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote:

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.⁸⁹

As pastors and preachers, we can learn from Bonhoeffer that all of life is to be lived as a living sacrifice, “holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1). Like Bonhoeffer, we can identify with Jesus by sacrificing time, resources and possibly our very lives for the sake of others. This is a truth to be taught through preaching and teaching and it is a reality to be lived out.

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⁸⁸ Finley, 251.

Serving Jesus in Severe Trials

While Dietrich Bonhoeffer often agonized over the role the church should play as Hitler’s polices were enacted, he continued to focus his energy on pleasing his Lord and obeying the Word of God. From the moment Hitler became chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, Bonhoeffer suffered setbacks and opposition for his commitment to Jesus and for his stance that the church should be a voice for the innocent in society.

For example, just two days after Hitler rose to power, Bonhoeffer delivered a message on the radio warning the nation that Hitler may be a “misleader” who will eventually mock God. Bonhoeffer never finished this address because he was cut off the air. This may have been the first action by the new government against free speech. Of course, Bonhoeffer was now in a sense a “marked man” because of his views.

Bonhoeffer simply saw his position as a matter of obedience to the Word of God. And he was aware that trials are part of the Christian life. Jesus even promised it in John 16:33: “In this world you will have trouble.” F.F. Bruce writes: “That those who are in Christ inevitably suffer tribulation in the world is the consistent witness of the NT writers.”

For example, the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 1:29: “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for

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him.” One of the many privileges that believers receive from God is to suffer for Jesus. Hawthorne writes:

A Christian who is willing to stand up together with other Christians for the faith of the gospel can expect to suffer. It has always been so. Redemptive history teaches that those who believe the Word of God, who uncompromisingly speak this Word and unyieldingly live in accordance with it often pay for their courage and resolution with their lives—from the ancient prophets to Jesus.\(^{93}\)

That is why the apostles saw it as an honor to be flogged by the Sanhedrin in Acts 5: “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (vs. 41). And even though they were ordered by the Sanhedrin not to speak in the name of Jesus, this did not deter them: “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (vs. 42). Commenting on Acts chapter five, Larkin writes:

In no masochistic fashion, but with spiritual eyes to see what suffering for the name of Jesus signifies about their eternal salvation, the apostles live out the dynamic of Jesus’ beatitude (Luke 6:22-23) and respond to their physical suffering with joy.

As far as Luke is concerned, two things bring Christians joy: contemplating salvation and the honor of being dishonored for Jesus’ sake (Luke 10:20; Acts 8:39; 11:23; 13:48). Whether in singing hymns over the crackle of flames at stakes in centuries past or praising God while cleaning Chinese prison-camp cesspools in our own day, the hallmark of the Christian has been, and must continue to be, joy in suffering persecution (1 Peter 1:6; 4:13).\(^{94}\)

In the face of persecution, the early Christians continued to joyfully press on in the mission to spread the good news about Jesus. In Nazi Germany, this meant standing up for the cause of Jesus and crying out against the injustices in society.

\(^{93}\) Hawthorne, 43:60

\(^{94}\) Larkin, 97.
This also meant suffering and even dying for Jesus. To Bonhoeffer, the church in Germany had a window of opportunity to face persecution like the first century believers. Instead she withdrew when the pressure to compromise mounted against her.

Concerning this fact, Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson wrote,

Bonhoeffer was all too well aware of the cowardly retreat of the churches in the face of swift Nazi sanctions for acts of defiance to its policies. The Hitler government had inoculated itself against opposition through Gestapo terror and cruel reprisals. For Bonhoeffer, the fear of repression served no excuse for the church’s widespread failure to act; the silence and inaction of the churches made them accomplices in the crimes of the government…It was right action for the church publicly to oppose the Nazi government as it did through the Barmen declaration of faith; it was wrong to have kept silent during genocidal persecution of the Jews.\(^95\)

It is true that 21st century preachers in America do not contend with a Hitler-like leader. Nor do they live with the daily possibility that they could be arrested or even executed for following Jesus. That day may come, but in the meantime, the followers of Jesus must “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:11-12).

The followers of Jesus are in a daily battle with Satan and his demons. These forces of evil were defeated through the cross and resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but “they are not yet harmless.”\(^96\) John R.W. Stott writes that “our

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struggle is not with human beings but with cosmic intelligences; our enemies are not human but demonic.”^{97}

F. F. Bruce writes about the spiritual forces of evil which opposes Jesus and the church:

“The god of this age” who “has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4), has a host of allies, principalities and powers, here described as “the world-rulers of this dark domain” (lit., “this darkness”) and “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.”^{98}

The forces of darkness may be manifested in a Hitler or through the daily pressures we face to compromise our love and commitment to Jesus. Regardless, we are to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (Ephesians 6:10). All the “resources the Christian soldier needs are drawn from Christ and ‘his mighty power.’”^{99} The very “same power that raised Jesus from the dead (1:20) and brought (the Ephesians) to life when they were dead in trespasses and sins (2:1)” is the power described in verse 10.^{100} Concerning this exhortation, Bruce wrote that the believers in Ephesus were: “told one way in which this power can be effective in their lives—in enabling them to resist those forces in the world that are hostile to their well-being and opposed to the gospel.”^{101}

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^{99} Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., “Ephesians,” in *Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1, 2 Thessalonians; 1, 2; Titus; Philemon of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 11:85.

^{100} Gaebelein, 11:85.

Thus, preachers today are to spend significant time in prayer seeking the strength of the Lord.

**The Grace of Living Well and Dying Well**

During the Apostle Paul’s final days before his execution, he penned a second letter to his dear friend, Timothy. Paul knew that death was just around the corner. On reflecting on this, he wrote:

> For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteousness Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul referred to his life as a “drink offering.” This was a metaphor to describe his death. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the priest would pour wine in the sanctuary as an offering of gratitude to God. Paul saw his imminent death as an offering to Jesus and approached his final departure as a sacrifice of thankfulness. In verse seven, Paul used three other metaphors to point out that even in his final days of life; he was faithful to the Lord: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

John R. W. Stott comments: “So the work of the apostle, and to a lesser extent of every gospel preacher and teacher, is pictured as fighting a fight, running a race, guarding a treasure. Each involves labour, sacrifice and even danger. In all three Paul had been faithful to the end.”

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Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer faithful in life and in death? In his short life, he achieved the reputation of radiating the love and joy of Jesus to the people around him. For example, in 1931, he taught confirmation classes to fifty teenagers at Zion Church in North Berlin. Bonhoeffer made a point to spend time beyond the classroom with his students and with their parents. His goal was to build Christian community among them. He even lived in the neighborhood of the church for two months so that he could have easier access to the families.

When Bonhoeffer was in prison for two years, he realized that he was just like the imprisoned Apostle Paul who was physically separated from the believers in the church of Colosse, yet was present with them in spirit (Colossians 2:5). This connection with other followers of Jesus enabled Bonhoeffer to press on.

Bonhoeffer’s approach to death was similar to the outlook that the Apostle Paul possessed when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. Under house confinement in the city of Rome, and uncertain of his future, he wrote:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your joy and progress in the faith (1:20-25).

To Paul, his whole life could be summed up in one word: Christ. Hawthorne comments:

To say “living in Christ” is to say for him “life means Christ”. Life is summed up in Christ. Life is filled up with, occupied with Christ, in the

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sense that everything Paul does—trusts, loves, hopes, obeys, preaches, follows, and so on—is inspired by Christ, and is done for Christ. Christ and Christ alone gives inspiration, direction, meaning and purpose to existence. Paul views his life in time as totally determined and controlled his own love for and commitment to Christ. Overpowered by Christ on the Damascus Road and overwhelmed by his majesty and love and goodness and forgiveness, Paul can see no reason for being except to be “for Christ”.

Life, for Paul, was Christ; and death was seen as gain:

Since for Paul “living is Christ,” meaning that life for Paul had no significance whatsoever without Christ, it follows that he never would have renounced Christ to save himself from those things that wearied him and hurt him and made life a burden for him. Therefore, for him to go on and say that “dying is gain” required a firm belief on his part that death, although it had the power to free him from “lingering out his days in misery,” could not in any way separate him from Christ. He was certain that even in death the Christian was still in vital relation with Christ.

Paul was torn between living and dying. In life, he could continue to minister to his fellow believers and see the Kingdom of God advance. If he was put to death, he would experience the joy of being with Christ; yet Paul was convinced that in life there was still “fruitful labor” for him. James Montgomery Boice writes that “death for the Christian is never pictured in the Bible as a gain over the worst in this life. It is portrayed as an improvement on the best. Certainly it is in this sense that Paul intends his words to the Philippians.”

Paul concluded that it was more necessary to keep living so that he could continue to minister to the Christians in Philippi (verses 24-25). Motyer comments:

As far as personal enrichment was concerned, death would win hands down. But there is also the Philippian church and all the others who fill the loving imagination of Paul. What of them? They still need (as he sees it) his

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104 Hawthorne, 43:45.
105 Hawthorne, 46
apostolic ministry. Paul believes it to be the will of the Lord that this should be considered paramount.

Furthermore, such is his love for his fellow-believers and his desire for their spiritual advantage that he is ready for it to be so. What a man the apostle was! The fruitfulness of remaining in this life could sway him as against the joy of living with Christ; the needs of the church were met by a love which, for the present, was willing to postpone heavenly glories. ⁷

The Apostle Paul’s ministry also proved that suffering for Jesus is a mark of a true minister. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul established that his ministry was authentic because of the suffering he had endured for the sake of Jesus. This was in contrast to the “super-apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11) who were undermining Paul’s ministry. In 11:23-33, he wrote:

Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move.

I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak?

Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

What was the purpose of Paul’s boasting? R. V. G. Tasker points out that Paul counter attacked his opponents “qualifications” and “achievements” through listing his own sufferings and weaknesses:

Paul claims superiority over his opponents as a ‘minister of Christ’ on four points: (1) He has undertaken more numerous and arduous evangelistic campaigns than they… (2) He has been the victim, as they have not, of excessive corporal punishment…(3) He had been more frequently in prisons than they…(4) So constantly is he in immediate danger of death that he can say ‘I die daily’ (1 Corinthians 15:31). He would appear to have been face to face with death recently at Ephesus (see 2 Corinthians 1:9).

Paul Barnett also writes:

What manner of boasting is this? In what must have been a daring exercise in antiquity, Paul takes the literary convention of boasting and inverts it. His boast is in folly, weakness, disappointment and defeat. One of the Roman soldier’s most glorious achievements in battle, the corona muralis, was awarded for being the first over the wall of the city under siege. As Christ’s fool, Paul boasts of being lowered down a wall as a fugitive (verses 32-33).

Paul’s opponents boast of superiority (11:5; 12:110, of being ‘super-apostles’. Yet the effect of their ministry is to enslave and manipulate those who succumb to them (verse 20). Paul, however, is the servant of Christ in his ministry to the churches. As opposed to the triumphalism of these newcomers, the essential character of Christ is the meekness and gentleness of a crucified slave. Christ’s glory is his divinely humble service of others. This is the message of the cross which Paul seeks to embody and express in his ministry of evangelism.

Paul’s boasting continued into chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians where he described how he was “caught up to the third heaven” (verse 2). To keep Paul humble, God gave him a painful “thorn” in his flesh: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing great revelations, there was given to me a

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109 Tasker, 161.

thorn in my flesh. A messenger of Satan to torment me” (verse 7). What was this thorn? It is impossible to determine: “Scholars have made many suggestions about the nature of Paul’s ‘thorn’. Was it persecution, sensual temptation, a speech defect, an ophthalmic disorder, epilepsy, or one of the many further possibilities?”111

Philip E. Hughes writes that it is not important to know exactly what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was because the spiritual purpose of it was the most significant reason for it, and if that was true for Paul, then it also holds true for the followers of Jesus since then:

Is there a single servant of Christ who cannot point to some “thorn in the flesh”, visible or private or psychological, from which he has prayed to be released, but which has been given him by God to keep him humble, and therefore, fruitful in His service? And is not this the case to a special degree with those who have been called to be ministers of the gospel? Every believer must learn that human weakness and divine grace go hand in hand together. Hence Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” is, by its very lack of definition, a type of every Christian’s “thorn in the flesh”, not with regard to externals, but by its spiritual significance.112

Regardless of our circumstances in the 21st century, we are to live for the glory of the Lord Jesus: “So whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” Gordon Fee points out that “One’s whole life must be to God’s glory…Certainly Paul intends that this ‘rule’ dictate the appropriateness of

111 Barnett, 177.

behavior as well. What is not, or cannot be, for God’s glory probably should be
excluded from ‘whatever you do.’”\(^{113}\)

Our lives on earth are just a “mist that appears for a little while and then
vanishes” (James 4:14). Tasker writes: “The only certain factor about human life is
that it will end sooner or later in death; and the refusal to face up to the
inevitableness of death, or the failure to remember that it may come at a time
unexpected and in a manner unforeseen, is a sign of human arrogance.”\(^{114}\)

We do not know when our time in the life will end and the Lord will say to
us: “Time to come home.” Yet, in the meantime, “we make it our goal to please
him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it” (2 Corinthians 5:9).

