Touchstone

Volume 43 **February 2025** **Number 1**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

From The Heart

Reviews

Editorial

On the 9th of April 1945, four weeks before the fall of the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was completing a worship service for fellow-prisoners at the Flossenburg concentration camp when he was summoned by camp guards and led to his execution. According to a fellow prisoner from England, his last words before being taken away were "This is the end─but for me it is the beginning of life!"

Bonhoeffer's life and legacy has continued to inspire, intrigue and sometimes haunt us in the eighty years since that day. In many ways, he remains an enigma. He was 39 when he died, much of his theological work left unfinished. The aphorisms recorded in his letters tantalize us. I recall in a graduate seminar on Bonhoeffer's work, painstakingly parsing each word of his letter of April 30, 1944, and discussing "What exactly did he *mean* by 'religionless Christianity'?"

Sentences from Bonhoeffer's work picked up over the years have stuck in my mind. One piece I have returned to over and over again is his letter to fellow Confessing Church pastors in 1943 entitled "After Ten Years." Words like "One may ask whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet" capture the increasingly vertiginous character of life amidst the ruins of modernity. His statement in *Life Together* that God will not allow us to live even for a moment in a land of "wish dreams" has been one to which has profoundly affected my ministry and sustained me through difficult times.

If there is an overarching theme that unites the contributions to this issue of *Touchstone,* it is that Bonhoeffer's theology is less a bibliography than a life. Fifty years ago, theologian James McClendon advocated for seeing "theology as biography." Actually, the title of McClendon's book was *Biography as Theology.* To an extent greater than most theologians, this phrase in either of its forms is true of Bonhoeffer.

Lori Brandt Hale provides an excellent overview of Bonhoeffer's theology, of equal value to those familiar with his life and work and for those encountering him for the first time. Lori organizes her paper around several key moments or turning points in Bonhoeffer's life, drawing out their significance for his theological vision.

Andrew Stirling explores Bonhoeffer's somewhat neglected lectures on preaching to students at the Confessing Church Seminary in Finkenwalde. Andrew shows how Bonhoeffer viewed preaching as a vocation and an office not dependent on the person or qualifications of the preacher. Preaching, for Bonhoeffer, was always to be practiced "within the context of the flock to which one is called" – in other words to be

concretized by the community within which the preaching occurs. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer believed that "preachers today have an obligation to offer the word as a gift to the next generation."

Philip Zeigler does a deep dive into Bonhoeffer's fateful decision to return from the US to Germany in September 1939. Through his diaries and correspondence with theologian Paul Lehmann, Bonhoeffer reveals his motive for this decision, troubling and baffling to many. Phil argues that it was less about a "grand geo-political and civilizational" agenda, and almost entirely about his concern to be with his fellow pastors and preachers of the Confessing Church in their hour of need.

Kimber McNabb gives us an interesting perspective on the place of Bonhoeffer's theology in the Canadian German Lutheran community. Kimber shows how the perception of Bonhoeffer evolved from providing a safe haven for a community dealing with the traumatic legacy of Nazism and war, to the foundation for a more radical Christian ethical engagement with the contemporary world.

Rob Fennell looks to Bonhoeffer's work as the foundation for a contemporary theology of leadership and discipleship. Rob reinforces the inextricable connectedness of Bonhoeffer's life, and his theology argues that it remains a powerful witness eight decades after Bonhoeffer's death.

Kassandra Matthews has written a moving account of a first encounter with Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the perspective of a theological student and how his work has shaped her vision for ministry.

Leslie-Elizabeth King profiles her grandfather, Rev. A. T. King, who was the last Congregationalist minister ordained before Church Union in 1925. Tracing King's life and ministry provides a fascinating insight into the texture of small-town ministry in the aftermath of Church Union, through the Depression, War and post-War period.

As usual, we round out this issue of *Touchstone* with four book reviews.

2025 is a year of anniversaries. This issue's Bonhoeffer retrospective will be followed by a commemoration of the United Church's centennial in May, and the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicea—a key moment in the development of Trinitarian theology—in October.

Thank you for your support!

Touchstone exists because of the efforts of a team of dedicated volunteers and you, our subscribers. You can help *Touchstone* to continue by becoming a subscriber, if you are not already, renewing your subscription when it expires, or giving a gift subscription. We will do our best to notify you when your subscription is coming to an end, but if you have any

questions you can email Kate Young at MaryKatharinesYoung@outlook.com.

Please note that for the first time in several years, we have increased our subscription rate by the modest sum of $2.00 to $30.00 per year.

Paul Miller
paulridleymiller@gmail.com

LESSONS FROM DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, WITH LOVE FOR THE COMING GENERATIONS: A EULOGY

By Lori Brandt Hale

Eighty years after his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer still matters because his life and theology offer insights to help us take responsible action in the world, on behalf of others. At the end of 1942, he wrote, the "ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living."[1]

Bonhoeffer is often remembered as a saint, a martyr, or—most recently—a "lone ranger" type hero battling the Nazis,[2] but these portrayals do his memory an injustice. They are two-dimensional caricatures of a three-dimensional human. Certainly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was extraordinary by many measures, but the propensity to think about him only in those iconographic terms obscures his humanity and the profound ways his life and work—shaped by his faith commitments, meaningful relationships with family and friends, attentiveness to historical and material realities, and capacity for deep reflection—can speak to us today.

Normally, a phrase like "can speak to us today" is a generic reference to the present. But *today*—as I write this essay—is January 9th, 2025: anti-immigrant, xenophobic sentiments tied to political successes of the far right are on the rise around the world. The United States is expected to begin mass deportations soon. Wars are raging in Ukraine, the Middle East, and East Africa. Donald Trump, set to take the highest office (again) in the United States in less than two weeks, is threatening Canada. Los Angeles is on fire.

On all these counts, I do not know what will happen between the time I submit this piece and the time it is published, but I cannot write about lessons from the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and his attentiveness to his historical context, without acknowledging my own. And the implicit nod to nationalisms, racism, and cataclysmic climate change in the preceding paragraph but scratches the surface of the sociopolitical, economic, and humanitarian crises shaping our shared global context in the post-pandemic mid-21st century.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "We should have so much love for this contemporary world of ours, for our fellow human beings, that we should

---

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English, (DBWE), 8:42.

[2] See Victoria Barnett. "There is no such thing as a Bonhoeffer moment," *Christian Century* 142, no. 1 (2025).

declare our solidarity with it in its crisis and hope."[3] This concern of Bonhoeffer's for the contemporary world, for fellow human beings in every circumstance, keeps me coming back to his work time and time again. And it is what keeps me hopeful in times like *today.* Bonhoeffer's concern for the contemporary world is played out in his theological and ethical thought—from his earliest work to his latest, his dissertation to his letters and papers from prison—in his concern for the neighbor, his commitment to community, his call to responsible action, and his insistence that we see the world from below. "It remains an experience of incomparable value," he wrote, "that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short, from the perspective of the suffering."[4]

A year ago, the XIVth International Bonhoeffer Congress met in Sydney, Australia, organized around the theme: "Crisis and Hope: Reading Bonhoeffer for Today." The papers and plenaries collectively served as a sustained conversation about Bonhoeffer's commitment to *life together* in our contemporary world*,* broadly understood, with that view from below serving as a hermeneutical starting point. The speakers did not shy away from naming the conditions—the crises—that point to disrupted and broken lives together: colonialism, nationalisms, patriarchy, consumerism, carceral practices, climate emergencies, war, authoritarianism, white supremacy, and racism. And, they spoke with poignancy and insight about the ways Bonhoeffer's work and their readings of that work offer hope. They put Bonhoeffer in conversation with voices from below—with Indigenous voices, women's voices, migrants' and climate refugees' voices—to imagine a new life together. This new life together takes seriously Bonhoeffer's idea that an encounter with the *other* requires an ethical response. It is a life together that takes seriously Bonhoeffer's idea that "the transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable task, but the neighbor…."[5] It is a life together that rejects hate and division, foundations of nationalisms. "You have brothers and sisters in our people and in *every* people, do not forget that. Come what may," Bonhoeffer preached in New York in 1930, "let us never more forget, that our Christian people is the people of God, that if we are in accord, *no nationalism*, no hate of races or

[3] DBWE 10: 326.
[4] DBWE 8: 52.
[5] DBWE 8: 501.

classes can execute its designs, and then the world will have its peace for ever and ever."[6]

In the paragraphs that follow, I will offer a brief recounting of significant turning points in Bonhoeffer's life, framed by his theological commitment to the neighbor, that underscore the interplay of his biography and the development of his theological and ethical thought. In the end, his complex story offers simple lessons. Perhaps more importantly, his human story—as someone who simply "tried to be decent in the face of evil"[7] — is one we all can emulate.