\(^{113}\) Gordon D. Fee, “1 Corinthians” in The First Epistle to the Corinthians, vol. 6 of The
New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The popularity of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has steadily increased over the past 60 years. Stephen R. Haynes writes in The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint that Bonhoeffer was relatively obscure during the years of the Third Reich.”

Since his death Bonhoeffer has become a “celebrity.” Haynes continues:

Despite being incomplete, occasional, and fragments, Bonhoeffer’s writings continue to invite serious engagement by theologians, philosophers, psychologists, and political scientists.

In an ever-increasing series of articles, monographs, and dissertations, Bonhoeffer is compared with thinkers as diverse as Martin Luther, Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi, Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Carl Jung, Adolf von Harneck, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Dilthey, Harry Stack Sullivan, Werner Elert, Friedrich Gogarten, Albert Camus, John Dewey, Jean-Paul Sartre, Yves Congar, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carl Rogers, Francis Fukuyama, Richard Rorty, Theodor Adorno, and Emmanuel Levinas.

At the same time, works about and references to Bonhoeffer can found in non-scholarly works:

Today references to Bonhoeffer’s life and thought are just as likely to be found in popular magazines and church bulletins as in scholarly journals. Laypersons read his books, participate in e-mail discussion groups, and join societies devoted to extending Bonhoeffer’s influence. Pastors of all theological persuasions refer to him in their sermons. And for those in search of inspiration for Christian living, Bonhoeffer’s words are readily available for devotional use.


116 Haynes, 2.

117 Haynes, 2.
Indeed, the German theologian seems to offer something for everyone with an interest in religion or spirituality, regardless of age, even among members of the presumably antitheological “Generation X.”\(^\text{118}\)

Mark Devine wrote that “Bonhoeffer has much to say to Bible-believing Christians in the twenty-first century.”\(^\text{119}\) Bonhoeffer also speaks to those who stand in pulpits Sunday after Sunday and proclaim the word of God. As stated in chapter one, there has been a wealth of published material concerning his life, theology and impact. This chapter will review literature related to the six areas in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer can impact preachers in the twenty-first century.

**Meditation on the Word**

David Mcl. Gracie wrote in the *Introduction* of Bonhoeffer’s book, *Meditating on the Word* that scripture meditation was not only a regular practice for Bonhoeffer, but also instrumental in his conversion to Christ:

> Regular, meditative reading in the Bible was practiced by Bonhoeffer from the time when, as a young theologian, he became a Christian. “Becoming a Christian” seems, in fact, to have been the result of his discovering the Bible as a personal message of God’s love for us…He received with meekness the implanted Word, which was able to save his soul.

> This reception of the Word was a daily, indeed, almost a constant affair—since texts and single words of Scripture were kept and pondered in his heart…It was also a means of determining God’s will for his life…\(^\text{120}\)

> To Bonhoeffer, meditation on God’s Word was also a central component of the development of a pastor: “We want in any case to rise up from our meditation in

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\(^\text{118}\) Haynes, 2.


a different state from when we sat down. We want to meet Christ in his Word.\textsuperscript{121}

The Preacher’s Seminary at Finkenwalde was his “experiment in community” where Christian fellowship could be experienced.\textsuperscript{122} Mary Bosanquet described the daily routine that Bonhoeffer established for the students:

First of all a rule was established. The day began with half an hour of common prayer: antiphonal repetition of the psalms, lessons from the Old and New Testaments, two chorals, one Gregorian chant and finally extempore prayer. Breakfast followed, and after breakfast, most alarming surprise of all, the students found that they were to meditate for half an hour in silence upon a passage of scripture, which was set for the whole week.

Then followed a morning of study; homiletics, exegesis and the groundwork of dogmatics, then lunch, recreation, further study and after supper an evening of relaxation, music, reading aloud or games. The day ended with a further half-hour of common prayer, after which complete silence was required until breakfast time, the next morning.\textsuperscript{123}

At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer was able to put into place an environment where consistent scripture meditation could occur. Bonhoeffer believed that it is within the context of Christian community where the practice of meditation is best expressed.

His book \textit{Life Together} was a description of this experiment in community.

When the Gestapo closed the seminary in September of 1937\textsuperscript{124}, Bonhoeffer, with a sense of urgency, composed \textit{Life Together}, in a four week span.\textsuperscript{125} Up to this point,

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\item \textsuperscript{121} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Meditating on the Word}, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Mary Bosanquet, \textit{The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer} (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 152.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Kelly and Nelson, eds., \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Testament to Freedom}, 533.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Kelly and Nelson, eds., \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Testament to Freedom}, 533.
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Bonhoeffer was “reluctant” to write anything about Christian community. However, with the seminary closed, he “saw the need to record for posterity not only the daily regimen (of the seminary) and rationale, but also to voice his conviction that the church needs to promote a sense of community like this if it is to have new life breathed into it.”

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer not only urged his readers to incorporate scripture meditation into their spiritual formation, but to set aside a period of time to just meditate:

There are three purposes for which the Christian needs a definite time when he can be alone during the day: Scripture meditation, prayer and intercession. All three should have their place in the daily period of meditation. The word “meditation” should not frighten us. It is an ancient concept of the Church and of the Reformation that we are beginning to rediscover.

It might be asked, why is a special time needed for this, since we mediate already during common devotions? This is the answer. The period of personal meditation is to be devoted to the Scriptures, private prayer, and intercession, and it has no other purpose.

The half hour of daily meditation was a difficult task for the seminarians. Bosanquet writes that:

The loudest outcry was against the period for meditation. What, the young men asked, were they to *do* with this silent half-hour? Might they smoke? Might they get on with their reading? Might they clean their shoes? No, Bonhoeffer replied, they were to meditate, and then he did his best to explain to them how the heart and mind may learn to listen. They remained for some time skeptical, but the example of their director’s stillness and concentration,

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128 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 81
and the evident and intense reality of this silent prayer as he knew it, began to have its effect.\textsuperscript{130}

According to Eberhard Bethge, whenever Bonhoeffer was away from the seminary, the students would avoid the period of meditation. Then, “upon his return, the seminarians would apologize, but admit that they did not know what to meditate about. Bonhoeffer would say, ‘Chase after your thoughts, get them together, concentrate.’”\textsuperscript{131}

Kelly and Nelson write that Bonhoeffer insisted his students spent time in daily silence so they could “listen prayerfully to the Word of God and to the words of those who share life in community.”\textsuperscript{132} Periods of silence were necessary components of the day:

This is the silence needed to let God have the first word in the early morning hour and the last word as one ends the day in sleep. It helps the members of the community to avoid idle chatter and misuse of speech that can wound the most vulnerable members of the community; it helps people to manage their speech during their daily conversations. There is power, Bonhoeffer says, in this kind of silence, “the power of clarification, purification, and focus on what is essential” that contributes “to proper speaking of God’s word at the right time.”\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{130} Bosanquet, 152.


\textsuperscript{133} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 166.
One of the benefits of “this attentive listening to God’s Word” was a more “effective prayer life” because the Word of God speaks to one’s personal situation, tasks, decisions, sins and temptations.\textsuperscript{134}

There were also critics of Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on meditation outside the seminary. Karl Barth was one. He could not accept the benefit of “edifying contemplation.”\textsuperscript{135} Plus, he was “disturbed by an indefinable odour of the eros and pathos of the cloister.”\textsuperscript{136} Nevertheless, Barth “found some difficulty…in defining his criticism”\textsuperscript{137}: “In fact what Barth suspected, in company with many others in the Confessing Church, was that Bonhoeffer was open to Catholic influence to an extent which seemed to him dangerous. The extent to which he was in fact so influenced, and the manner of it, is not easily defined.”\textsuperscript{138}

The truth was that Bonhoeffer was influenced by the Catholic tradition of monastic life in his early formative years. He was not ashamed to admit that there were “catholic insights in the sense that they belonged to the treasury of the Christian tradition, and they proved their value through some fifteen hundred years of religious history…he made use of them without prejudice and built them into his own conception of the possibilities of the Christian life…”\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{134} Kelly and Nelson, The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 166.
\textsuperscript{135} Bosanquet, 159.
\textsuperscript{136} Bosanquet, 159.
\textsuperscript{137} Bosanquet, 159.
\textsuperscript{138} Bosanquet, 159.
\textsuperscript{139} Bosanquet, 160
Later Bonhoeffer “begun to make his own theological explorations…within the Calvinist-Lutheran framework”140 and in doing so Barth and he were eventually reconciled in this area. By the time Finkenwalde opened, Bonhoeffer was confident and ready to experiment with the insights he developed.

Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann was Bonhoeffer’s teaching assistant at the University of Berlin.141 Later, Zimmermann was one of students at the seminary in Finkenwalde.142 Luther Seminary student, Kyle Kenneth Schiefelbein, interviewed Zimmermann in 2003 for his undergraduate thesis. The interview was published in the Winter 2006 issue of Word & World.143

Zimmermann vividly remembers the Finkenwalde schedule. Silence structured the day: Dietrich instituted silence in the morning between waking up and breakfast and between dinner and bedtime; a half hour of meditation breakfast. The seminarians concentrated on one passage of Scripture per week. Bonhoeffer gave them twelve verses of German biblical texts, and they were to concentrate on these verses, without commentaries, for six days.

On Saturday, the students and Dietrich would come together and discuss what came to them from these verses. Zimmerman recalls the excitement among the seminarians as each one found something different in the texts. After the students had discussed their insights, Dietrich would then analyze these verses in ways that the students had not even considered and would sometimes offer the same texts for another week to see if any new meanings would come to them.144

140 Bosanquet, 159.


142 Schiefelbein.

143 Schiefelbein.

144 Schiefelbein.
Bonhoeffer wrote in *Spiritual Care* that since pastors provide spiritual comfort and care to others, scripture meditation must be a necessary element of their daily routine:

Exercises for the one who gives spiritual care are made concrete in such things as Bible reading, meditation, prayer, abstinence, silence, and humble service to the neighbor. In the background stands the old dogmatic relationship between contrition of the heart, confession with the lips, and satisfaction by words. We must regain the New Testament and evangelical sense of this threesome. We should not try to bypass the necessity of such exercises.\(^{145}\)

David Mcl. Gracie writes that Bonhoeffer’s example should serve as motivation for us to meditate on God’s word:

The great point, after all, is not to take up Bonhoeffer and read him for his own sake, but to “take up and read” God’s Word in our day as he did in his. The command spoken once to St. Augustine, “tolle et lege,” is a command to each generation of Christians. Observing how Dietrich Bonhoeffer obeyed it on a day-today basis, during his lifetime and in his work as a pastor, teacher, and political activist, can motivate us, I believe, to do so where we are.\(^{146}\)

Jim Wallis points out that scripture meditation is part of the entire package that attracts 21\(^{st}\) century Christians to Bonhoeffer:

Bonhoeffer will appeal today to those who are hungry for spirituality. But his was not the soft new-age variety that has mostly to do with inner feelings and personal enlightenment. Rather, it was Bonhoeffer’s spirituality that made him so politically subversive. His commitment to daily prayer and meditation is what sustained him and provided the courage for his political resistance. But his was never a private spirituality. Bonhoeffer offers us spirituality for public engagement, in a time that cries out for both.\(^{147}\)


\(^{146}\) Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 12.

Fellowship

To Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christian fellowship with one another was essential to be truly a Christian: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to another only through and in Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on Christian fellowship began after he spent three months in Rome in 1924. Bosanquet writes that during this period Bonhoeffer realized that Lutherans had “abandoned” the richness of fellowship:

Here, for the first time, he saw the Church as the true super-national nation of God’s people, “Christ existing as community”. The tremendous impact of this experience seems to have touched some deep spring in his intuitive faculty, so that he began from this time on to feel about in the dark for some of the Christian insights which Lutheranism had abandoned, and was able to make quick response when he found them.

The emphasis on fellowship continued when he was student at Berlin University from 1924 to 1927. On December 27, 1927, at the age of 21, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, entitled The Communion of Saints, or Sanctorum Communio. While the young Bonhoeffer wrote it to impress a small group of University professors, yet:

It is of seminal importance in the growth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s thought. No other work concentrates so intensely upon the nature of the church…And apart from “Life Together”, in no other work does Bonhoeffer

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149 Bosanquet, 160.
150 Kuhns, 16.
151 Kuhns, 16.
better explain the structure of the Church as community, an integral concept in all his thinking on the Church.\textsuperscript{152}

Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson explore the development of Bonhoeffer’s picture of Christian community in their book, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}. “One of the main reasons why readers find Bonhoeffer’s writings so compelling lies in the inner strength and intensity of his relationship with Jesus Christ developed in the practical everyday life of a Christian community.”\textsuperscript{153}

Bonhoeffer’s interest in this relationship between the presence of Jesus and Christian community began during those years he was a student at Berlin University:

…Bonhoeffer harbored a desire to live in and help shape a Christian community from his first days as a student at Berlin University. He was intrigued then, as he was in the years that ensued, by the mystery of how God in Jesus Christ becomes present in and among those who gather to profess their faith together and celebrate through Word and sacrament their oneness in the Lord.\textsuperscript{154}

After he was appointed a lecturer in theology at Berlin University in 1929 and 1931\textsuperscript{155}, he was afforded the opportunities to put into practice his views on fellowship:

His earliest attempts to put into practice his idea, on Christian community, however began in the circle of his admiring students…his seminars, evening discussions, and country excursions brought him into closer contact with

\textsuperscript{152} Kuhns, 17.


\textsuperscript{154} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 146.

likeminded students, some of whom later became his colleagues in the church struggle. Several would enter the seminary to study under him. Together with these students of theology he organized frequent weekend trips to a rented cottage in the hilly countryside well beyond the outskirts of Berlin, where they could discuss theology (and) work into their day some spiritual exercises.

…Though these beginnings in community life were informal and spontaneous, they provided some of the sparks for the creation of the kind of community life that Bonhoeffer presented in Life Together with a view to reanimate the Christian churches in Germany and withstand the lure of Nazism.156

This “casual experience of community” would not become permanent because the rise of Adolf Hitler into power in 1933 would begin the church struggle in Germany.157 Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer would continue to develop his view on Christian fellowship “through lectures on the nature of the church”158 and through conferences where he was able to explain the necessity of belonging to a “genuine Christian community.”159 Such a community could be a safeguard in a turbulent German society:

Bonhoeffer was interested not in merely theologizing about church, but in being part of a church community committed to God’s Word in service of others, particularly society’s unfortunates, and willing to make sacrifices embodied in truthfully following Jesus Christ, even though it might lead to the cross.

He left no doubt about his desire to enter into a community life that, with the courage of Jesus Christ and in obedience to Jesus’ teachings, could live out the gospel more intensely and thus cope more courageously with the crises

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then overwhelming the German people and their churches. In hindsight, one wonders whether the slaughter that took place in the war and the death camps could have been avoided had the Christians of Germany professed their faith in truly Christian communities like that directed by Bonhoeffer.\footnote{Kelly and Burton, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 147.}

Could genuine communities of faith have made a difference in Nazi Germany? Bonhoeffer believed they would:

One’s faith in Jesus Christ expressed through the bonding of Christians with each other was more than an abstract, rationalized theory to Bonhoeffer the young student, and later to Bonhoeffer the mature theologian drawn into a bitter struggle over whether the churches in Germany were truly representing Jesus Christ in the Hitler era. Hitler’s popularity with the masses generated a dilemma for the churches. Afraid to contradict what the people so enthusiastically applauded, in spite of their own misgivings, most of the churches went along with the popular mood. Bonhoeffer was convinced that the failure of the churches to become prophetic communities contributed to the perverse attractiveness of National Socialism. He criticized the churches for being turned in on themselves, lost in a kind of sanctimonious narcissism.\footnote{Kelly and Burton, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 149.}

At the end of 1934\footnote{Kelly and Nelson, eds., \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Testament to Freedom}, 532.} Bonhoeffer visited various monasteries and seminaries of other denominations to “to examine their ‘monastic training’ programs and their different modes of community life.”\footnote{Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 154.} In March of 1935, while in England, he visited the Anglican Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield. Bonhoeffer “had long been aware of the need for the church to be a living
community of persons rather than a conglomerate of ‘justified individuals’. The experience at Mirfield strengthened this conviction.”

Bonhoeffer’s conviction led him to accept the invitation to become the director of the Preacher’s Seminary at Finkenwalde in 1935. Bonhoeffer now had the “unique opportunity to put his thoughts into practice”:

Under Bonhoeffer’s leadership, Finkenwalde thus became an experiment in Christian community. This was something unprecedented in the German Evangelical Church with its historic wariness of anything that looked like a Catholic Monastery. But Bonhoeffer was convinced that the church and its pastors could not minister in the world, especially in a world in crisis, unless the ‘body of Christ’ became a reality.

…Life at Finkenwalde was not a way of escape from the political and church struggles, but a way of engagement. Finkenwalde was not simply a community of preparation for ministry, but one already engaged in serving others.

Bonhoeffer also realized that the German church was in great need of a place where future leaders could be trained:

Bonhoeffer became even more convinced to establish the kind of training center for these future moral leaders where everyone would be fully committed to incorporating Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount into their daily life. This commitment would in turn be sustained by community structures based on the gospel, structures that emphasized their togetherness as well as their need for prayerful time alone in order to foster the mutual support they needed and their service of one another as a prelude for serving the wider church community.

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These “future” leaders of the church were familiar with suffering even before their time at Finkenwalde. Bosanquet writes:

These young men all knew what it was to suffer—frustration, repression, enmity, even personal danger. Four had been turned out of a theological college in Wittenberg because of their refusal to compromise with the official line. All were ready to sacrifice themselves in order to guard the purity of the faith; at the same time they were young, healthy and boisterous.\textsuperscript{169}

By the order of the Gestapo, the seminary was closed down in September of 1937.\textsuperscript{170} Yet, during the short period the seminary was open, a picture of Christian fellowship was established:

\textit{The students of Finkenwalde past and present were welded into a community of Christian brothers who found in their unity a source of strength and a shared treasury of spiritual riches. It was an experience which to this day shows its profound effect on those who survive, and what Finkenwalde might have meant for the Christian life of Germany if it could have continued into the present may still be conjectured.}

Its achievement in the less than three years of its existence was prodigious, and its influence was extended not only through the young pastors who went out from it, but also by means of those missions in surrounding parishes…\textsuperscript{171}

Devine writes that Bonhoeffer sought to establish a genuine fellowship that would bring blessing both in this life and in the life to come:

\textit{Freedom to worship and serve our Lord in the visible church with our brothers and sisters is a great blessing, a special mercy. It constitutes a concrete anticipation of and dress rehearsal for the true and permanent fellowship of the saints in the next world…We were made for one another, and our relationship with Christ includes our divinely created and sustained connection to one another.}\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{169} Bosanquet, 151.
\textsuperscript{171} Bosanquet, 183.
\textsuperscript{172} Devine, 82.
One year after the seminary closed, in the home of his twin sister Sabine, Bonhoeffer would write *Life Together*. Kelly and Nelson point out that this work of Bonhoeffer was quickly accepted by readers:

The book was published in 1939 as Volume 61 in a series of theological monographs *Theologische Existenz Heute (Theological Existence Today)*. Within one year it had been through a fourth printing. Kaiser Verlag published the fifth edition after World War II, in 1949. Its twenty-first printing in 1986 is a strong testimony to the enduring quality of what has become a genuine classic in contemporary literature.

Devine points out that Bonhoeffer’s message of fellowship is needed more than ever in the 21st century evangelical, consumer-driven church:

…evangelicals, at the beginning of the twenty-first century are experiencing a renewed interest, if not in the doctrine of the church as such, certainly in the quest for community. With the waning, if not the collapse of denominational loyalty in America, the mobility of evangelicals between congregations has never been greater. Local churches minister in a highly competitive, Christian-consumer, winner take-all environment. Perhaps as never before, joining a church may do little to satisfy the current self-conscious search for community.

**Costly Grace**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s most famous work is *The Cost of Discipleship*, published first in 1937. Todd Kappelman writes that “This book is a rigorous exposition and interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 9:35-10:42.”

Eberhard Bethge points out that: “Many of the great men of the

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175 Devine, 99.


Protestant tradition, like Luther and Barth, have made their reputation with a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans; Bonhoeffer made himself to a wider circle with an exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount.”

John de Gruchy, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, writes that Bonhoeffer first began to explore Christ’s radical call to follow him while he was an “unpaid lecturer” at the University of Berlin:

During his two years (1931-33) at the university he became a ‘minor sensation’, attracting a significant number of students to his lively seminars. Many of the insights which later found expression in *The Cost of Discipleship* were first explored in the informal discussions which Bonhoeffer had with the circle of students who gathered around him.

It was also through his formal lectures at the university where Bonhoeffer could develop the connection between theology and reality in the world:

Bonhoeffer’s formal lectures began with a course on “The History of Systematic Theology in the 20th Century”. Then followed the series on the essence of the church, Christian ethics, “Creation and Sin” (published later as *Creation and Fall*), and finally, Christology. Also of note is his seminar on Hegel in the Summer of 1933.

These lectures provide the bridge between his early theology and that which follows in the church struggle and in prison. They demonstrate Bonhoeffer’s new commitment to doing theology from the perspective of committed discipleship to Jesus Christ as Lord of the world.

Bonhoeffer’s chief concern in the *The Cost of Discipleship* is that “grace…has become so watered down that it no longer resembles the grace of the

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New Testament, the costly grace of the Gospels.” Bonhoeffer called this a “cheap grace” and it had “been the ruin of more Christians than any other commandment of works.” Bonhoeffer defined “cheap grace” as: “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

“Costly grace”, on the other hand, is:

…is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.

Of all the works of Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* is certainly his “angriest book—possibly his one ‘angry’ book…none of Bonhoeffer’s early works reveal him inflamed and vehement, as this book does. The tone throughout the book is entirely serious, rarely speculative, often rhetorically powerful—but always angry.”

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182 Kappelman.
187 Kuhns, 81.
There is an idea of Bonhoeffer’s anger in the first chapter of the book:

We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcase of cheap grace, and there we have a drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ…To be “Lutheran” must mean that we leave the following of Christ to legalists. Calvinists and enthusiasts—and all this for the sake of grace.

We justified the world, and condemned as heretics those who tried to follow Christ. The result was that a nation became Christian and Lutheran, but at the cost of true discipleship. The price it was called to pay was all too cheap. Cheap grace had won the day.\textsuperscript{188}

There was urgency for Bonhoeffer to complete the book because he believed that true discipleship was the only hope for Germany:

The conditions Bonhoeffer faced are simple reason enough why. He wrote the book between 1935 and 1937, while directing the seminary at Finkenwalde. Hitler by now had roused the German people to a nationalistic furor and an utter blindness to social responsibility. The imprisonment and terrorization of Jews raged through the large cities. Any outspoken criticisms of the Nazi regime, including those from the Confessing Church, were quickly squelched.

Germany had been, not too long ago, a “Christian” nation; now men and women continued to attend church services, but the real spirit of Christianity had dimmed to a darkness. At this time Bonhoeffer wrote his strongest book, a challenge to Christian discipleship, because he believed that only a real return to the Christian faith could save Germany.\textsuperscript{189}

This challenge of Bonhoeffer has been heard and accepted outside of Protestant circles. The Catholic Hermes Donald Kreilkamp wrote that:

The message of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is not an easy message, even for believers. But it was Bonhoeffer’s response to the Jesus who said, “If anyone wishes to be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Christ meant this more literally than most of us imagine; that certainly was Bonhoeffer’s conviction.\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{188} Bonhoeffer, \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, 53.

\textsuperscript{189} Kuhns, 81-82.

*The Cost of Discipleship* is not without its critics who see “The Cost of Discipleship” as “an unfortunate detour in the direction of Bonhoeffer’s theological development.” Kuhns summarizes the criticism:

Its seeming emphasis on personal sanctification, the Christians’ aloofness from the world, and a “religious sense” verging on piety have, they say, distorted the real Bonhoeffer, the champion of “religionless Christianity.” They are fond of quoting his letter from Tegel prison of July 21, 1944: “I once thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. It was in that phase that I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*. Today I can see the dangers of the book, though I am prepared to stand by what I wrote.”

According to Kuhns, “by quoting Bonhoeffer, such critics provide their own rebuttals. ‘The Cost of Discipleship’ was written during a distinct place of Bonhoeffer’s life.” Kuhns continues:

In 1936 Bonhoeffer was highly conscious of the Confessing Church’s precarious situation, the need for deep spiritual motivation among the ministers he was training, and, not least of all, his own state of personal danger. Such conditions hardly discourage one from living a holy life in the sight of God, and hoping in that.

It is perfectly understandable that *The Cost of Discipleship* would reflect this urgency for a holy, personal life. The book, however, reflects more; it is a sign of Bonhoeffer’s faith in the world—even at this time—that nothing in *The Cost of Discipleship* really contradicts the central passage written later in the July 21 letter: “It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe.” The book might emphasize heavily to Christian’s separation from the world—but never to the point of any lack of responsibility to it.

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191 Kuhns, 82.