In his earliest work, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer said that theology is essentially social and claimed that what it means to be human comes in *encounter with* and *ethical response to* other humans. His idea of the other, or neighbor, was expansive. In 1934 he preached, "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak."[8] In *Ethics*, which he was working on from 1940 to 1942, he said, "Christ was not concerned with whether 'the maxim of an action' could become 'a principle of universal law,', but whether my action now helps my neighbor…."[9] The idea and importance of the neighbor was central to the ideas he was working out at the end of his life. While in prison he was developing a *this-worldly* Christianity marked by living completely in this world: "living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities."[10] He punctuated this thought in his outline of a book which he wrote in August of 1944 "The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbor within reach in any given situation."[11]

That Bonhoeffer would develop a theological disposition toward the neighbor was not a foregone conclusion. That he would even study theology came as a surprise. He was born the sixth child (of eight) into a tight knit, highly educated, politically engaged, and *not* very religious

---

[6] DBWE 10: 581, 584.

[7] Barnett, "There is no such thing as a Bonhoeffer moment," accessed January 5th, 2025, *https://www.christiancentury.org/features/there-s-no-such-thing-bonhoeffer-moment.*

[8] DBWE 13: 402.

[9] DBWE 6: 98-99.

[10] DBWE 8: 486.

[11] DBWE 8: 501. Several contemporary Bonhoeffer scholars have expanded his notion of neighbor to include all of creation and address issues of climate change. See, for example, Dianne Rayson, *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene*, Fortress Academic, 2021.

family. In the post-World War I Germany of the Weimar Republic they were, in a word, bourgeois. Significant experiences and historical events served as turning points in Bonhoeffer's life and gave rise not only to formative questions that set his course, but the contours and iterative developments of his theology and ethics, including his concerns about outcasts and those on the margins.

A Turning Point: Death of Walter Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's older brother, Walter, was killed in action on the German Front in 1918. His death took an emotional toll on the family and raised deep existential questions for twelve-year old Dietrich—about life, death, and the nature and impact of violent political realities.[12] These questions piqued his interest in the study of religion. By age fourteen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided and announced that he would become a theologian and minister.[13] His brothers mocked him, warning 'that becoming a theologian would amount to a retreat from reality'.[14] They did not understand that Bonhoeffer's theological path would not lead him away from the world, but more deeply into it.

A Turning Point: A Year in New York

Bonhoeffer studied first at Tübingen, then at the University of Berlin, finishing his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communion* in 1927. He served for a year as an associate pastor in Barcelona before writing his post-doctoral dissertation, *Act and Being*, followed by a fellowship at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1930-1931). Bonhoeffer's year in New York had a profound impact on him. In fact, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of it. His experiences, including Union classes with social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, his observations and friendships there and, also and especially, at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, were life changing. He began to see the events of the world from below, from the perspective of real and racialized human beings suffering in the world.[15] The year at Union was also instrumental in Bonhoeffer's move

---

[12] See DBWE 9:9.

[13] Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography.* Revised and edited by Victoria Barnett. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), 36.

[14] Schlingensiepen, Ferdinand. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*. (New York:T&T Clark, 2010), 16; Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 17.

[15] See Williams, Reggie. *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014.

toward ecumenism and the development of what would become his very strong peace ethic.

Two of the most important friendships he developed in New York—that helped shape these sensibilities—were with fellow students: Albert Franklin Fisher and Jean Lassere. Fisher was an African American student from Alabama who introduced Bonhoeffer to the vibrant black Baptists of Abyssinian. Jean Lassere was a French student with an unshakable commitment to pacifism who suggested that the challenging commands of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—including to love one's enemies—should be read not as an abstract or hoped-for ideal in the Kingdom of God, but as instructions for living, here and now. This new reading of the Gospel reorientated Bonhoeffer's thinking.

When he returned to Germany, Bonhoeffer took on roles as a youth secretary in two international ecumenical councils. In addition, he lectured at the University of Berlin and served as a student chaplain in an impoverished working-class neighborhood of the city. His work in the church and the community influenced his academic inquiry and teaching. His questions, even in the classroom, were less exercises in academic abstraction and conjecture, and more existential and urgent questions about life and faith, eventually leading him to the question: who is Jesus Christ for us *today*? Bonhoeffer wrote, "Thereby we are turned away from any abstract ethic and toward a concrete ethic. We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about *how Christ may take form among us today and here*."[16]

A Turning Point: The Rise of National Socialism

The rise of the National Socialists in Germany had concerned the Bonhoeffer family since before Dietrich's return from New York; the ascent of Adolf Hitler to power at the end of January 1933 realized their fears. Immediately, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address warning his fellow Germans against making an idol of the Führer, or leader.[17] Within months, Hitler opened the first concentration camp, passed the "Law for the Restoration of Professional Civil Service" which removed all Jews and persons of Jewish descent from civil service—also known as the "Aryan paragraph," and attempted to unify twenty-eight independent, Protestant *Landeskirche* (regional churches) into a unified *Reichskirche* (a national, state church). While this attempt was ultimately abandoned, a significant sector of the German Protestant Church, the "Christian German Faith

[16] DBWE 6:99.
[17] See DBWE 12:268-282.

Movement," embraced Nazi ideology, the idea of aligning the church with the Nazi state and pushed for a church version of the "Aryan paragraph."

Bonhoeffer was one the first to recognize "Hitler's policies against the Jews as a problem for the church. . . and eminently a political one."[18] He began writing his essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question," even before the law on civil service law was issued. In August of 1933, Bonhoeffer helped draft the Bethel Confession, opposing false doctrines of the German Christians, though he refused to sign the final, watered down version. In September, he, Martin Niemöller, and others formed the Pastors' Emergency League to help clergy who had already been dismissed. But by October, about six months before the adoption of the Barmen Theological Declaration and the creation of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer left for London, in both frustration and humility, to lead two German-speaking churches to, in his words, "go into the wilderness for a spell, and simply work as a pastor, as unobtrusively as possible."[19]

Despite his hope to retreat, Bonhoeffer continued to monitor developments in Germany and reject the idea being promoted by the leadership of the German Christians in Berlin that the work of the Third Reich was some kind of fulfillment of Scripture. Rather, Bonhoeffer preached that Christians "should read the Bible not only 'for' ourselves… but also 'against' ourselves" to know and love the world in which we actually live, even one filled with struggle, poverty, and uncertainty."[20] He remained active in the ecumenical movement, discussing developments in Germany with Bishop George Bell and other leaders, and he reunited with his friend, Jean Lassere, at a conference in Fanø, Denmark, in the summer of 1934, where Bonhoeffer insisted that the conference pass a resolution, proclaiming "we are immediately faced with the decision: National Socialist *or* Christian."[21] It was here that he also issued a clarion call to peace, noting that peace is not reached by a path of security, but only with risk. "The hour is late," he said. "The world is choked with weapons, and dreadful is the distrust which looks out of all men's eyes. The trumpets of war may blow tomorrow. For what are we waiting?" [22]

---

[18] Schlingensiepen, 125.
[19] DBWE 13:22-23.
[20] Best, Isabel. The *Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), xxiii-xxiv.
[21] DBWE 13:192.
[22] DBWE 13:309.

A Turning Point: Confessing Church Seminary

A year and a half later, in 1935, Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation to direct a preachers' seminary of the new Confessing Church first at Zingsthoff, then at Finkenwalde. His acceptance meant abandoning a planned trip to India, to study non-violent resistance with Gandhi. At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer tightly structured the days of the seminarians. He was accused by some of his colleagues, including Karl Barth, of legalism, of fostering a monastic retreat from the world, when his intention was to prepare the students for the difficult reality of life in parish ministry, in opposition to the Nazi regime.[23] One of his first students there, Eberhard Bethge, became his closest friend, theological confidante, and eventual biographer.

A Turning Point: Kristallnacht

Two years later, the illegal seminary was shut down by the Gestapo. Meanwhile, the Nazi assault on Jews in Germany continued to intensify, marked notably by the events of November 9th and 10th, 1938, known as *Kristallnacht*, or the night of breaking glass. Jewish homes, business, synagogues, and cemeteries throughout Germany were vandalized and destroyed. It was followed by the first mass incarceration of Jewish men, more than 30,000, arrested on the basis of their ethnicity. *Kristallnacht* was a turning point for Bonhoeffer. He was horrified by the events, the destruction, and he was horrified by the failure of the churches to respond—not just the Reich Church, but the Confessing Church, too.

A Turning Point: Joining the Resistance

Bonhoeffer's friends abroad were worried for his safety; with their help, he returned to the United States in June of 1939. But Bonhoeffer never felt settled about this decision and returned to Germany within a month. "Christians in Germany will face a terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security."[24] Upon his return, Bonhoeffer began work as an agent of the *Abwehr,* the German Military Intelligence and the seat of the resistance. Ostensibly, Bonhoeffer was using his ecumenical contacts throughout Europe to gather information for the Nazis when, actually, he

[23] DBWE 14:268.
[24] DBWE 15:210.

was passing information about the resistance in the other direction. In this contrast, he began work on his *Ethics*.

A Turning Point: Imprisonment

On April 5th, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested on tenuous charges related to his resistance work and sent to Tegel prison in Berlin. More than a year later, on July 20th, 1944, the final attempt on Hitler's life failed. The Gestapo subsequently discovered files in which Bonhoeffer was implicated in the planned coup. In October he was taken to the Gestapo prison in Berlin, moved to Buchenwald in February, and then to the Flossenbürg concentration camp where, on April 9th, 1945, he was executed by hanging. He was 39 years old. Bonhoeffer's family and friends, including his fiancé, Maria von Wedemeyer, did not learn of his death until the end of June. His brother, Klaus Bonhoeffer, and brothers-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi and Rudiger Schleicher, were all executed the same week as Dietrich.