192 Kuhns, 82.

193 Kuhns, 82.

194 Kuhns, 82-83.
For Bonhoeffer, if a follower of Jesus was responsible in the world, it meant obedience to Jesus. He wrote that there are formidable “forces” and obstacles which try “to interpose themselves between the word Jesus and the response of obedience…But the call of Jesus made short work of all these barriers, and created obedience. That call was the Word of God himself, and all that it required was single-minded obedience.”\textsuperscript{195}

Many have written about Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ’s radical call to follow him. Kelly and Nelson write that \textit{The Cost of Discipleship} has become a “genuine classic in Christian spirituality.”\textsuperscript{196} They write that the book is the solution to Bonhoeffer’s “problem” of slipping into a “‘soft’ Christianity…within a comfortable church ministry.”\textsuperscript{197}

Kelly and Nelson continue: “The question was a troubling intruder into his budding success story: What was he as a Christian to do about the “impossible demands of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount? His answer…became a call to a simple, unflinching obedience.”\textsuperscript{198}

Bonhoeffer was able to “give more concrete shape to the hold that the Sermon on the Mount had exerted in his own life”\textsuperscript{199} while he was director at the Finkenwalde seminary:

\textsuperscript{195} Bonhoeffer, \textit{The Cost of Discipleship}, 79.


For the young seminarians, the thoughts Bonhoeffer shared with them on this theme led to that exhilarating experience of being drawn into a revolutionary movement. At stake were Christianity in Germany and, indeed, Christian faith itself. The German title of this work (Nachfolge) states in one word not only what Bonhoeffer perceived to be the vocation of a Christian minister but also what happened to him at a crucial turning point in his spiritual life. Following Christ! 200

A key principle for Bonhoeffer in the book was obedience to Jesus: “the book puts forth what Bonhoeffer himself had come to hear in the Sermon on the Mount: Christ’s Word, commanding obedience.” 201 To Bonhoeffer, this obedience to Christ “meant abandoning his own careerism and embracing dedicated servanthood—even to the point of becoming a prophetic critic of his church.” 202

From Bonhoeffer’s perspective, the church in Germany was self-serving, had accommodated herself to evil and, “often, an open endorsement of Hitler’s plans for nationalistic expression.” 203 Bonhoeffer wrote The Cost of Discipleship to confront the unfaithfulness of the church:

In the context of such church infidelity, Bonhoeffer’s book confronts individual Christian and Christian community alike with the crisis point of their faith: they are called to the same obedience that Christ’s first followers heard. This is the “costly grace” of discipleship...The situation in Germany under the spell of Nazism, Bonhoeffer claims, is identical to that faced by the first disciples asked to choose whether or not to follow Christ. 204

Kelly and Nelson point out that Bonhoeffer somewhat wrestles with the tension between fully representing the presence of Jesus in Nazi Germany and yet opposing the undermining of the church’s authority by Hitler:

The thorniest aspect of this choice, which is only partially resolved in the book, is how to be fully decisive in one’s opposition to the Nazi inculturation of church and society and how, at the same time, to affirm a church presence in and Christ’s lordship over the world.

The Christian is one who has promised to follow Christ even should this mean an inglorious martyrdom for refusing to worship the god national socialism…For Bonhoeffer, the call (to follow Jesus) was clear: self-sacrificing faith and wholehearted solidarity with one’s neighbor, particularly those of one’s community and those cast out by a heartless society.205

Concerning _The Cost of Discipleship_ Karl Barth wrote in 1955 that Bonhoeffer not only wrote the definitive work on the subject of discipleship, but he also lived it out:

The matter (of Christian discipleship) is handled with such depth and precision that I am almost tempted simply to reproduce them…in an extended quotation. For I cannot hope to say anything better on the subject than what is said here by a man who, having written on discipleship, was ready to achieve it in his own life, and did in his own way achieve it even to the point of death.206

G. K. A. Bell, wrote in the “Forward” in _The Cost of Discipleship_ that “‘When Christ calls a man,’ says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘he bids him come and die.’ There are different kinds of dying, it is true; but the essence of discipleship is contained in those words…Dietrich himself was a martyr many times over before he died.”207

G. Leibholz explained the “Memoir” section of _The Cost of Discipleship_ that Bonhoeffer never was content to simply “follow” Jesus through mere words:


206 Kuhns, 81.

207 Bonhoeffer, _The Cost of Discipleship_, 11.
It was his brotherly love of his fellow-men which also caused Bonhoeffer to believe that it was not enough to follow Christ by preaching, teaching and writing. No, he was in deadly earnest when he called for Christian action and self-sacrifice. This explains why Bonhoeffer always acted spontaneously, “in hiding,” far from publicity, and why he considered self-righteousness and complacency great sins against the Holy Spirit and regarded ambition and vanity as the start to hell.208

G. Leibholz also writes that Bonhoeffer’s example provides hope for the church in the future:

“We have not found Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s grave, but the memory of his life will safely be guarded, not only in the hearts of those who are indissolubly united with him, but also in the heart of the Church who draws her life-blood again and again from those who “follow him.”

…Bonhoeffer’s life and death have given us great hope for the future. He has set a model for a new type of true leadership inspired by the gospel, daily ready for martyrdom and death and imbued by a new spirit of Christian humanism and a creative sense of civil duty. The victory which he has won was a victory for us all, a conquest never to be undone, of love, light and liberty.”209

**Standing Against Evil in Society**

Much has been written on Bonhoeffer, who on the one hand was a pacifist, and on the other hand, was involved in the resistance that actively sought to remove Adolf Hitler from power. This is an intriguing area of his life because there seems to be a contradiction between Bonhoeffer before he joined *Abwehr* in 1939 and Bonhoeffer after he joined *Abwehr.*

*Abwehr* was the “counterintelligence agency of the armed forces in Nazi Germany.”210 Many members of *Abwehr* were part of the German resistance

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movement that provided “cover-ups for the resistance activities.” Abwehr also actively plotted for the assassination of Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer was a civilian member of Abwehr from 1939 until his arrest in 1943.

What were the circumstances that led Bonhoeffer to join Abwehr? Is it even possible to arrive at a logical conclusion? Larry Rasmussen, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance writes:

How is it that this man, neither born nor educated for conspiracy, nevertheless moved through many forms and stages of passive and active resistance, including conspiracy, until he was hanged for his participation in the plot to end the reign of Adolf Hitler? How is it that he, so self-consciously an admirer of Martin Luther, departed from almost all his Lutheran colleagues in sounding pacifist themes and carrying out conspiratorial deeds?

For some, there are not always clear answers to those questions. At times, his writings and life are hard to understand. Peter Vorkink II said:

Interpretations of the life and thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are like the answers elicited by a Rorschach test—no two commentators see the same things…What Bonhoeffer really meant and what he would have said had he lived has become a wide-open pastime, little previous experience required.

Despite the difficulty in always understanding Bonhoeffer, his perseverance and example during a dark period of the twenty-first century continues to inspire people across the spectrum. Martin E. Marty observes: “Between East and West,

215 Haynes, xvi.
Protestant and Catholic, Liberal and Conservative, clergymen and laymen, theologians and activists, Calvinists and Lutherans, across the ecumenical spectrum (Bonhoeffer) has stood as a symbol.\textsuperscript{216}

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was made chancellor of Germany\textsuperscript{217} ushering in a period of “twelve years that shook the earth.”\textsuperscript{218} From the onset of Hitler’s control, Bonhoeffer was actively promoting the cause of Jesus though Germany was rapidly falling under the dark cloud of Nazism:

By midsummer of 1933, Hitler was master of Germany. The Lutheran Church fell quickly under his spell. The socialist party within the church, soon known as the German Christians, won elections in July, and nominated Ludwig Muller, handpicked by Hitler, Reich Bishop. Bonhoeffer made his way to Gestapo headquarters for the first time, already questioning the compatibility of loyalty to Jesus Christ and membership in a church that, in his mind, had lapsed into heresy.\textsuperscript{219}

Renate Wind described the weeks and months that followed Hitler’s rise to power as a mass exodus from ‘responsibility into a cult of the Führer…not only a large part of the nation but almost all the Protestant church was prostrate before the Führer.’\textsuperscript{220}

One pastor from the Rhineland named Paul Humburg took the tune of a well-known Nazi hymn, the Horst Wessel, and composed the following verse that appealed to the church of Germany:

\textsuperscript{216} Haynes, xvi.


\textsuperscript{218} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 17.

\textsuperscript{219} Devine, 14.

All hands to work, young Germany risks anew,
Germany, the battle cry in need and death,
The Fuhrer calls, we gladly rejoice.
The day before us, and our strength is God.221

One of the Fuhrer’s first tasks was to purge Germany of people with Jewish ancestry. On April 1, 1933, there was a national one-day boycott of Jewish owned businesses in Germany.222 Six days later, the Aryan Civil Service banned all people of Jewish ancestry from employment in civil service, including jobs with the state and church.223 This became known as the “Aryan Clause”.224

Later that month, Bonhoeffer addressed a group of Berlin pastors who met monthly to discuss theological matters.225 His address, which later published as “The Church and the Jewish Question”,226 was the first public response to the church’s responsibility to the Jews in society.227

In that address, Bonhoeffer referred to the Nazi government as the “wheel”.228 And the church can respond to the “wheel” in three ways. First, “it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibilities.”229

221 Wind, 66-67.
228 Wind, 69.
229 Wind, 69.
Second, if the “wheel” runs over and hurts people in society, then the church has the responsibility to “bandage the victims.”\textsuperscript{230} Third, the church even had the responsibility to “put a spoke in the wheel itself.”\textsuperscript{231} That statement caused many of Bonhoeffer’s fellow pastors to leave the room: “Dietrich gave the rest of his lecture to an almost empty room.

His demand that the church must be prepared for political resistance had flabbergasted most of his audience. With this attitude, Dietrich remained alone in his church.”\textsuperscript{232}

Despite the lack of support from his brethren in the church, Bonhoeffer pressed forward to formalize a proper, Biblical doctrine that defined the relationship between the church and the world. William Kuhns writes that this pursuit would consume Bonhoeffer during the middle years of 1930’s:

The question became urgent during the Nazi regime: how should the church respond to the Jewish persecution, the nation’s preparation for an aggressive war, the intoxication of the people with a dangerous leader? Bonhoeffer realized that a major reason for the failure of the Confessing Church in Germany was a lack of theological doctrine of Church and world.

Worse: the absence of such a doctrine forced upon the Church an unreal notion of itself which was, as Bonhoeffer later suggested in his prison letters, essentially self-destructive…his writings of the period between 1932 and 1936 show a recurring questioning of the relationship, and a circling effort to define the problem.”\textsuperscript{233}

\textsuperscript{230} Wind, 69.
\textsuperscript{231} Wind, 69.
\textsuperscript{232} Wind, 69.
\textsuperscript{233} Kuhns, 60.
During these years, Bonhoeffer was also able to lay the groundwork for his work, *Ethics* which he began in 1940. Bonhoeffer considered this his main work in his life: “I sometimes feel as if my life were more or less over, and as if all I had to do were to finish my ‘Ethics’”. One will not find a systematic doctrine of the relationship between the church and state in *Ethics*:

According to Bonhoeffer, the movement from life in the Christian community to service of one’s neighbor is the only one true movement toward God that God’s gift of faith makes possible. He argues, moreover, that the demand for spontaneity in one’s response to people in need makes it impossible to produce a systematic ethic. Every changing situation of need can become the specific locus of God’s command.

This “demand for spontaneity” explains why it seemed that Bonhoeffer went from a pacifist to an active role in the assassination of Adolf Hitler. When he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1937, Bonhoeffer “offered a compelling argument on behalf of pacifism as blessed in Jesus’ beatitudes…” However, when he wrote *Ethics*:

…his thoughts…became conditioned by the reality of an entrenched, seemingly insurmountable evil that no ordinary means, least of all that of pacifism, appeared capable of nullifying. The times called for another approach, one inspired by his practical sense of responsibility for the victims of Nazism and his trust in the incarnate presence and forgiving power of Jesus Christ.

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234 Kuhns, 285.


Larry Rasmussen offers legitimate questions about this possible shifting of Bonhoeffer’s position:

But what about that most intriguing journey of all, from a committed Christian pacifism to Christian participation in tyrannicide and coup d’etat? What explains Bonhoeffer’s twisting path of resistance in the Church Struggle and in the military-political conspiracy? Does this journey, varied in form and perhaps contradictory and ethically problematic, also belong and hold together?\(^{240}\)

To Bonhoeffer, however, there was no contradiction because he would maintain that his devotion to the example of Jesus allowed times for pacifism and also times for a more active role in representing Christ in the world:

Although the peacemaking dimensions of Bonhoeffer’s Christian spirituality seemed muted by his arguments in *Ethics* in favor of tyrannicide and violent interventions to the end of the war, in truth Bonhoeffer’s reliance on Jesus Christ’s example and mandates of responsibility never ceased to be his primary motivating force…To act on behalf of the victims of the widespread suffering inflicted by Nazism militaristic bloodletting meant that law-abiding citizens had to break the laws and plan the violent death of a dictator.\(^{241}\)

Rasmussen also argues that there was no inconsistency in Bonhoeffer, and that the seemingly different approaches to Nazism are simply the unfolding of his Christology:

…Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s resistance activity was his Christology enacted with utter seriousness. Bonhoeffer’s resistance was the existential playing out of christological themes. Changes and shifts in his Christology were at the same time changes and shifts in the character of his resistance. In the other direction, changes in his resistance activity had an impact on his Christology.\(^ {242}\)

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\(^{240}\) Rasmussen, 8.