Key Theological and Ethical Ideas and Lessons for Today

Bonhoeffer's primary theological and ethical themes are contained in four concepts which are inherently Christological and inextricably connected: the other (or neighbor), community, grace, and responsible action.[25] They also are iterative. The seeds of these key ideas are planted in his earliest work and mature over the course of his life in response to the key turning points outlined above. Bonhoeffer's idea of "Christ existing as community," posited in his dissertation (1927), is connected to the ethical idea that we are called to "vicarious representative action" described in his *Ethics* (1942). The pathway between these two ideas includes an understanding of freedom as freedom *for* others, described in both *Creation and Fall* (1933) and *Discipleship* (1935). The pathway is also marked by Bonhoeffer's year in New York City which included his introduction to social ethics at Union, engagement in a vibrant, politically active congregation in Harlem, the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists in Germany, and his decision to lead the seminary at Finkenwalde.

Bonhoeffer's claim that theology is inherently social (1927) is connected to his notion that we should see the events of the world from the

[25] For additional engagement with Bonhoeffer's theology expressed in these four concepts, see the multi-week curriculum I developed in 2024 for Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania, accessed January 5th, 2025, *https://www.lutheranadvocacypa.org/bonhoeffer/*.

perspective of those who suffer, from the "view from below" (1942). It is a point of view imbued with both theological and ethical meaning and is foundational for his articulation of a "this-worldly Christianity" (1944). *Kristallnacht*, participation in the resistance, and his own imprisonment are crises that sent him in search of new ways to think about what it means to be a Christian. "What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or *who is Christ actually for us today?*"[26] This beautiful, complex question persists for us today. It sums up, as it were, the central themes of Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics—in relationship to his biography—and leads us to (what seem to be) the very simple lessons of his life and legacy: ask questions, challenge assumptions, make friends, care for others, stand up for justice, and take responsibility.

Bonhoeffer started asking questions, existential questions, as a child, in response to Walter's death. He made friends, like Jean Lassere and Albert Franklin Fisher, who challenged his assumptions about nationalism, pacifism, and race. When Hitler came to power, he questioned those who would make an idol of their leader. Bonhoeffer's organization of life together at Finkenwalde was an ethic of care for the seminarians. *Kristallnacht* destroyed homes and synagogues and lives of Jews across Germany; Bonhoeffer cried out for justice and began to write about responsible action. His decision to join the resistance, as a courier of information and broker for peace with his ecumenical contacts throughout Europe, was an act of responsibility on behalf of others. While in prison, Bonhoeffer comforted other prisoners, even when he was unsure of himself and wrestling, again, with existential questions.[27]

Together, Bonhoeffer's "simple" lessons bring us back to his profound claim that the "ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living."[28] This essay is not a eulogy for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is a eulogy for our collective inability to understand the same. It is a eulogy for our collective inability to set aside prejudice, pride, power lust, and greed to work for a better future, to work for the coming generation, to stand up for the suffering and the outcasts, to take responsibility for our world. It is a eulogy for our children's future.

But it does not have to be this way. Eighty years after Bonhoeffer's death, maybe his life and lessons should matter even more.

---

[26] DBWE 8:362.
[27] See Bonhoeffer's poem "Who am I?" in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8: 459-460.
[28] DBWE 8:42.

If you want more information about Dietrich Bonhoeffer or the International Bonhoeffer Society - English Language Section (IBS-ELS), please visit the IBS-ELS website *www.bonhoeffersociety.org*. This site includes a resource page that contains statements issued in the fall of 2024 warning against the misuse of Bonhoeffer's life and legacy, insightful reviews of the biopic about Bonhoeffer, also released in the fall of 2024, and thoughtful essays prompted by the heightened interest in Bonhoeffer.

LOYALTY TO THE CONFESSING CHURCH: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND PAUL L. LEHMANN, NEW YORK, SUMMER 1939

by Philip G. Ziegler

"I am being pulled irresistibly back toward the Confessing Church."
—Bonhoeffer to Erwin Sutz, July 5th, 1939

Introduction

Students of Bonhoeffer's life and work have long taken a keen interest in Bonhoeffer's year-long visit to Union Theological Seminary in New York City during the academic year 1930-31. It reflects the young German theologian's unusual cosmopolitanism, having already by this time travelled to Rome and Morrocco, and served as a pastor in Spain. That year in New York was, it seems, also a time of intense personal discovery and development, fuelled less by formal studies perhaps than by formative relationships.

Eberhard Bethge identified four such notable friendships.[1] An earlier generation of scholarship took especial interest in Bonhoeffer's relationship with the Swiss student Erwin Sutz, (an important personal connection with Karl Barth) as well as the French pacifist pastor, Jean Lasserre, seeing there the roots of both Bonhoeffer's radical peace theology and his concern for the theme of contemporary discipleship.[2] In a sense, these young Europeans had to travel across the Atlantic Ocean in order to get out from under the shadow of the Great War and to be able to encounter one another as freely and fully—and with lasting effect—as they did during that year. More recently, particular focus has fallen upon Bonhoeffer's friendship with the African American student, Frank Fisher, emphasizing the pivotal role it played in exposing Bonhoeffer to the plight of Black Americans together with the lively and engaged faith of the Black Church, thereby opening his eyes to both the "underside of history" in

[1] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, trans. E. Mosbacher et al (London: Collins, 1970), 111-115.

[2] See, for example, Clifford Green, "Pacifism and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18:3 (2005), 31-47 and Geffrey Kelly and Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), especially chapter 5. An English translation of one of Lasserre's main works has just appeared: Jean Lasserre, *Christians and Violence*, ed. Steven Hickey (London: T&T Clark, 2024).

general, and the dynamics of Nazi antisemitism in particular.[3]

The fourth and final friendship to which Bethge drew attention was that with the American PhD student, Paul L. Lehmann, noting that it was Lehmann who would later prove, in the crucial days of the Summer of 1939, to be "Bonhoeffer's companion and loyal helper at the most important turning point in his life."[4] Lehmann was very closely associated with these events: beginning in the Spring of 1939 when he conspired in securing Bonhoeffer invitations to preach and teach in America, and ending with his final dockside conversations with his friend in New York before Bonhoeffer's departure in the early hours of July 8th. It is upon this "important turning point" in Bonhoeffer's life, and Paul Lehmann's personal witness to it, that I wish to reflect in what follows.

Bonhoeffer in America, Summer 1939

The timeline of Bonhoeffer's month-long sojourn in America in June and July of 1939 unfolded as follows. Having received invitations to lecture to several American church organizations and seminaries, Bonhoeffer travelled from Germany to England on June 2nd to visit his sister Sabine and her family (Leibholz). After a five-day visit, he sailed on the *Bremen* for New York, arriving on June 12th. Not more than three days later he was already having to clarify with his erstwhile patron, the ecumenical secretary Henry Smith Leiper, that "for the sake of loyalty to the Confessional Church" he must not enter into arrangements which "on principle would make my return to Germany impossible"; indeed his "friends at home would only be too glad, if I came back a little earlier than they expected"; such is the "duty of '*Bruderschaft*'."[5]

---

[3] See Reggie Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*: *Harlem Renaissance theology and an ethic of resistance*. Revised edition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), but also the earlier work of Josiah U. Young, *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). The very recent film, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor. Spy. Assassin* (2024) similarly emphasises this moment in Bonhoeffer's biography in its own way.

[4] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 115, 560-562. I have examined Lehmann's own theological existence in relation to Bonhoeffer in "Getting the Reformation in America—The Making of Paul L. Lehmann as Public Theologian", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31:1 (2018), 79-107.

[5] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940*. *DBWE* 15, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, et. al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 184-85. Hereafter simply DBWE 15.

Indeed, as early as June 17th Bonhoeffer writes to Lehmann (then in Columbus, Ohio) to stress that he would need to return to Germany in the autumn or following Spring at the latest: "My dear Paul . . . I am not a refugee, but I must go back to Germany to take up my work over there."[6] Writing to his parents five days later he suggests, having discussed matters with his brother Karl-Friedrich—then himself in Chicago exploring émigré work prospects—that he now expects to return "already in the autumn."[7] By June 26th he informs Karl-Friedrich that he has firmly "turned down the job they offered" and so "am now completely master of my time; I can stay or travel back, as I will." Indeed, Dietrich was increasingly anxious not to be caught abroad if and when war broke out. He admits to Karl-Friedrich that "I find the political news from Europe so dreadful that I am seriously considering whether I should not travel back earlier. In case of war I want to be not over here but back in Germany."[8]

On June 28th Bonhoeffer writes Lehmann to inform him that "things have changed for me entirely" and that he will return to Germany within a month.[9] Lehmann replies immediately that "it is unthinkable that you should return before America shall have had the fullest opportunity to be enriched by your contribution to its theological hour of destiny", and invites him to consider staying with him and his wife, Marion, for as long as he would be like.[10]. But by the time Bonhoeffer replies on June 30th things have developed further so that "I have had to decide to return to Germany, already in the next few weeks. . .. everything has been decided with the Confessing Church; I shall travel back in July or August. . . . There is no longer any other way! I am now expected back there soon. The political situation is dreadful, and I must be with my brothers when things become serious"; he notes that he may leave as early as July 8th.[11] Lehmann writes back insisting he will now travel by car to New York because "we must meet before your return. I simply could not think of your being here and going back without it"; Bonhoeffer confirms this plan by return of post on July 2nd.[12]

---

[6] DBWE 15: 191-92.
[7] DBWE 15: 194. Cf. Kathleen L. Housley, *The Scientific World of Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer. The Entanglement of Science, Religion, and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), especially 165-190.
[8] DBWE 15: 199-200.
[9] DBWE 15: 206.
[10] DBWE 15: 204-206.
[11] DBWE 15: 209.
[12] DBWE 15: 212, 213-14.

The final entries in Bonhoeffer's own American diary subsequently record that Lehmann did in fact drive to New York, arriving on the afternoon of July 6th.[13] Bonhoeffer then notes that, "At 2:30 I meet Paul Lehmann in my room, who came from Columbus, Ohio, to see me while I'm still here. Great joy. From now on the entire remaining time together with him", before finally recording: "Last day. Paul is still trying to keep me here. It is no longer possible. . .. Theological conversations with Paul. . . Drive to the ship with Paul. Good-byes at 11:30; departure at 12:30."[14] The short time together was, it seems, precious. As Bethge writes, Lehmann was the one person by whom Bonhoeffer "in his gloomy misgivings would only too gladly have had his mind changed", though it was not to be.[15]

Reflections

When the story of Bonhoeffer's decision in the summer of 1939 is told, prominence is regularly given to the account of Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote after the fact:

> Shortly after the outbreak of the war I received a letter from [Bonhoeffer] written in the garden of the President of our seminary, Dr. Coffin, in which he said that it was a mistake for him to come to America, that the Christians of Germany would have to make a decision between wanting the victory of their nation, and the death of Chrisitan civilization, or the defeat of their nation and the survival of a Christian civilization. You cannot, he said, remain out of a country when your fellow Christian face such a momentous issue.[16]

This report, while certainly accurate, stresses the grand geo-political and socio-cultural horizon of Bonhoeffer's decision, and thereby quite

---

[13] The text of the diary is reproduced in DBWE 15: 217-238. The original of the diary was entrusted to Paul Lehmann by Eberhard Bethge during the latter's fellowship at Harvard University which Lehmann helped to arrange. The original MS of the diary is not lost—see Eberhard Bethge, "Paul Lehmann's Initiative (1974)" reprinted in *The Revolutionary Gospel: Paul Lehmann and the Direction of Theology Today*, eds. Nancy J. Duff, Ry O. Siggelkow, and Brandon K. Watson (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), 303-04.

[14] DBWE 15: 237.

[15] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 560.

[16] Reinhold Niebuhr, 'To America and Back' in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, eds. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. Käthe Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 165. The letter itself is partially reproduced in DBWE 15: 210.

naturally associates his decision with his future involvement—by way of (his sister) Christine and Hans von Dohnanyi—in the resistance circle gathered around Admiral Canaris.[17] What it occludes—and what I want to suggest is crucial—is the absolute priority of Bonhoeffer's commitment to the life and ministry of the Confessing Church in motivating his decision to return to Germany. This is something we can see more clearly if we attend to Paul Lehmann's own testimony to those final conversations together in New York.

In a long letter dated July 17th and written to his father, Timothy Lehmann—then President of Elmhurst College—Paul gives a detailed account of his two days in New York with his friend.[18] As regards Bonhoeffer's motivations for his return, two things are reported. In the first instance Lehmann repeats that "there had come to Bonhoeffer the clear perception that he who wishes to have any voice in the new Germany must live through this worst of agonies with her."[19] But much more prominent is Bonhoeffer's expressed concern for his service in the Confessing Church. As Lehmann explains,

> He had agreed with his friends that he would come back without fail within one year, unless a mutually agreed upon code formula came to him. This formula was to express their conviction that war was imminent. This formula came and there was no alternative. He fully expects war in September and will thus have one month to make the necessary connections so vital to the ongoing of the Confessing Church. . . . The outstanding impressing one gets from being with him and from hearing his account of the work he is doing is that the only power for living in a completely broken world is the

[17] That Dietrich was alert to this before his 1939 trip seems certain—see Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 20-21. For a detailed study of the von Dohnanyis, see Marikje Smid, *Eine Ehe im Widerstand gegen Hitler: Hans von Dohnanyi, Christine Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002).

[18] The letter, the original TS of which is held in the Paul L. Lehmann Papers in the special collections of the Princeton Theological Seminary Library is reproduced in an abridged form in both DBWE 15: 252-254 and *The Revolutionary Gospel*, 355-56 where it is joined by a further letter of 31st July 1939 to Rienhold Niebuhr in which Lehmann rehearses and further expands upon his report, see 356-358. In what follows all quotations from taken from the texts as printed in *The Revolutionary Gospel*.

[19] The letter to Niebuhr July 31st , repeats this claim, see Lehmann, *The Revolutionary Gospel,* 357.

> Christian gospel. Here is a man and a group who are so completely committed to Christ in life that it has become axiomatic to them that they may have to die for Him. And they are ready.

In the version given to Niebuhr, Lehmann explains similarly that,

> The war news was to reach him from his friends in the confessional church by code. He was here scarcely a week when this formula came to him, whereupon he decided to return at once. He reasoned that one month of work before the hostilities would be of strategic importance for the confessional church.

Two things are striking in Lehmann's report: first, the priority given to Bonhoeffer's specific concern for his ongoing work in the Confessing Church, which predominates over all others really; second, the curious detail about the agreed "code" from "friends in the confessional church" which was to summon him back when the outbreak of war became inevitable.

Now, we know that before his departure, Dietrich had agreed with his family a code by which they would communicate about the state of preparations and imminence of the outbreak of war: they would enquire about or share news of "*Uncle Rudi*." So, Bonhoeffer's letter to his parents of June 17th asks "How is Uncle Rudi doing?", and again on the June 22nd he writes, "hopefully, I will hear again from you soon, also about how Uncle Rudi is doing."[20] Informing his parents by postcard on July 1st that he will sail for England within the week he adds, "Would you please write to me c/o Sabine's address the date of Uncle Rudi's birthday, so that I can eventually congratulate him personally?"[21] Interestingly, neither Bethge nor other biographers make mention of this other agreed upon coded message from Church friends and colleagues. One exception it seems is Kathleen Housely who addresses the matter directly in her very recent biography of Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer. After rehearsing (as we have) Lehmann's testimony, Housely notes that while on June 19th Dietrich was "still pacing the floors in an agony of indecision" by the very next day he

---

[20] DBWE 15: 201, 195.

[21] DBWE 15: 211. Both the existence of the family plan to send a coded message to Dietrich and Karl-Friedrich if war became imminent, and confirmation that they did indeed send just such a message asking them to return to Germany as soon as possible, is confirmed in correspondence between Sabine Bonhoeffer-Leibholz and the American Lutheran pastor, Paul Empie, dated 19th May 1946 and held in the Paul L. Lehmann Papers.

could write in his diary: "In the morning a letter from my parents in southern Germany. Booklets from Stettin. Visit with Leiper. With that the decision has been made."[22] From this she concludes that Dietrich provides us with a "compelling clue" and that the code was "probably the booklets from friends in the town of Stettin in Pomerania."[23] If this is so, then it goes some way to confirming the central place of the business of the Confessing Church to Bonhoeffer's preoccupying concerns and to his decision to return to Germany after only a month in New York.

We may corroborate all this by the contemporary testimony of Felix Gilbert—a childhood friend of Bonhoeffer's from Berlin—who was living and working in America at that time. Gilbert explains in his memoir, *A European Past*, that when he met and spoke in person with Dietrich in New York in late June:

> Dietrich gave me two reasons why be believed he ought to return to Germany. "The Brethren" were one reason: he was engaged in forming a group of young ministers ("brethren") who would struggle against Nazi encroachments. The preservation of a true Evangelical church in Nazi Germany depended, Dietrich believed, on the concentrated existence of such a group. The other reason he gave me can be found in a published letter to Reinhold Niebuhr. . .. There was no personal ambition in his wish to have a role in Germany after the war. Dietrich was not a political person in the sense of being concerned with the introduction or the reestablishment of particular institutions, or with the construction of social utopias. He had very close ties to his family, his friends and colleagues, the people among whom he lived; he saw *them* behind the institutions, and his overwhelming urge was to help save for them the possibility of a meaningful life. Would he be heard if he separated his fate from theirs?[24]

Note again the priority and especial prominence of reasons relating to Bonhoeffer's involvement in the ongoing Church Struggle; note too, the firm observation that Bonhoeffer was not "political" so much as committed to the family and friends and church colleagues living out their lives within

---

[22] DBWE 15: 226.

[23] Housely, *The Scientific World of Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer*, 184-185.