\(^{242}\) Rasmussen, 15.
Bonhoeffer’s varied responses corresponded to the three possible responses of the church he outlined in his address, “The Church and the Jewish Question” in April of 1933. In the early years, Bonhoeffer’s response resembled “something of a ‘pacifist.’” But as the historical conditions changed, Bonhoeffer reacted accordingly.

For example, Bonhoeffer eventually was involved in smuggling Jews out of Germany. He was a civilian member of Abwehr from 1938 until his arrest in 1943. This was the German Intelligence Service. Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, a staff member of Abwehr, recruited him as a front for exemption from being drafted into the military. This gave Bonhoeffer an appearance of loyalty to the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer’s involvement with a movement to smuggle Jews out of Germany again corresponded with his essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question”. In it, Bonhoeffer appealed to Galatians 6:10 as support to bandage the wounds of the Jewish people: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” He argued

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244 Kuhns, 228.


that “the church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”

There was a biblical mandate for Bonhoeffer to risk his own life to save others. This risk became more apparent as conditions worsened in Germany. Kuhns writes that the “need was sharper, more urgent.”

A demonic government was dragging the German people into destruction and ripping open Europe at the same time. What the world needed most now was not peace, not a quieting of the havoc, nor even primarily an effort to rescue the victims of the havoc. “The third possibility,” Dietrich had written in 1932, “is not just to bandage victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”

The historical moment made that third alternative for Bonhoeffer an imperative…In terms of the historical moment, then, Bonhoeffer’s transition to conspiracy against the government is not a total reorientation…What Bonhoeffer did when he became involved in the Abwehr circle makes sense in terms of what he always believed and hoped in. For he believed more deeply in relating to the present, in identifying the concrete needs of the moment, than in simple pacifism.

Kuhns also argues that there were other motivations for Bonhoeffer’s “new form of action…One motivation may well have been a disillusionment with pacifism.”

Bonhoeffer embraced pacifism largely because it held a tactical advantage: it answered a need. But the coming of the War made pacifism an individual (and highly risky) decision, and by obliterating the very peace which Bonhoeffer had struggled for, made his style of pacifism somewhat obsolete. And obsolescence was something which Bonhoeffer instinctively abhorred.

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249 Kuhns, 229.
250 Kuhns, 229.
251 Kuhns, 229.
Another motivation may figure in, Bonhoeffer’s growing disappointment with the Confessing Church. In the late 1930’s an effort had been made by Reich Church and Confessing Church leaders to consolidate the two churches. Bonhoeffer had violently opposed the effort. And though it failed, the attempt seriously weakened the Confessing Church—to the point at which its leaders were far more worried about its stability than the salvation of the people it was intended to serve.

Had the Confessing Church actually done what Bonhoeffer hoped it would do—sharpen consciences, stimulate critical thought about German life under the regime, identify the imperatives of discipleship to Christ in the present—then very possibly Bonhoeffer never would have had to enter the resistance.

A third reason for entering resistance was certainly Bonhoeffer’s profound love for Germany and the German people. In his 1939 letter to inform Niebuhr that he was suddenly leaving America, Bonhoeffer wrote: “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of the Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

A final and related reason for Bonhoeffer’s entry into the resistance would be the very terms in which he conceived resistance action. “Our action,” he told Bishop Bell in their meeting in Stockholm in 1942, “must be such that the world will understand it as an act of repentance.”

In his meeting with W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft in 1941, he described resistance as a salvaging action, and an act of repentance: salvaging, in that out of the war would be plucked the foundation of a new international order of justice; repentance, meaning in his own words that “only in defeat can we atone for the terrible crimes we have committed against Europe and the world.”

Out of this context, out of these motivations, Bonhoeffer took part in a conspiracy to end the Third Reich. A man who loved his country and could not bear to see it drag Europe into another holocaust; a man whose disappointment with earlier causes made him realize that the times called for action of heroic and desperate proportions; a man whose commitment to pacifism followed from a deeper commitment, which led him in time to resistance: this was Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer’s involvement with Abwehr was a means for him to put a “spoke” in the wheel of Nazism in order to jam it. Bonhoeffer explained his reasoning in joining the resistance to his sister-in-law Emmi Bonhoeffer. He told

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252 Kuhns, 229-232.
her: “If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can’t, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.”

Mark Devine explained Bonhoeffer’s motive to wrestle the steering wheel out of the madman’s hands:

Without taking a dogmatic position, perhaps we can say that Bonhoeffer fairly consistently maintained a strong Christian aversion to the use of violence, accepting its inevitability only as a last resort. This leaves aside the question of the criteria by which believers recognize whether last resort conditions are met.

What we can say with real confidence is that Bonhoeffer found retreat from the concrete problems on humankind on supposed Christian or theological grounds intolerable. Better to sin boldly and let grace abound (Luther) than to welcome and enjoy the benefits of Hitler’s assassination by others while smugly adoring and displaying one’s own ostensibly clean hands!

Bonhoeffer’s pacifism accepted agonizing participation in violence, asking for forgiveness all along the way but refusing to stand by and let nonbelievers do the dirty work.

Kelly and Nelson write that the changing circumstances forced Bonhoeffer to abandon the more peaceful forms of resistance: “But by, 1938, given the mood for compromise, the drive for civil legitimation, and the rise of a national patriotism, then eroding Confessing Church resistance, Bonhoeffer had been edged


254 Devine, 137-138.
past mere church agitation toward the more murkier actions demanded by a political-military conspiracy.”

Among the “murkier actions” was Bonhoeffer’s silence in ecclesiastical circles. The reason was that his involvement with Abwehr allowed him to be aware of “damning information from the conspirators.” The sharing of this information would certainly put his peers in danger.

Bonhoeffer’s involvement with Abwehr eventually led to his arrest on April 5, 1943. Abwehr was responsible for “Operation 7,” a plan to transport a small group of Jews out of Germany. Abwehr provided passports and papers to Jews allowing them to pose as Abwehr agents. Bonhoeffer was heavily involved in “Operation 7”:

Bonhoeffer was also instrumental in the implementation of a top-secret plan to assist the smuggling of Jews out of Germany, referred to as “Operation 7.” Three times he crossed the border himself to Switzerland, connecting with key ecumenical figures such as Karl Barth, W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft, and others. He was able to make several important contacts for the resistance. Together with Helmut Count von Moltke, he also traveled to Norway under the auspices of the Abwehr.

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Bonhoeffer’s most dangerous journey came in the spring of 1942, when he met with his ecumenical friend, Bishop George Bell of England, in Sigtuna, Sweden: “The crucial importance of this mission can scarcely be exaggerated”\textsuperscript{260}.

In this secret rendezvous, Bonhoeffer relayed to the bishop precise information, including names of key resisters in the German underground. The hope was that Bell would transmit this important message to the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, thence to Prime Minister Winston Churchill and further to Franklin Roosevelt.

It was hoped that the Allies would initiate a contract with the resistance, negotiating a compromise peace after Hitler had been overthrown in a coup. There was no return message by Allied leaders. The “unconditional surrender” policy of the Allied leaders seemed set in stone, much to the consternation of the resistance movement and also at great cost of life during the final two years of the war.\textsuperscript{261}

However, the Gestapo learned that Abwehr was using Jews as military agents.\textsuperscript{262} This led to an investigation into “Operation 7”. In October of 1942, Abwehr agent, Consul Wilhelm Schmidhuber was arrested. He was one of Bonhoeffer’s superiors. During interrogation, “Bonhoeffer’s name had surfaced.”\textsuperscript{263} This eventually led to the arrest of Bonhoeffer in April of 1943. He was thirty-seven years old at the time.\textsuperscript{264}

A few months prior to his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote the essay, “\textit{After Ten Years}.” It was a Christmas gift to his closest fellow resisters “when the race


\textsuperscript{262} Wind, 152.

\textsuperscript{263} Devine, 30.

\textsuperscript{264} Kuhns, 114.
between arrest and success was close. This was also a time when Bonhoeffer knew that the Reich Security Head Office was gathering evidence against him. “After Ten Years” was Bonhoeffer’s attempt to “give some account of what we have experienced and learnt in common during these years.”

Todd Kappelman writes that in this essay, “Bonhoeffer identifies with the evil of the times, and especially the war. He speaks of the unreasonable situations which reasonable people must face.” One lesson that Bonhoeffer learned ten years after Hitler took power was the need for civil courage among citizens when evil prevailed:

What lies behind the complaint about the dearth of civil courage? In recent years we have seen a great deal of bravery and self-sacrifice, but civil courage hardly anywhere, even among ourselves. To attribute this simply to personal cowardice would be too facile a psychology; its background is quite different.

In a long history, we Germans have had to learn the need for and the strength of obedience. In the subordination of all personal wishes and ideas to the tasks to which we have been called, we have seen the meaning and the greatness of our lives. We have looked upwards, not in servile fear, but in free trust, seeing in our tasks a call, and in our call a vocation.

Bonhoeffer continued by reminding his fellow conspirators that Germany has a proud history of having the freedom to follow a “command” outside of self in order to serve “the community.” Yet, this same freedom to obey and follow can

265 Rasmussen, 63.


268 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison, 5-6.

269 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison, 5-6.
be “exploited for evil ends.” And it was at this point when courage failed the German people:

When that happened, the exercise of the calling itself became questionable, and all the moral principles of the German were bound to totter. The fact could not be escaped that the German still lacked something fundamental: he could not see the need for free and responsible action, even in opposition to his task and his calling; in its place there appeared on the one hand an irresponsible lack of scruple, and on the other a self-tormenting punctiliousness that never led to action.

Rasmussen points out that even though Bonhoeffer advocated the freedom to act against oppression, he stops short of making such freedom normative:

Bonhoeffer immediately counters an ethic in which unbound freedom is normative. Certainly the man of unbound freedom knows the necessary deed and practice the art of compromise as well. He might also be clearly cognizant that compromise may prove the wrong tack and that a fruitful radicalism may be the demand of the hour instead.

He is free to move in any and all of these directions...Bonhoeffer falls short here of his standing criticism of an ethic that makes free responsibility normative, i.e., an ethic that ignores law as a generally binding boundary...he concludes that the exceptional act must never be made the normative one, that necessity must not become a principle.

Nevertheless, there will be times when citizens must be “exceptional” in their actions. This leads to another lesson in the essay. The Church also has the responsibility to take an active role against tyranny. Bonhoeffer wrote:

We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must share in Christ’s large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer.

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272 Rasmussen, 65.
Mere waiting and looking is not Christian behavior. The Christian is called to sympathy and action, not in the first place by his own sufferings, but by the sufferings of his brethren, for whose sake Christ suffered.\textsuperscript{273}

While the essay is “an account of the resistance experience and not an essay in Christology or theological ethics…Bonhoeffer does not omit deep-running themes of his christological ethic.”\textsuperscript{274} It was the sufferings of others that call Christians into action. Kelly and Nelson write:

The essay is a reminder of the ideals for which they were joined in the struggle. They could derive satisfaction only from the example of Christ in his willingness to suffer for others and in that remarkable solidarity with the oppressed that had continued to animate their decisions to deliver their nation from Nazism.\textsuperscript{275}

There certainly was a progression in Bonhoeffer’s actions from 1933 to 1943. This progression was, again based on the three responses he outlined in the 1933 essay, “\textit{The Church and the Jewish Question.}” The conditions in Germany and Europe eventually reached the point where it was necessary to jam the wheel.

Bonhoeffer knew that murder was morally wrong. Yet, Hitler was guilty of horrifying massacres of countless Jews and others. When Bonhoeffer realized the gravity of terror inside the walls of the Nazi death camps, he concluded that he could no longer passively sit and watch millions of innocent people die because of the evil of Hitler.


\textsuperscript{274} Rasmussen, 66.

In 1939 when the Confessing Church in Germany lost her backbone to stand up to Hitler, Bonhoeffer joined the resistance. His activities within the Abwehr progressed to the point of committing treason.

By 1940, Bonhoeffer believed that his involvement in the conspiracy to remove Hitler from power was the only path that “made any sense.” Yet, Bonhoeffer was always careful to make sure that his devotion to Christ was the overriding reason to take such a path. In the same way that Jesus suffered and died for the oppressed, they sacrificed their lives for the sake of the oppressed. Bonhoeffer, thus, identified with Jesus through his own suffering and eventual execution.