[24] Felix Gilbert, *A European Past: Memoirs 1905-1945* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 96-97.

what Bonhoeffer himself styled the "mandates" afforded by the institutions of government, law, etc.

When they invited Bonhoeffer to come to America in the summer of 1939, Niebuhr, Leiper, and others—including Lehmann—imagined they were rescuing him, i.e., they considered that he was in effect a *de facto* refugee threatened with imprisonment or worse should he continue in Germany under the developing circumstances. The single year of teaching and other engagements they were seeking to arrange for him in America were but a prelude to other, more lasting opportunities.[25] And it seems perhaps that some of his friends in the Confessing Church shared this same view: explaining his decision to return to Germany to Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer stated that came to America in part at the specific urging of his "brothers in the Confessional Synod" who, no doubt, increasingly feared for his fate at home.[26]

Bonhoeffer himself, however, understood from the first that his trip to America was tactical not terminal. While his departure did allow him to defer once again the need to enlist—having been invited to his military recruitment physical in Berlin on May 22nd—and also therefore to avoid bringing any embarrassment to the Confessing Church itself should he refuse to do so.[27] Indeed, as he explained to Leiper, prior to leaving for America he "had long talks with my brethren from the Brethren Council and pledged myself to return to Germany after about a year's time to take up the training work in the Confessional Church again, unless some unforeseen development would change the whole situation."[28] The cultivation of American ecumenical contacts on behalf of the Confessing Church was the primary matter; Bonhoeffer's own "personal question and difficulty with regard to military service etc. came in only as a second

---

[25] See Henry Smith Leiper's invitation dated 11 May 1939 which includes the comment "The term of service is not now fixed although we hope that it can be a permanent thing and expect that it will occupy you for at least the next two or three years"—DBWE 15: 164. Leiper hoped that Bonhoeffer might in fact be engaged to provide "pastoral service for Germans living here", i.e. in New York, in effect a refugee pastor to refugees—DBWE 15: 169, 173-74.

[26] DBWE 15: 210.

[27] Writing to Bishop George Bell on 25th March 1939 Bonhoeffer already notes that he is considering leaving Germany for a time to avoid bring about the "tremendous damage" that would be done to the brethren by his conscientious refusal of compulsory military service though he still has 'a great desire to serve the Confessional Church as long as I possibly could'—DBWE 15: 156-157.

[28] DBWE 15: 183.

consideration," he remarked. But in everything, Bonhoeffer was clear, his "loyalty to the Confessional Church"—in whose service and employ he was even during this period of agreed leave—was always of paramount concern.[29]

Yet, more than any formal obligations, his personal devotion to the educational work of the Confessing Church in general—and that of the "collective pastorates" in Pomerania in particular—seizes his imagination. He confesses to Lehmann that he is "being pulled toward the brothers in struggle, you will understand this!"[30] And on the eve of his departure, he writes to Erwin Sutz: "I am being pulled irresistibly back toward the Confessing Church. Tomorrow I will depart."[31] It is, just as Gilbert observed, Bonhoeffer's deep commitment to the concrete church-community and the people welded together within it by Christ that compels him home. It is telling that when Bonhoeffer finally reached Germany at the end of July he immediately arranged as a matter of priority to travel to meet and to plan with stalwart Confessing Church leaders and educators in the western Germany, including Hans Joachim Iwand and Hermann Albert Hesse.[32] It was his concern for the work of the Church which ultimately drew him home to Germany in those weeks just before the lights once more went out all over Europe.

Conclusion

Paul Lehmann's testimony to the events surrounding Bonhoeffer's short summer sojourn in New York city in June and July of 1939 helps to secure for us several important things about Bonhoeffer's motivations in deciding to return to Germany on the eve of the outbreak of war.

Fundamentally, Lehmann's testimony confirms that rather than grand geo-political or civilizational concerns, Bonhoeffer's return to Germany was first and foremost a return to the witness and service of the Confessing Church. Despite lingering disillusionment with many of the decisions of the Council of Brethren and its direction in the recent past, Bonhoffer remained deeply committed to the work of theological education for the Confessing Church. His work in Pomerania in this regard had knit him most firmly into an unbreakable *Bruderschaft* with a cadre of former students, as well as with other teachers and theologians in the

[29] DBWE 15: 183.
[30] DBWE 15: 209.
[31] DBWE 15: 215.
[32] Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 232-233.

increasingly underground network. Typical of him, even his worries about his conscientious refusal of military service centred not on any personal consequences but upon its likely negative implications for the Confessing Church, in particular his former students and immediate colleagues.

Some years later, in a rather harsh review of the compilation of Bonhoeffer's shorter writings published under the title, *No Rusty Swords*,[33] Lehmann once again confirmed:

> A more serious misrepresentation is the judgment, with regard to Bonhoeffer's return to Germany, that 'he was right to assume that he would be needed.' This is at best a hagiographical retrospect. Having wrestled with Bonhoeffer over that decision, I know that his being needed in the future was farthest from his mind. Such an assumption was totally alien to this mind and spirit. What he did know (not assume) was, that he had committed himself to his brethren in the struggle inside Germany, and that there was no other way for him to honor that commitment but to return.[34]

The specific details of Lehmann's curious and uncommon report of the agreed upon code from Bonhoeffer's friends in the Confessing Church is certainly in keeping with all this, and perhaps not at all unthinkable given Bonhoeffer's preoccupying concern with the brethren and their ongoing work, as well as the fact of the arrival of those "booklets from Stettin" that reached him by post on June 20th in the "Prophets' Chamber" at Union Theological Seminary.

What Bonhoeffer declared to the Finkewalde brethren in the first circular letter written after the outbreak of war was no doubt also addressed firmly to himself:

> We have the vocation to be preachers of the gospel and shepherds of the church-community, and as long as we are that, God will only ask us one thing, namely, whether the faithful ministry to his church-community has suffered damage due to us for even one moment, whether, for even one moment, we have paid too little attention to his church-community and the brothers he has given us.[35]

---

[33] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. and trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

[34] Paul L. Lehmann, "Bonhoeffer—Real or Counterfeit (1966)", in *The Revolutionary Gospel,* 376.

[35] DBWE 15: 275.

Indeed, as he expressed it to Lehmann personally, "In such 'final' times everyone should be found at the place where he belongs."[36] The place where Bonhoeffer understood himself to belong at this "final" moment, as he saw it, was fundamentally in the midst of the Christian congregation of brothers and sisters—as the third article of the Theological Declaration of Barmen has it—engaged in its proper work of witness and service to the gospel, building up its community, and therein also undertaking the church's proper evangelical work of "reminding the state of the righteousness of God" (Barmen V).

[36] Letter of 30th June 1939, DBWE 15:209.

BECAUSE BONHOEFFER WAS SAFE, THEREFORE TODAY BONHOEFFER IS ANYTHING BUT SAFE

By Kimberlynn McNabb

Growing up Lutheran in an area of German immigration, being a Canadian with German ancestry, and studying at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (WLS),[1] has affected my perspective on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. My grandparents recall their parents living in Berlin, ON, when the name was changed to Kitchener, during WWI.[2] They remembered a large poster of the British monarchs that was hung on the wall when visitors came to the house. Recalled were years of racism, particularly slurs and mud slinging, when German Canadian men were excluded during World War II from many jobs—the public seeing a German and not a Canadian engineer.

WWII and its aftermath for those of German Canadian Lutheran heritage was filled with complexity. Postwar guilt and association with a church complicit with German atrocities had German Canadian Lutherans grasping for a safe place to gather and practise faith.

Bonhoeffer was considered "safe"—a saving grace for generations of Canadian Lutheran pastors trained at WLS after WWII. Bonhoeffer's theological legacy helped pastors face the complexity of the times. Between 1939-1970 Ulrich Leupold was ordained in the Canada Synod, serving congregations in Eastern Canada, and for a time served as dean of WLS. Leupold had been a seminarian in Germany when Hitler's Aryan polices went into effect, and so, a Jewish mother and extended Jewish family excluded him from Lutheran ordination. He participated in and was a pamphleteer for Bonhoeffer's Confessing Church. Fleeing Germany, Leupold brought Bonhoeffer's theology to Southern Ontario, wrapped in his own story of living a faith contrary to established church and authorities.[3] Forty years of Bonhoeffer theology via Leupold seeped into the fabric of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Bonhoeffer was safe. Congregations welcomed his theology because it sounded familiar. Each generation of Lutheran pastors and

---

[1] WLS has been re-named Martin Luther University College.

[2] Elliot Worsfold, "Welcoming Strangers: Race, Religion, and Ethnicity in German Lutheran Ontario and Missouri, 1939-1970" (1980). *https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5678.*

[3] Paul Helmer, "Ulrich Siegfried Leupold (1909-70)," (2012). *Consensus:* Vol. 34: Iss.1, Article 2. *https://scolars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol34/iss1/2.*

theologians reimagined and rearticulated faith, rooted in the Lutheran Confessions. Bonhoeffer's work was grounded in a Lutheran understanding articulated in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession: "but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven, and righteousness and eternal life are given to us." [4] His words and actions were a comfortable theological home, interpreted by Lutherans as an overflowing of grace, rooted in a deep understanding of the theology of the cross. Bonhoeffer's words and actions were an encouraging self-esteem booster to people living in an English Canada. To get to the heart of Bonhoeffer's work, we must understand it within the context of Lutheran heritage and German culture. As Douglas John Hall points out, Germanic-Protestantism is different from Anglo-Protestantism,

> A sense of mystery, paradox, and the ongoing struggle between opposites informs Germanic cultural and religious consciousness that is not true of the other western European Protestant groupings . . . It is this profound spiritual/cultural distinction, more than specific ideas or doctrines, that prevents most English-speaking Christians from comprehending in depth the thought of Martin Luther. This is nowhere more manifestly so than in connection with Luther's theology of the cross.[5]

To guilt-ridden German Lutherans, Bonhoeffer was safe because his work was a call back to Christ as the centre and a reminder that grace was not about the individual, but, rather, all about God and God's action:

> what must be more fully considered under the discussion of Theology (God) in this theological tradition, but let me state already what seems to me absolutely vital if we are to comprehend this entire approach: *The theology of the cross, which may be stimulated* (as we have seen) *by a certain kind of anthropological preunderstanding, is nevertheless first of all a statement about God, and what it says about God is* not, *that God thinks humankind so wretched that it deserves death and hell, but that God thinks humankind and the whole creation so good, so*

[4] "The Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* ed. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 30.
[5] Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*: *Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 232.

> *beautiful, so precious in its intention and its potentiality, that its actualization, is fulfillment, its redemption is worth dying for.*[6]

Canadian Lutherans do not typically observe Remembrance Day because it was complicated. However, at the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Halifax, NS, November 11th, 2017, the congregation liturgically marked Remembrance Day. The congregants were of diverse backgrounds: Canadians of various European descent, Germans whose fathers, brothers, and uncles were conscripted to fight with the Nazis, Displaced Persons (Prussians, Estonians, and Latvians), recently arrived German citizens, WWII veterans, both Canadian and British, and active Canadian military service members. Bonhoeffer's story and quotations from his works satisfied the needs of all present. Bonhoeffer was presented as a saint and a martyr, admired and quoted, helping to assuage guilt and foster cordiality in community. Remembering Bonhoeffer tended to avoid ethical discussion of what actions may or may not constitute faithful obedience and discipleship, particularly in time of war.

Recently in a straw poll, Lutheran clergy shared that Bonhoeffer remains important in their pastoring, surfacing in reflections, appearing in sermons and in adult education conversations. Bonhoeffer's works are no longer used as a bridge between people of diverse experience or to assuage guilt; rather, Bonhoeffer's work is presented to inform and inspire conversations of faithful Christians living in a world full of chaos.

Bonhoeffer's 1937 book, *Nachfolge*, was translated and published in North America under the title *The Cost of Discipleship*. However, in 2015, Lutheran publisher Augsburg Fortress changed the traditional English title to simply, *Discipleship*. For me, the action marks a change of the role of Bonhoeffer and his work in North American Lutheran communities. 2015-2017 also marked the Lutheran World Federation's 500th commemoration of the Reformation under the theme, "Liberated by God's Grace: Creation, Salvation, Human Beings—Not for Sale." The emphasis on costliness satisfied a North American church that sought safety and healing post-WWII. The 500th Reformation commemoration theme and resources saw a move to renewed focus on grace lived out through discipleship, whether addressing climate justice, human trafficking, or longing for wholeness and healed relationships. The focus is not the cost to an individual; rather, grace is in the forefront.

Within North American experience Lutherans have used Bonhoeffer's witness and writings for their own healing. Distance from

[6] Ibid., 24.

WWII, several generations of pastors, Lutheran immigration from the global south, emphasis on refugee resettlement,[7] and changing times, have formed a community with the opportunity to embrace a gravitation to political action, whether the defiance of legal systems, or political authority. Reformed from insular safety to outward orientation, Lutherans in Canada can boldly follow a Confessing Church, where faith is taken from abstraction and placed firmly in living out grace for the healing of the world.[8] "The critical theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, perhaps the greatest exponent of the theology of the cross in the modern church, was from start *(The Cost of Discipleship)* to finish (the final passage of *Letters and Papers from Prison)* a protest against the substitution of mere doctrine, or personalistic piety, for the more radical and indeed *political* living out of this tradition on the part of a complacent Christendom." [9]

But now, it is time to emphasize the unsafe nature of Bonhoeffer's theology: grace is costly. For a church seeking to follow his legacy, there is a responsibility to once again articulate the theology of the cross and proclaim the Gospel—a countercultural endeavor. Bonhoeffer's work has been interpreted and quoted to substantiate and promote a myriad of causes and beliefs. The recent surge in the US of Christian Nationalism and the Christian Right has enlisted Bonhoeffer as a figure to emulate, to justify extremist actions in opposition to liberal leftist policy. Bonhoeffer has been a common discussion topic in Lutheran clergy Facebook groups, particularly in the US after President Trump's election to a second presidency. The November 2024 movie, "Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Spy, Assassin," has also disturbed Lutheran clergy. Standing on its own, Bonhoeffer's work and legacy challenge those who engage with it. Lutherans in American and Canadian contexts have an added challenge with interpretations of Bonhoeffer that remove his work from its theological context and misuse it to fuel ideologies that are not proclamations of the Gospel.[10]

There are examples within Christian academia where Bonhoeffer is not fully contextualized. In *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction*

---

[7] The Lutheran NGO, Canada Lutheran World Relief, began after WWII with the specific focus of welcoming and resettling Displaced Persons from Europe.

[8] *For the healing of the world* was the theme for the Tenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, July 2003.

[9] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 232.

[10] Dr. Tripp Fuller professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, and host of the podcast "Homebrewed Christianity," has a recent project on Bonhoeffer's works and actions in an eight-episode audio docuseries, *The Rise of Bonhoeffer*, for further exploration of this theme.

to Christian Theology Since 1918, readers are presented with a comprehensive review of theologians, beginning with an introduction of six theologians referred to as classics of the twentieth century, Bonhoeffer among them. The entry on Bonhoeffer alludes to, but never mentions, the theology of the cross, and fails to root him in the context of continued theological reflection in Lutheran systematics. The suggestion is to study Bonhoeffer's works as an expression of pastoral theology and spirituality, rather than definitive systematic theology We need to remember reflecting on his work from a Lutheran perspective requires vigilance in maintaining a connection to radical grace through the theology of the cross. It requires us to take a stand so that the theology of the cross is not replaced by theologies of glory or victory. This conviction is radical, not because of Bonhoeffer, but because of the radical nature of Christ.

Because the foundation of his theology is in his Christology, Bonhoeffer is never safe. To follow Bonhoeffer is to follow Christ who pushes beyond comfortable boundaries and is found waiting in the eyes of marginalized people, targeted minorities, and demonized groups. When it becomes politically acceptable to intentionally alienate segments of a population, authorize mandates against some, and ignore genocide, the boundary where Christ stands is amplified. Bonhoeffer reminds readers of "the Great Divide,"[11] the separation of Church and the world, and of that boundary where Christ stands to welcome the follower across the uncomfortable threshold into a call to live a different vision. The disciple understands the call simultaneously as an act of God's judgement and God's grace, working in and through humankind leading to true humility and right faith.[12] As Christ meet us on the boundary, we find that the boundary shifts, grace demanding continued obedience to seek Christ beyond. Living in continued judgement and grace is articulating and living faith, on the ground, now.

Journalist Carol Off, in her book, *At a Loss for Words: Conversation in an Age of Rage,* reflects that society, and therefore our political discourse, is losing key language and the meaning of words. "[I]f we no longer have the words," Off writes, "we no longer have what they stand for. When we lack a way to express an idea, then the idea itself may be gone. Even the range of our thoughts becomes diminished."[13] So too,

---

[11] A section title in Bonhoeffer's, *Discipleship,* discussing Matthew 7 and path of discipleship.

[12] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship,* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 216.

[13] Carol Off, *At a Loss for Words: Conversation in an Age of Rage,* (Toronto: Random, 2024), 2.

she reflects, without the words of reasonable voices, discourse deteriorates to the emotional and irrational. If there was ever a time for words, it is now. Preaching has always been central to Lutheranism. Proclamation of the Word is the avenue for engaging something bigger than oneself and expressing theological vision. General editor of the *Bonhoeffer Works*, Victoria J. Barnett wrote, "I do not think that we can understand Bonhoeffer the resistance figure or Bonhoeffer the theologian without understanding Bonhoeffer the preacher."[14] The Word, as delivered by writers, preachers, composers, and spoken word artists, proclaims Gospel, and Gospel is countercultural. Throughout history the Word has irritated and aggravated those in power, created change and formed new things from chaos. The heart of Christan life and worship is the proclamation of the Word of God as revealed through Scripture. Preaching is a confession of faith, a prophetic means to call the church, and hope amid the shadow of the ideological spirit of one's times. Eberhard Bethge commented that Bonhoeffer's heart was in preaching, as "it was by the promised work of the *viva vox,* the living voice, by which the God of today, the witness of today, and the hearer of today encounter one another."[15]

According to Clyde Fant, "to the theological specialist Bonhoeffer is too much the preacher and to the preacher Bonhoeffer is too much the theologian. For the theologian, the preacher is always technically too imprecise and humanly too specific; while to the ecclesiastical practitioner, the theologian is too troublesome because he watches everything too closely, and often critically."[16] In the complex tension between theology and preaching there emerges a rich practice where preachers and hearers wrestle with living theology and applying it to everyday life. Engaging communities in theologically enriched language actively works to counter the loss of words and meaning in the wider world.