**Serving Jesus in Severe Trials**

As society in Germany deteriorated, Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized that the church, in her present form, was incapable of standing strong for Jesus. The church certainly had “religious forms”, but those forms actually “restricted” the church. Bonhoeffer believed that a day would come when the church would be freed from these religious forms: “indeed, evidences are clear that Bonhoeffer welcomed the secular forces in the world, and saw in them a growing liberation from man’s enslavement to religious forms—a liberation to be fuller men in Christ.”

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277 Kuhns, 196

278 Kuhns, 196.
Near the end of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life, he was able to begin to articulate his concept that the world was in a transition to a day when the real meaning of Christianity would be finally realized:

In one of his last letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer described a book which he was preparing to write, The Essence of Christianity, on the world’s coming of age, the dissolution of religion, and the “real meaning” of the Christian faith. Obviously such a book would have been invaluable in clarifying Bonhoeffer’s thought in the critical area of “religionless Christianity” and a “non religious interpretation of biblical concepts.” Unfortunately, he was never able to finish the book. 279

It was unfortunate because “The Essence of Christianity” would have been Bonhoeffer’s “most mature important thought.” 280 On April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer described in a letter Eberhard Bethge his thoughts on “religionless Christianity.” 281 Bonhoeffer was concerned that church people in Germany were content to simply wear a thin “garment” of Christianity. 282 Yet, a day is coming when people will realize how helpless they are with such a garment:

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.

Even those who honestly describe themselves as “religious” do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by “religious”…How this religionless Christianity looks, what form it takes, is something that I’m thinking about a great deal… 283

279 Kuhns, 194.

280 Kuhns, 194.

281 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 282.

282 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 280.

283 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 279, 282.
Kelly and Nelson offer the following definition and understanding of “religionless Christianity”:

(It) refers to a new “form” of Christianity in which people of a genuine Christian faith would live in a more open, constructive relationship with the world. In this process, religion itself, considered and historically conditioned, transient, dying form of Christianity, would undergo drastic changes as faith is freed from its more Westernized, self-serving constrictions and emphasis on inward piety and empty rituals.

...Bonhoeffer had criticized religion for its having inflicted on people a psychic posture of weakness and immature dependence and for having encouraged individualistic, self-centered attitudes toward God and others. Christians living a “nonreligious” form of Christianity, on the other hand, would draw on the example of Christ, the “man for others,” and live in a paradox of being called out of the world while belonging wholly to it.284

“Religionless Christianity” is connected with costly grace and obedience to Jesus’ call to radically follow him. However, the church structure of Bonhoeffer’s day hindered Christians from doing so. Thus, the structure had to change:

From the prison letters, one can deduce that Bonhoeffer was calling for a complete restructuring of ecclesiastical offices and for a reshaping of the churches so they can become more like Christ, divested of their possessiveness and encouraged to live only to serve others.

Such a Christianity, with its church, Sacrament, and sermon still needed the “discipline of the secret,” in order for Christians to be completely engaged in a more “silent” life of prayer and dedication to social justice. In this way Bonhoeffer hoped that a new form of Christian church would come into being.285

It is in this framework of “religionless Christianity” that helps us to understand how Bonhoeffer was able to stand fast during severe trials. Even though the time was harsh and dangerous, Bonhoeffer saw this as an opportunity for the


church to be revised and repaired. Even from his days as the director of the Finkenwalde Seminary, he looked forward to the revitalization of the church. Bonhoeffer longed for the day to come when the church would no longer be self-serving and cowardly.

Bonhoeffer worked hard to provide the church with a backbone, even though setbacks plagued him until his death. For example on August 5, 1936, he was no longer allowed to teach at Berlin University. In September of 1937, the Seminary at Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo. On January 11, 1938, Bonhoeffer was informed that he could no longer work in Berlin. On September 9, 1940, he was prohibited to speak publicly and was ordered to regularly check in with the police. On April 5, 1943 he was arrested and imprisoned. In July of that year, Bonhoeffer went through intense interrogation. On February 2, 1945, he was sentenced to death and on April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed at Flossenberg.

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286 Rasmussen, 45.
Bonhoeffer also faced opposition from fellow Christians who opted for a safer route. Bonhoeffer was among the first to recognize the anti-Semitism within the government. So he urged his fellow pastors to stand up and protect the Jewish people. As stated above, Bonhoeffer reasoned from scripture that Christ-followers are obligated to intervene for the helpless in society.

But this intervention was not to just protest Nazi polices; nor was it just to provide safe passage of Jews out of Germany. Again, Bonhoeffer suggested that the spokes of the Nazi wheel are to be broken by those who profess Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer’s viewpoint was seen as too extreme by many of his peers. He “became an enigma to many of his colleagues in the church who were attempting by political quietism, indifference, and religious compromise to survive a difficult situation.”

Yet, this passivity and inaction of the church would allow for the “the insidious Nazi takeover of the churches.” In 1933, Bonhoeffer pleaded with the church to remain true to biblical values. Nevertheless, in July of the same year, the Evangelical Church in Germany (composed of Lutheran and Reformed churches) elected as Reich bishop, Ludwig Muller. He was a sympathizer of Nazi polices and was an “ecclesiastical counterpart to the political leadership of Adolf Hitler.” Thus, within the church, Hitler had an ally who would endorse his racial policies.

The fact that Muller was elected by church delegates indicated Hitler had already cast his spell. The door was now open for national policies to become

church policies. For example, the “Law for the Reconstruction of the Professional Civil Service” was passed by the German Reichstag on April 7, 1933. It contained the “Aryan Clause” which banned Jews from serving in the government. On September 4, 1933, the Evangelical Church adopted the “Aryan Clause.” From that point on, pastors of Jewish descent were denied rights as ordained ministers.

From Bonhoeffer’s point of view, the church had fallen into heresy. The call of Jesus for radical discipleship had been replaced by racial purity. The church had opted for “cheap grace” by skirting her responsibility to stand up for the oppressed in society.

Bonhoeffer could not sit back and watch the church transform into Hitler’s puppet. There had to be action. Bonhoeffer and others formed a “resistance” movement within the church to not only oppose the pro-Nazi policies within the church; but also to show unity with their Jewish colleagues within the church. This resistance was known as the “Pastors’ Emergency League.” This organization would eventually form the “Confessing Church of Germany.”

The Confessing Church then commissioned Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse to formulate a confession of faith that would serve as a counter to the Nazi’s invasion into the German National Church. Bonhoeffer and Sasse would draft this confession at a retreat center called Bethel. Thus, the confession was known as the


“Bethel Confession”.

This document, in its original form was perhaps the most devastating condemnation of the Nazi point of view. Yet, the Bethel Confession went through several revisions to make it less offensive. Bonhoeffer was so disappointed in the final watered-down version that he refused to sign it.

In May of 1934, the Confessing Church adopted the “Barmen Declaration”. The primary author of this document was theologian Karl Barth. The delegates from nineteen provincial churches voted unanimously to oppose the intrusion of Nazi values into the German church. The Barmen Declaration included the following statement: “We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him.”

It was a strong and clear call to allow the church to truly be the church and to be completely devoted to Jesus. Bonhoeffer was a strong advocate of the Barmen Declaration:

Bonhoeffer himself, though not present at Barmen, would look back on that moment as an affirmation that church order was bound solely to Jesus Christ. This affirmation, for him, was a clear rejection of the heresy that a church could be allowed to suit its convictions to the dictates of politics or public opinion. The church was, to put it simply, the Body of Christ.

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Bonhoeffer also pushed that the Confessing Church be recognized as the only true representative of the Evangelical Church of Germany. Unfortunately, this never became a reality because even within the Confessing Church, pastors began to waver in their original commitment to God’s word. The Barmen Confession eventually became “blunted by compromise and the seductive siren of patriotism.”

By 1936, compromise had slipped into the Confessing Church. On January 10, 1936, Bonhoeffer addressed a group of clergy at Stettin-Bredow and declared that the “church had, in short, become susceptible to skilled subversion by state propaganda. In standing still, he said, they ‘destroy the church.’ He urged them to move forward.” Over the course of time, as more pastors were imprisoned, the voice of the Confessing Church lost her boldness.

This path of neutrality baffled Bonhoeffer because in life, either a person followed Jesus Christ or did not. This loyalty to Jesus was tested on April 20, 1938 when all the pastors in Germany were ordered to take the oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler in honor of his fiftieth birthday. The Confessing Church refused to take an official stance against this oath to Hitler, but simply left the matter up to individual pastors. Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to Berlin Council of Brethren and voiced his bitter disappointment that pastors caved in to political pressures rather than obey the demands of Jesus.

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Later that year, on November 9, the church’s loyalty to Jesus was tested again when Nazi storm troopers “mobilized hordes of willing citizens to terrorize the Jewish population, breaking the windows of houses and stores and burning the synagogues.” This became known as “Krisallnacht” (Crystal Night) because broken glass littered the streets in the towns and cities “after that night of devastation and terror.”

Bonhoeffer was stunned and angry that “only a few pastors spoke out against this latest violence against the Jews and their places of worship.” The other church leaders withdrew “into a pious silence.” He was also angry because it was “reprehensible” for Christians “to make the connection, as many did, between the destruction of Jewish property and the so-called curse on Jews because of their alleged participation in the death of Christ.” Kelly and Nelson write that “scarcely any pastors or church leaders spoke out against these acts of blatant anti-Semitism. Bonhoeffer himself was outraged.”

All the personal setbacks and disappointments with the church emphasized the need to Bonhoeffer for the church to become “religionless.” Bonhoeffer came to

realize “that religion, however helpful in previous ages, was now an obstacle to genuine faith in Jesus Christ.” Bonhoeffer was not seeking to propose “an apologetic for Christianity, nor a dilution of the Christian message.”

Bonhoeffer’s concern was that the church’s “openness to the world would…lead to a loss of Christian identity and substance, and ‘righteous action’ alone could not sustained for long.” A “religionless Christianity” would restore the courage and substance to the church because believers would be strengthened through genuine community and the spiritual disciplines.

David H. Jensen writes that even though Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity” was not fully developed and often misunderstood, it is nevertheless christocentric:

In a letter to Eberhard Bethge dated April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestles with the idea of a “religionless Christianity.” Although Bonhoeffer approaches this idea more in form of questions and less as an explicit theological topic, this has not deterred legions of interpreters from seizing his catch phrase for a bewildering array of theological projects.

From “Death of God” theologians to post-modernists, “religionless Christianity” has served as a rallying cry for a new way of Christian thinking (and acting) in the world. Though the details of Bonhoeffer’s proposal of “religionless Christianity” are sketchy at best, the questions that he asks become especially relevant as Christianity approaches its twenty-first century and confronts issues of religious pluralism more openly.

For Bonhoeffer, “religionless Christianity” is as steadfastly christocentric as it is a model of face-to-face encounter and solidarity with others in a world of difference. In an age that should herald the death of Christian triumphalism, Bonhoeffer’s alternative posture may allow Christians to hold

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317 De Gruchy, 39.
318 De Gruchy, 39.
319 De Gruchy, 40.
fast to their core confessions about Jesus Christ without obscuring the claim and wisdom of religious others.\textsuperscript{320}

Bonhoeffer, according to Jensen, was convinced that most “God-talk” was either “strange or irrelevant to modern ears.”\textsuperscript{321} Another dangerous tendency was that religion had become “autonomous” and inward, and thus, had “run its course with even more disastrous consequences. A preoccupation with personal (and national) salvation had so turned the Christian eye away from others that the church now manifested itself in a monstrously distorted cult of uniformity.”\textsuperscript{322}

Thus, the church was rendered “both irrelevant in the face of crisis and incapable of openness to vulnerable others beyond its walls...For Bonhoeffer, this focus on religion resulted in an impotent church, incapable of sustaining the new life it had been entrusted to proclaim.”\textsuperscript{323}

A “religionless Christianity” is a sharp “contrast to a religion that would insulate Christians within the irrelevant confines of their Sunday sanctuaries” and it will return the church to Christ, “the person of difference—and a return to a world in its turmoil and struggle.”\textsuperscript{324} This return to Jesus within a “religionless Christianity” would free Christians from the previous insulation of the church:

Bonhoeffer can thus say that Christ takes hold of Christians at the center of their lives, while at the same time recognizing that it is also Christ who


\textsuperscript{321} Jensen.

\textsuperscript{322} Jensen.

\textsuperscript{323} Jensen.

\textsuperscript{324} Jensen.
launches Christians into a world of suffering and difference. Hurled into the
midst of this world, Christians are not to assume a sense of privilege, but to
relinquish privilege for the sake of others.

Bonhoeffer’s steadfast christocentrism thus results in a model of
discipleship that is thoroughly eccentric. If we follow its contours, a
“religionless Christianity” might otherwise be expressed as “being-for-
others-in-Christ”—a commitment that involves the entire human life. Because the demand of this stance is great, the cost is likewise substantial: a
“sharing” in the suffering of God in Christ.\footnote{Jensen}

Bonhoeffer was aware of the risks of whole-hearted devotion to Jesus Christ
when he first challenged the policies of Hitler back in 1933. Even though
Bonhoeffer’s model of “religious Christianity” was not fully developed when he
was executed, it was very possible that his own practice of it sustained him during
the years after 1933 and it helped prepare him for his impending death.

**The Grace of Living and Dying Well**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s legacy is based on more than just his works. As seen
above, Bonhoeffer lived for the glory of Jesus even as he risked his life opposing
Nazi oppression. The source of strength for him to live well, and eventually die
well, was the grace of God.

His good friend, Eberhard Bethge delivered a lecture entitled “*The Living
God Revealed in this Church*” in Coventry Cathedral on October 30, 1967.\footnote{Bosanquet, 279.} In
that lecture, he expressed his concern that Bonhoeffer’s legacy was marred by
misunderstanding the source of power that sustained Bonhoeffer’s life. For
example: “The isolated use and handing down of the famous term “religionless

\footnote{Jensen}

\footnote{Bosanquet, 279.}
Christianity” has made Bonhoeffer the champion of an undialectical shallow modernism which obscures all that he wanted to tell us about the living God.”³²⁷

That source of power was actually God’s grace that Bonhoeffer relied upon during the times he stood alone for the cause of Jesus; and during the times he displayed the image of Jesus through his words and action. Bethge summed it up with the phrase: “secret discipline.”³²⁸

To Bonhoeffer: “Secret discipline meant…all that power to deepen and sustain Christian life: prayer, meditation, common worship, the sacraments, and experiments in life such as Finkenwalde had been, all in fact that helped to fit the Christian for a life of love lived with God and for his fellow men.”³²⁹

Most modern readers of Bonhoeffer who are enthralled by his writings can completely miss why he lived and wrote the way he did:

The Letters and Papers from Prison, which are the most widely read and quoted of all Bonhoeffer’s works, explore extensively the problems of identification which face the Christian in the present century, while saying little about that secret discipline by which his identity as a Christian is maintained. But what the writer did not say he was living daily and hourly, and the eloquence of his life counterbalances the reticence of the letters.

His life had in fact represented a continuous effort to hold the two in balance, an attempt complicated by powerful inward and outward pressures, so that at certain stages the scale tipped more heavily to the one side and certain stages to the other.³³⁰

While Bethge believed that many readers may miss the reason why Bonhoeffer lived that way, Kelly and Burton believe many are actually attracted to

³²⁷ Bosanquet, 279.
³²⁸ Bosanquet, 279.
³²⁹ Bosanquet, 279.
³³⁰ Bosanquet, 279-280.
Bonhoeffer because of his intense relationship with Jesus. They write that genuine community was a key component to Bonhoeffer’s spirituality:

One of the main reasons why readers find Bonhoeffer’s writings so compelling lies in the inner strength and intensity of his relationship with Jesus Christ developed in the practical everyday life of a Christian community. When he wrote his account of his community-sustained spiritual life in the Finkenwalde seminary, he was not reminiscing about an agreeable, idyllic experience of a like-minded group of dedicated seminarians.

He intended to share with others this experience, with its joys and trials, its mutual support and enduring friendships, that it might serve as a model; for forming moral leaders and for the creation of new forms of church community throughout Germany.331

“Moral leaders” will be the fruit of the “new forms of church community.”

Bonhoeffer shared his “experience” at Finkenwalde in the pages of “Life Together.”

If this “new and different” way “to be the church” became a reality, then vibrant followers of Jesus would be produced:

In depicting that community in Life Together, Bonhoeffer also acknowledged the urgent need for the church to discover new and different ways to be the church. He thus emphasized the courageous following of Jesus Christ within a genuine community formed along the lines of the gospel, not the typical kind of church gatherings where strangers met and remained strangers, and whose dull blandness offered little resistance to the political ideology that had gained the allegiance of most churchgoers.

In Bonhoeffer’s spirituality, effective moral leadership and one’s personality strengths are supported in and through the sharing of convictions that takes place in genuine Christian communities where the teachings of Jesus Christ, not political ideology, should inspire believers.332


In such communities, the followers of Jesus should be inspired to “live out the gospel more intensely and thus cope more courageously with the crisis then overwhelming the German people and churches.”

333 Kelly and Nelson speculate that the German landscape would have been transformed and the atrocities committed during the war could have been avoided if genuine Christian communities were formed within the churches: “In hindsight, one wonders whether the slaughter that took place in the war and in the death camps could have been avoided had the Christians of Germany professed their faith in truly Christian communities like that directed by Bonhoeffer.”

Though history turned out differently, Bonhoeffer himself served as a prototype in both his life and his death. An early example of this was that he displayed intensity during theological debates with his students at Finkenwalde, and yet he deeply cared for each of them. His assistant, Wilhelm Rott wrote that Bonhoeffer “always had time for the brethren.”

335 His compassion for his fellow believers grew out of his own passionate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.


Bonhoeffer was known to be a “man of action.” But his writings reveal that he was also “a man of deep, personal prayer.” It was his fervent spirituality that sustained him and motivated him to stand for the truth of the Word of God:

His practice of quiet meditation on the Word of God helped him to become a unique advocate for truth and freedom as his own country was being overwhelmed with mendacious distortions of the truth by the Nazi government. The truth, as Bonhoeffer saw it, was that Jesus Christ was being crucified anew in the persecution of the Jews and dissidents and later in those murdered in the death camps and on the battlefields of World War II.

Bonhoeffer’s resolve to spend time in prayer and scripture meditation strengthened him to stand up against the Nazi government:

His determination to resist Nazism was reinforced by his daily meditations on the biblical texts. It was in fact his dedication to prayer, as Bethge has observed, that kept Bonhoeffer’s conspiratorial actions from degenerating into self-righteousness, that buoyed his spirits with unflinching perseverance, that kept his pursuit of justice in line with the gospel. No prayer seemed complete for him unless it was linked to prophetic action for justice.

Bonhoeffer’s final published book was a “lengthy commentary on the Psalms.” It earned him a monetary fine from “Reich Board for the Regulation of Literature.” After Bonhoeffer appealed the fine, the Board threw at him a “strengthened prohibition against any further publishing venture on his part because

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of the ‘dangerous dogmatic and spiritual connections’ that conflicted with the prevailing Nazi ideology. It was Bonhoeffer’s longing in the commentary to “retrieve the Psalms as the prayer book of Jesus Christ himself”:

Against the quasi-apocalyptic background of a Europe at war, a church divided, and a nation engaged in a malignant policy of genocide, Bonhoeffer’s study of the Psalms takes on a new life...The Psalms are God’s mode of enabling the followers of God’s son Jesus to speak to and with Jesus.

God hears those in the language of Jesus who, as God’s Word, allows his followers to enter into his own prayer and thus to find their way with Jesus back to God. Bonhoeffer argued that this prayer is God’s gift to the followers of Jesus because it focuses them not on themselves but on Jesus, the biblical center, who leads them to pray as God wants.

Bonhoeffer wanted to put into the hearts of German Christians a practical way of enriching their prayer lives. For him, “the Psalms enabled him to cope with his own shifting moods amid all the vicissitudes of his ministry, including his imprisonment. The Psalms taught him that God was near in all the sorrows and joys, successes, and disappointments that had marked his own days.” At the Finkenwalde seminary, Bonhoeffer often incorporated the Psalms into the “regular community prayer services.”


This practice also encouraged and strengthened him even “during the most dismal days in Tegel prison.”

The Psalms were for him the prayer of Jesus Christ, who, as Bonhoeffer claimed, perhaps paraphrasing Augustine’s “Dues intimior intimo meo” (God is more intimate to me than I am to myself), “knows us better than we know ourselves.”

It was predictable, therefore, that the prayers Bonhoeffer composed for his fellow prisoners were filled with the spirit of the Psalms. Their constant theme was to trust in God’s love and acceptance of whatever God has permitted in their regard.

Bonhoeffer entered the Tegel Prison in Berlin on April 5, 1943. There he ended each day in prison with praise to God and prayer for his family and the people around him: “He commended into God’s hands at close of day his loved ones and his fellow prisoners, and even their wardens, as well as his own person. He asked for strength to bear what God might send and the courage to overcome their fears.”

His devotion to Christ exceeded his own prison cell:

In the all-pervasive distress of prison life, he would say to God, “I trust in your grace and commit my life wholly into your hands. Do with me according to your will and as it is best for me. Whether I live or die, I am with you, and you, my God are with me.”

These prayers, which were circulated illegally among the cells, manifest many of the insights that helped guide Bonhoeffer’s own actions on behalf


of peace and freedom and exude his concern for Christian community even in prison. 352

Fellow prisoner and conspirator, Fabian von Schlabrendorff wrote that Bonhoeffer was concerned for the spiritual and emotional well-being of his fellow prisoners: “To the very end, Bonhoeffer took advantage of (their) condition by arranging prayer services, consoling those who had lost all hope, and giving them fresh courage. A towering rock of faith, he became a shining example to his fellow prisoners.” 353

One student of Bonhoeffer’s spirituality, F. Burton Nelson realized “with a new appreciation the source of Bonhoeffer’s spiritual stamina and vitality—his constant, daily, childlike relationship to God.” 354

Bonhoeffer’s fervent relationship with Jesus would also maintain him during his two years of imprisonment. This can be seen in a letter from prison to Eberhard Bethge on August 21, 1944:

It is certain that we may always live close to God and in the light of God’s presence, and that such living is an entirely new life for us; that nothing is then impossible for us, because all things are possible with God; that no earthly power can touch us without God’s will, and that danger and distress can only drive us closer to God. 355


In the lonely darkness of a Nazi prison cell, Bonhoeffer’s spirit was not only strengthened and encouraged through the presence of Jesus, but ironically by the “community” of Christ’s body. Not even the barb-wired fences and guarded cells could separate Bonhoeffer from the experience of fellowship with his brothers and sisters in Jesus:

But whether they were physically present or close to him in prayers and meditative reflections, Bonhoeffer experienced intense comfort from the thought that they were all “in a community that sustains (them).” He specified that such community in Jesus Christ was the “firm ground” on which he had taken his stand...Separated from his family and friends and denied the physical support of the Confessing Church while in prison, Bonhoeffer was strengthened by the thought of his being remembered in the prayers offered on his behalf.357

It was Bonhoeffer’s friendship with Eberhard Bethge that gave him the most joy and comfort. In his last letter to Bethge, dated August 23, 1944, he opened with:

“Dear Eberhard, It’s always an almost indescribable joy to get letters from you. The peace and quiet in which your last letter was written was especially splendid.”358

Later in the letter, Bonhoeffer writes:

Please don’t ever get anxious or worried about me, but don’t forget to pray for me—I’m so sure you don’t! I am so sure of God’s guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I’m travelling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I’m being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified.

I’m most thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of, and thankful for, God’s mercy and forgiveness. Forgive my writing this, but let


358 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 392.
it make you happy. But I did not want to say it for once, and I couldn’t think of anyone else who I could be sure would take it aright.\textsuperscript{359}

Kelly and Nelson write Bonhoeffer’s close relationship with Bethge was a key ingredient to Bonhoeffer’s strong faith:

In the intensity of such a friendship and mutual prayer, Bonhoeffer’s concern for personal survival and the safety of his loved ones yielded to the quiet confidence in God’s protection that made his eventual death an act of faith and resignation to what he perceived as his destiny under God’s salvific will.\textsuperscript{360}

One other component found in Bonhoeffer’s life in prison was his poetry. From 1928 to 1943, there is not a single poem in his writings.\textsuperscript{361} But then in June of 1944, he wrote the first of ten poems. It was entitled, “The Past” and it was “significant for the way it depicts Bonhoeffer’s sense of loss at having to be separated from his loved ones.\textsuperscript{362} In the remaining months of 1944, Bonhoeffer composed the other nine poems\textsuperscript{363}:

The tenth and final poem, “By the Powers for Good,” was written in the Gestapo cellars of Prinz Albrecht Strasse in Berlin, where prisoner Bonhoeffer had been transferred from Tegel Prison a few weeks earlier. This poem is widely known in the Christian world because of its having been adapted into a hymn and translated into a variety of languages. It included in church hymnals throughout the world.\textsuperscript{364}

\textsuperscript{359} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 393.


\textsuperscript{361} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 236.

\textsuperscript{362} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 236.


Bonhoeffer’s final poem, “By the Powers for Good” was dated December 19, 1944. It was composed “…in the more severe surrounding of the Gestapo prison, where he was subjected to more intense interrogations…” Bonhoeffer had been moved from the Tegel Prison to the Gestapo Prison at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin on October 8, 1944.

In this final poem, Bonhoeffer expressed his trust in the sovereign God who gives strength and endurance and hope in a dark world. There were “powers for good” that surrounded Bonhoeffer “even during the dire days of imprisonment.”