Meeting Christ in Word, sacrament, and community at the Lutheran Church of Resurrection has changed over the past twenty years. A congregation wrestling with Bonhoeffer is no longer composed of people in need of healing from WWII, protecting themselves from anti-German sentiment, or struggling with self esteem. Today's church is a community that has welcomed members from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, China, Iran, Ukraine, and Columbia. Recent arrivals have lived through

---

[14] *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,* ed. Isabel Best, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), xi.
[15] Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics,* ed. and trans. Clyde Fant, (New York: Cross Road, 1991), vii.
[16] Ibid., 4-5.

war and violence, authoritarian regimes, religious persecution, displacement, and/or refuge camps. Congregants witness and experience social and political upheaval, climate crisis, racism and other injustices. The church practises meeting Christ in the other and offering hospitality, a hospitality that comes from a renewed sense of God in community and worship. Christ encounters people who gather around the Word and preaching "where eternity and time meet, where the immortal God receives mortal human beings, through the holy Word, and cares for them, where human souls can taste the starkest terrors of despair and the ultimate depths of God's eternity."[17]

Bonhoeffer's life and work resonates in a troubled world. The proclamation of the Gospel comes to the North American church through people who have, by faith, journeyed through crisis and the starkest terrors of despair. Christ always comes in living voice. Congregation members born and raised in North America are astounded by the Scriptural acumen of Christian siblings from the global south. Through sharing their life stories, through prayer and faith, the Incarnate presence of Jesus is at the centre of the stories and the centre of daily living (the ultimate depths of God's eternity). Although familiar with Scripture in his or her mother language, a pastor's first request is often for an English Bible, from which to study and pray but also to learn English from a place of comfort and power. The Word, whether Scripture, prayer, or preaching, is received as living Word, life giving, and life changing:

> This is what makes a sermon something unique in all the world, so different from any other kind of speech. When a preacher opens the Bible and interprets the word of God, a mystery takes place, a miracle: the grace of God, who comes down from heaven into our midst and speaks to us, knocks on our door, asks questions, warns us, puts pressure on us, alarms us, threatens us, and makes us joyful again and free and sure.[18]

Bonhoeffer was safe for an earlier generation because he was able to hold hurting people in the living Word until the grace that was present all along in that Word was embodied. For this very reason, however, Bonhoeffer is anything but safe today because **e**mbodied grace is never safe. Once we experience grace, Bonhoeffer's message articulates a countercultural word spoken to power, an invitation to address injustice, a

[17] Bonhoeffer, "Ambassadors for Christ." in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 90.
[18] Ibid., 90.

call to step beyond boundaries and find God already present. There ought to be no separation of preacher and theologian. The world needs communities of Christians who live their discipleship from a deep understanding of grace and embodiment of that grace.

A Lutheran church that has been reformed through its encounter with Bonhoeffer the preacher and theologian has a responsibility to continue his legacy. Bonhoeffer's Reformation sermon of November. 4, 1934, calls disciples to action—action that is birthed from meeting Christ at one's boundary and, judged and redeemed, lies that grace in word and deed (obedient discipleship), proclaiming the Gospel. Let the last word belong to Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself:

> When we go out the doors of this church now, we enter into a world that is longing for the things we have spoken of here—not simply for the words, of course, but for the reality. Humanity, betrayed and disappointed a thousand times over, needs faith; humanity, wounded and suffering, needs hope; humanity, fallen into discord and mistrust, needs love. Even if we no longer have any compassion for our own poor souls, which are truly in need of all three, do at least have compassion for your poor fellow human beings. They want to learn from us how to believe again, to hope, to love again; do not deny them. On this Reformation Sunday, let us hear the call—believe, hope, and above all, love—and you will overcome the world. Amen.[19]

[19] Bonhoeffer, "A Church That Believes, Hopes, and Loves," in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 165.

IS PREACHING OF ANY USE TODAY? THE LEGACY OF DIETRICH BONHOFFER

By Andrew Stirling

"The path to conversion and healing goes through the ear. The hearing does it. The Word alone works conversion and hope. That was the proclamation of the Reformation."[1]

During the commemoration service of the 80th anniversary of the death of Greek Catholic Archbishop of Lviv and Metropolitan of Halych, Andrei Sheptytsky, in November of 2024, I was asked on behalf of the ecumenical Christian community to deliver a sermon reflecting upon his life and influence. Andrei Sheptytsky is recognized as one of the greatest leaders of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church. During World War II he opposed the rule of the Nazis in Galicia, challenged supporters of the mass murder of Jews in his own country, and spoke out against the atrocities of Jewish murders. As Paul Robert Magocsi points out, he courageously ordered the monasteries to, "adopt hundreds of Jewish children, many of whom survived the Holocaust to tell their stories of appreciation for the saintly Metropolitan."[2] Andrei was also an eloquent preacher whose love for his flock and his deep faith in Jesus Christ inspired his oratory. In delivering this sermon, I referred to the example within my own Protestant tradition of the courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with particular reference to his sermons and theological reflections delivered in the aftermath of the Nazi laws of 1933 that enshrined the policies excluding Jews from civil society, employment and government. These laws were infamous for the "Aryan Clause" that paved the way for the *Shoa* that was to follow.

While Bonhoeffer is frequently recognized and sometimes immortalized in numerous publications and movies for his courageous opposition to the Antisemitism of his era and his role in influencing the Barmen Declaration and the church's struggle against Hitler, it was his often-little-known instruction to young emerging pastors who attended the Confessing Seminary in Finkenwalde that contributes to his living legacy. As Edwin Robertson suggests,

---

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom,* Geffrey Kelley and Burton Nelson (eds.) *(*New York: Harper Collins,1995), 277.

[2] Peter Galadza, *Archbishop Andrei Sheptytsky and the Ukrainian Jewish Bond,* (Toronto: Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies and the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, 2015), 8.

> These scanty notes, freely translated, gives as good an idea of the discussions in Finkenwalde as we need . . . He was guiding the thoughts of young men who would lead the epic struggle against the perversions of the German Christians and enable the church to cope with the demonic forces of Nazism.[3]

In this essay, I suggest that the lectures he gave on preaching in Finkenwalde in 1934/35 are still of immense significance to any student or practitioner of homiletics and preaching today. Indeed, while they were given within the context of persecution and ecclesiastical confusion and division, which clearly makes them unique, there is a timelessness to their application.

No small calling

In classical Protestant thought, a preacher is one who is ultimately called by God to the task of preaching. Bonhoeffer asserted this belief in his statement, "Only commission given by Christ can support a sermon. Every other causality leads to resignation."[4] He was convinced that the call to preach is irrevocable and the person called cannot extricate themselves from its influence. However, for Bonhoeffer the preaching office is not dependent on the person being ordained. He clearly saw a role for lay preachers and perhaps this was even more important in the light of the restrictions placed on the ordained clergy by the Nazi state at the time. The office of preaching is dependent on what he calls the, *"vocatio interna."*[5] This internal call from God is precisely what all preachers need to authentically offer the word, and it is this very experience that gives the preacher both fidelity to the word and courage to proclaim it in difficult situations.

Over the past two years, I and a colleague from the Orthodox church have been privileged to offer preaching seminars on behalf of the Canadian Bible Society to pastors serving "diaspora" churches in Canada. Many of them have come to Canada from places of war, violence and the intimidation of Christians. In addition to countries such as Iran and Syria where some of the pastors still have family in prison for political and

---

[3] Dietrich. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords,* (London: Wm Collins & Sons, 1977),16.

[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works, Volume 14, (*Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 490.

[5] Ibid., 489.

theological reasons, others have come from the poorest of nations. They represent diverse theological and ecclesiastical traditions, from Coptic Orthodox to Pentecostal Assembly churches. Many of them are ordained within their denomination, while others are lay preachers offering the word of God in small settings. A few serve large congregations, while others are pastoring in house churches. The languages are as diverse as the nations represented, and there is a need to offer translation to assist in their understanding of the presentations.

Their stories of courage and their desire to be a prophetic voice for the Gospel among their people is inspiring. One overwhelming characteristic of these preachers is their inherent sense of the call to preach. Their appreciation for the *vocatio interna* empowers them to overcome immense obstacles to their preachment. A few of them are even frightened that what they say in a sermon in Canada may be relayed back to their home nation resulting in persecution of their family. Such is the impact of social media today. For many of them, Bonhoeffer's example has been a beacon of light and inspiration.