These “powers” were a source of comfort for Bonhoeffer:

With every power for good to stay and guide me,
Comforted and inspired beyond all fear,
I’ll live these days with you in thought beside me,
And pass, with you, into the coming year

The old year still torments our hearts, unhastening;
The long days of sorrow still endure;
Father, grant to the souls thou hast been chastening
That thou hast promised, the healing and the cure.

Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving
Even to the dregs of pain, at thy command,
We will not falter, thankfully receiving
All that is given by thy loving hand.

But should it be thy will once more to release us
To life’s enjoyment and its good sunshine,
That which we’ve learned from sorrow shall increase us,

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365 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 246.
And all our life be dedicate to thine.

Today, let candles shed their radiant greetings;
Lo, on our darkness are they not thy light
Leading us, haply, to our longed-for meeting?
Thou canst illumine even our darkest night.

When now the silence deepens for our hearkening,
Grant we may hear thy children’s voices raise
From all the unseen world around us darkening
Their universal paean, in thy praise.

While all the powers of good aid and attend us,
Boldly, we’ll face the future, come what may.
At even and at morn God will befriend us,
And oh, most surely on each newborn day!369

There is a “paradoxical peace”370 in the poem. Bonhoeffer experienced that peace of God in a harsh environment. Kelly and Nelson also point out that Bonhoeffer’s faith in cruel times can serve as an example for “moral”371 leaders faced with opposition. It also follows the example of Jesus:

This poem offers unique insights into what can support Christian moral leaders, faced as they may be with frustration, opposition, rejection of their vision, and the shattering of their hopes. The sustaining forces for good are the same for Bonhoeffer as they can be for the Christian moral leader: faith in God’s promised grace, solace from the risen Lord ever present in life’s sorrows, and the breaking into each day of the divine love that overcomes hatred and the divine life that over comes death itself.372


Bonhoeffer’s poems “probably cannot be classified among the unforgettable, enduring gems of world literature, though they belong to an important epoch of Christian history.”\(^{373}\) Even Bonhoeffer “exhibited no illusions about their literary excellence.”\(^{374}\) Nevertheless, Bethge saw value in Bonhoeffer’s poetry:

Despite this disclaimer, Bonhoeffer’s biographer (Bethge) saw their value as poetry because of the special circumstances in which they were composed and because the poetry was shared in such a personal way with him. In the extreme conditions of imprisonment and Gestapo interrogations, Bonhoeffer had bared his soul as never before…They are efforts to overcome his isolation.\(^{375}\)

Kelly and Nelson write that the poems of Bonhoeffer are important because “they serve as keys to interpret the moods and profound thoughts harbored by Bonhoeffer during the months of his forced confinement.”\(^{376}\) His poems were an outlet for Bonhoeffer in his final months of life:

Bonhoeffer’s poems represent a way of expressing his profound feelings, his faith, his love for his friends, his struggle for freedom, and the depths of his prison and life experiences. The poems serve veritably as windows into his own soul, carrying the freight of his loneliness, his anxiety, his longings, his faith, and his spirituality. Not only are they in large measure links to his autobiography; they also reflect his personal assessment of the cost of his moral leadership in the midst of the Nazi nightmare.\(^{377}\)


Edwin T. Robertson concludes that “the importance of the poems he wrote lies in the fact that they were the ultimate attempt to express his deepest feelings about himself, his friends, his church, the future of Germany, and his future.” The future for Bonhoeffer was execution.

He knew that his death was nearing when he wrote the poem, “The Death of Moses” in September of 1944. This poem seems “to be an effort by Bonhoeffer in the more strained circumstances of the Gestapo’s tightening grip on the conspirators, to peer into the future and to see some meaning amidst the bleakness.”

Bonhoeffer compared himself to Moses in that both of them were only given a glimpse of the future for their people. Death would hinder both of them from sharing in that future. The last lines were:

Hold me Fast!—for fallen is my stave,
O faithful God, make ready now my grave.

Like Moses, who never entered into the Promised Land, Bonhoeffer would not be alive to see a new Germany after the war:

Bonhoeffer…saw himself as a Moses on the threshold of the Promised Land. He harbored hope in the midst of the massive destruction and ruin all about him, hope that out of the ashes and shattered lives a new Germany, a new Europe, and a new world might eventually arise.

His death he now understood and accepted for the sake of his people. He would not live to see their liberation but was content to know he had done

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all he could to share in the sufferings of Christ at the hands of the godless world of Nazism.\textsuperscript{381}

Nevertheless, it was enough for Bonhoeffer to at least “see his people marching free.”\textsuperscript{382} Bonhoeffer’s freedom would not come. By early 1945, “interrogations were taking a much more serious turn. Communication could no longer be maintained between those who had privy to conspiracy…Bonhoeffer…and others were being examined under torture, all were on trial for their lives.”\textsuperscript{383}

Yet, there were glimmers of hope because ‘there were curious elements in the interrogations…Their captors were plainly ill at ease. They could not remain unaware of the crumbling fortunes of the Nazi party…the British and Americans from the West and the Russians from the East were converging on Berlin.’\textsuperscript{384}

At the same time, Hitler gave the orders that the trials of the conspirators “be prolonged in order that they might be forced to reveal as much as possible about the nationwide network of whose existence he was now convinced.”\textsuperscript{385}

The uncertainty of the future “had not dimmed Bonhoeffer’s radiance or disturbed his peace.”\textsuperscript{386} Fellow prisoner Fabian von Schlabendorff would later write about Bonhoeffer:

\textsuperscript{381} Kelly and Nelson, \textit{The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 246.


\textsuperscript{383} Bosanquet, 267.

\textsuperscript{384} Bosanquet, 267, 268.

\textsuperscript{385} Bosanquet, 267.

\textsuperscript{386} Bosanquet, 267-268.
He was always good tempered, always of the same kindliness and politeness towards everybody, so that to my surprise, within a short time, he won over his warders, who were not always kindly disposed. It was significant for our relationship that he was rather the hopeful one, while I now and then suffered from depressions. He always cheered me up and comforted me; he never tired of repeating that the only fight which we lose is that which we give up.\textsuperscript{387}

On February 7, 1945, Bonhoeffer was moved to Buchenwald concentration camp.\textsuperscript{388} There were twelve cells in the camp. Bonhoeffer was in cell number one. The author of \textit{The Venlo Incident}, British Captain S. Payne Best was in cell number eleven. Captain Best verifies that even in Bonhoeffer’s final weeks, days and hours, he lived for the glory of Jesus. Bonhoeffer was deeply grateful for the fact that he was alive.\textsuperscript{389}

In a letter, dated March 2, 1951, to Bonhoeffer’s sister, Sabine Leibholz, Best wrote that “Bonhoeffer was different; just calm and normal, seemingly perfectly at his ease…his soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison.”\textsuperscript{390} Bosanquet explains that Bonhoeffer “was passing the last landmarks in his spiritual journey”\textsuperscript{391}:

\begin{quote}
The struggles of the Tegel days had ended in victory, and he seems to have attained that peace which is the gift of God and not as the world giveth. The struggle to abandon to God his rich and treasured past, the struggle with the last vestiges of his pride, the struggle to suffer, in full measure and yet in gratitude, his human longings and to remain open to others in the midst of his own pain; all this had led him to the experience of the Cross, in which at least, through a grasp of reality so intense that it fused all the elements of his
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{387} Bosanquet, 268.


\textsuperscript{389} S. Payne Best, \textit{The Venlo Incident} (London: Huthchson and Co., LTD, 1950), 180.

\textsuperscript{390} Bosanquet, 271.

\textsuperscript{391} Bosanquet, 271.
being into a single shining whole, he learnt what life can be when “we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but the sufferings of God in the world.”

Out of this death to the last vestiges of self Bonhoeffer seems to have been raised up quietly, unspectacularly into the last stage of his life, in which he was made whole, made single, finally integrated in Christ. In a way more complete than any that had gone before, the Christian had become “the man for others, the disciple “as his Lord.” As we look back, struggling with such help as we have to pierce the obscurity that surrounds him in these last months, this seems to be the truth.  

As a man for others, Bonhoeffer’s generosity to his fellow prisoners became a constant theme. This was seen on April 3, when the prisoners were informed that they were being transferred to another facility. Sixteen prisoners and their luggage all tightly crammed into an eight passenger van. The van was powered by a wood generator that filled the van with fumes. The van would often break down, so the prisoners just sat until the van could move.

Captain Best describes one of the stops: “There was no light, we had nothing to eat or drink nor, but for the generosity of Bonhoeffer, who, although a smoker, had saved up his scanty ration of tobacco and now insisted in contributing it to the common good, anything to smoke. He was a good and saintly man.”

Captain Best also noted that while everyone, including Bonhoeffer, alternated between “hopes and fears”, Bonhoeffer did reach the stage of knowing that he could face any trial without fear: “He had always been afraid, that he would

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392 Bosanquet, 271.
393 Best, 190.
394 Best, 191.
not be strong enough to stand such a test, but now he knew that there was nothing in life of which one need ever be afraid.”

The prisoners finally made it to Schonberg on April 6. On April 8, a Sunday, Bonhoeffer led a small worship service for the prisoners: “He gave an exposition of the Scriptures for the day: ‘Through his stripes we are healed’ (Isaiah 53:5) and ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again into a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ (1 Peter 1:3).”

Captain Best writes that Bonhoeffer

…spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said: ‘Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us.’ Those words ‘Come with us’—for all prisoners had come to mean one thing only—the scaffold.

Bonhoeffer then “gathered his few belongings. In a copy of Plutarch that he had received for his birthday he wrote his name in large letters and left it on the table.” As the other prisoners said their good-byes to Bonhoeffer, he talked to Captain Best privately and gave him a message to pass on to his “English friend Bishop Bell”:

Tell him that for me this is the end, but also the beginning. With him I believe in the principle of our universal brotherhood which rises above all

395 Bosanquet, 272.
396 Bosanquet, 277.
397 Best, 200.
398 Bosanquet, 277.
399 Bosanquet, 277.
national interests, and that our victory is certain—Tell him too that I have never forgotten his words at our last meeting.\textsuperscript{400}

There was a “trial” that lasted through the night: “the prisoners were interrogated once more and confronted with one another. All were condemned.”\textsuperscript{401}

Early in the morning on April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging. Bosanquet writes:

So the morning came. Now the prisoners were ordered to strip. They were led down to a little flight of steps under the trees to the secluded place of execution. There was a pause. For the men about to die, time hung a moment suspended. Naked under the scaffold in the sweet spring of woods, Bonhoeffer knelt for the last time to pray. Five minutes later, his life was ended.\textsuperscript{402}

The camp doctor was an eye-witness of Bonhoeffer’s final minutes:

Through the half-door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.\textsuperscript{403}

\textbf{Summary}

Dietrich Bonhoeffer will continue to influence the followers of Jesus well into the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century. In an article that appeared in \textit{The Christian Century} on April 2, 1997, De Gruchy wrote:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{400} Bosanquet, 277.  \\
\textsuperscript{401} Bosanquet, 277.  \\
\textsuperscript{402} Bosanquet, 15.  \\
\textsuperscript{403} Devine, 36-37.  
\end{flushright}
The relevance of Bonhoeffer’s theology is unlikely to diminish. Even if some of his comments now strike us as problematic and often embarrassingly patriarchal, he continues to have an uncanny way of relating to "the Other," often surprising us with new insights. Many Christians find Bonhoeffer’s witness helpful in their own struggles against racism and poverty, or in efforts to engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue, especially about the Holocaust. The surprising, often risky elements of both action and thought in a life profoundly marked by consistency of faith and hope keep interest in Bonhoeffer alive.

Of course, much of contemporary and contextual concern lies beyond the parameters of Bonhoeffer’s legacy. Those who turn to Bonhoeffer for all the answers will be disappointed. But time and again his approach to doing theology suggests the way forward. Those who explore his writings will usually find some clue which provides a way of grappling with the issues. In this sense, it is fortunate that Bonhoeffer never completed his theological work in any systematic way. It remains open-ended, thereby inviting us to participate in an ongoing task of action and reflection.404

The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer will grow as the amount of literature about his life and words continues to be produced. Larry L. Rasmussen makes this clear:

April 9, 2005, marked the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for his attempted overthrow of the Nazi regime. February 4, 2006, marks the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth in Breslau, Germany. Few pastors and theologians of such youth have captured the interest and attention of the church worldwide as he.

This twentieth-century Christian leans into the twenty-first century because he is both rooted and postmodern, both grounded and capable of living with fragments, both theologically traditional and theologically innovative, both church-centered and worldly, both sensuously bound to earth and deeply pious. The variety of Bonhoeffer’s keen sensibilities, and how they belong and hold together, intrigues us.405


405 Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance, 7.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Bryan Eugene Galloway was born on July 18, 1959 in Council Bluffs, Iowa. He grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. He is a graduate of Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota with a B. A. in Biblical and Theological Studies in 1982. He also is a graduate of Bethel Theological Seminary in San Diego, California with a Master of Divinity in 1985.

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