Lecturing to the Finkenwalde students, Bonhoeffer believed that the commission to preach is, ". . . given to the church. Its presence grounds the sermon. Hence the contents of the sermon can only be actions with respect to human beings, not contemporary circumstances."[6] He was convinced that the gathered community was the locus of the sermon, and that the preacher is preaching within the context of the flock to whom they are called.[7] This is precisely the conviction of the diaspora preachers today. While the circumstances of their contexts are important, the preacher is not speaking an ethereal word to an imagined problem, but to a concrete people who are waiting to hear the word of God. These pastors recognize that, in essence, preaching means discipleship. As Bonhoeffer put it, "The truth

---

[6] Ibid., 491.

[7] This should be of no surprise as Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation deals with the concreteness of the Christian community as he asserts the importance of ecclesiology. This is a theme that permeates all of his writing including his latter ones in prison. See, Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 6-7. For the original text see, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). In the same way, Bonhoeffer's ecumenical spirit recognizes the diverse nature of congregations. A good summary of this is found by Conrad Raiser in, John W. De Gruchy (ed.), *Bonhoeffer for a New Day. Theology in a time of transition, (*Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 319-399 . He concluded that Bonhoeffer's commitment to ecumenism left a legacy of unity, confession and resistance for others to follow.

and reality characterizing the sermon depends on the form of existence of the church itself, and that means discipleship."[8] As Bonhoeffer claimed, this allows the preacher to transcend either bourgeois or proletarian contexts and speak to the people as important subjects. Such a perspective encouraged the Confessing pastors to return to their congregations with a very clear mandate to stand against oppression as a dedicated community. His premise for all of this was clearly stated:

> Does the concrete situation of the congregation itself not demand a form of contemporization going beyond mere exegesis? One must make the so-called concrete situation of the congregation comprehensible to the congregation as the universal situation of human beings before God, of human beings in their pride, in their unbelief, in their insensitivity to others is the question. The answer is Christ as he comes to us through his word, always simultaneously as the judging, commanding and forgiving one.[9] It behoves all preachers today to heed this reminder.

What preachers actually need

In the Finkenwalde lectures, Bonhoeffer gives some practical guidance to preachers. He relates to them the core existential qualities of the preacher and the form of the sermons to be preached. He begins with his assertion that preaching essentially and primarily involves engagement with the biblical text. He states, "It pleased God to speak to us in the word of the Bible alone. This is why a sermon is an exposition, not an application of the word of the Bible."[10] This approach to the Bible also implies that, "All of God can be found in every word of Scripture."[11] Bonhoeffer had a high view of Scripture arising from his Lutheran background, however, he did not deify the Bible and realized it requires interpretation. Like Luther, he was convinced that the primary hermeneutical approach was *suipsius interpres* (i.e. it is self-interpreting) and that the entire Bible was the subject of preaching. This was very important in his context and is relevant for today. There is often a temptation to adopt a Marcionite (Gnostic) hermeneutic that only selects certain passages as being authoritative. This often leads to the rejection of parts of the Hebrew Bible and can lead to Antisemitism. If one avoids the texts that deal with God's irrevocable

[8] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, op.cit., 2013, 491.
[9] Ibid., 422.
[10] Ibid., 492.
[11] Ibid., 493.

covenant with Israel, it is tempting to take the next step and reject the covenant people themselves. This was an issue that the United Church of Canada had to deal with in the writing of *Bearing Faithful Witness*[12], that in essence affirmed the key relationship between the two testaments. While an Antisemitic approach to Scripture still exists today, in the context of 1930's Nazi Germany, the immediacy of the threat was even greater.

The text of Scripture should also be the foundation for the form and structure of the sermon. Bonhoeffer believed that if this happens, the preacher's own bias or artificially imposed structural points of the sermon can be avoided. When the preacher tries to force a text into a particular form, it simply serves the cause that, "the pastor becomes merely a pulpit orator."[13] Oratory should only serve to enhance the word and not replace it. It is only conjecture on my part, but I think Bonhoeffer did not want the Confessing preachers to emulate the German Christian preachers who used their sermons to promote or authenticate the Nazi ideology. He objected to thematic sermons and preferred the *Lectio Continua* that encourages preachers to choose texts that are assigned, thus avoiding the temptation to only speak about the issues of the day. If preachers in every generation are true to themselves, they will acknowledge that we all have a "canon within a canon" from which we draw with frequency. Bonhoeffer's approach should not be misconstrued as a form of avoidance, quiescence or disengagement from current crises or *Kairos* moments. Rather, Bonhoeffer was affirming that the preaching of the Scriptures is always God's word addressing any situation.

Another recommendation of Bonhoeffer's came with regards to the importance of prayer. "No sermon can begin without a prayer for the Holy Spirit, for a sermon is not merely a presentation in which we express personal opinions and feelings."[14] Likewise, he believed that sermons should conclude with a prayer expressing humility and thanksgiving and in so doing, recognize that in the sermon God has spoken. The fact is that the objective word of the Lord is manifested in the subjectivity of speaking. The preacher needs to be a person of prayer and must exercise a "special discipline"[15], and this is especially true for Protestant preachers who are

[12] *Bearing Faithful Witness, United-Jewish Relations Today,* was adopted by the 36th General Council in 1997
[13] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, op.cit., 2013, 498.
[14] Ibid., 494.
[15] Ibid., 502.

not as accountable as other traditions to the oversight of ecclesiastical bodies.

In this instruction, we also witness the contemplative Bonhoeffer. Preaching was sacramental and went hand-in-hand with the sacrament of Holy Communion.[16] Together they spoke the Word of God. The place of prayer was, therefore, essential in developing an entire approach to worship that recognized that it is not the preacher who ultimately calls people to repentance and offers forgiveness, but God. Both preaching and communion are God's direct act towards us and not the other way around. Bonhoeffer was clearly influenced by others in his belief that the devotion of silence is also needed,

> 'Be still, for that is the absolute', writes Kierkegaard. That has nothing to do with the silence of the mystic, who in their dumbness chatter away secretly in their souls by themselves. The silence of the Church is silence before the Word. In so far as the Church proclaims the Word, it falls down silently in truth before the inexpressible: 'In silence I worship the unutterable' (Cyril of Alexandria) . . . To speak of Christ means to keep silent; to keep silence about Christ means to speak.[17]

This theme permeates much of Bonhoeffer's later thoughts regarding the power of silence. An example of this was in May 1943 when Bonhoeffer was in Tegel prison. In a loving letter to his parents he said, "Nevertheless, a period of enforced silence may be a good thing, and the Roman Catholics say that the most effective exposition of Scripture come from the purely contemplative orders."[18] This view was a pressing one for his students at Finkenwalde, and his words were wise counsel as they witnessed in the context of tyranny.

There comes a time not to speak but instead give God the freedom by recognizing that the truth is found in *Deus dixit*. To discern, however, when to speak and when to remain silent requires a life of prayer and discernment for the preacher. I confess there are times in my ministry when I have felt pressure to speak on a particular matter or moment, only to realize that I must humbly acknowledge I have nothing to say except God's Word alone.

---

[16] Earnst Feil, op.cit., 1985, 49.
[17] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center, (*New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 27.
[18] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* (London: SM Press, 1979), 40.

These instructions form only one part of Bonhoeffer's thoughts, but they reveal a depth of commitment to the homiletical enterprise. I concur with Victoria Barnett in an essay she wrote recently in the Christian Century[19] that his mission in Finkenwalde was to create a space for pastors to have the courage to take on the stresses imposed by National Socialism. It also created a body of discipleship that was juxtaposed to the rest of the German church that was conforming to the will of the Nazi state. However, from that motivation arose a life of service and witness to the truth of the Gospel.

Is preaching still of any use?

The question I struggle with is whether these lectures in Pomerania in the 1930's have any bearing on our current context. Are we merely paying homage to a highly regarded (though sometimes criticized) martyr of yesteryear who has been turned by the media into another celebrity? Alternatively, can we look at Bonhoeffer as first and foremost a theologian/pastor from whom wise words emanated? Clearly, I think it is the latter, and if this is the case, then his view on the importance of biblical preaching should be examined.

One of Bonhoeffer's contemporaries was Karl Barth, who questioned whether Bonhoeffer's experiment at Finkenwalde was a legitimate way to deal with the Nazi crisis. Barth was critical of Bonhoeffer's approach and felt that it had the "odor of monastic eros and pathos . . . for which at the moment I have neither a positive feeling nor use."[20] Bonhoeffer realized the dangers inherent in such an enterprise and the danger of simply becoming a religious enclave that no longer addressed the *polis* with the word of God. Such a retreat from responsibility was abhorrent to him. Nevertheless, like Barth, he believed in prayer and righteous action and both of these commands form both a preacher and the community of believers.

Preaching was not, therefore, to be constrained to a gathering of a "holy huddle" or limited to the gathered community. It was to address the

---

[19] Victoria Barnett, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer didn't choose to be a martyr. He simply tried, as many others did, to be decent in the face of evil,* The Christian Century, November 2024, *https://www.christiancentury.org/contributor/victoria-barnett.*

[20] Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 57. This book was given to me by Professor Martin Rumscheidt, my former professor and friend and a meaningful interpreter of Bonhoeffer within The United Church of Canada.

concrete situation in which disciples found themselves. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge in July, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote, "The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure at least in the sphere of the 'personal', the 'inner', and the 'private.'"[21] The Confessing church was moving dangerously close to becoming a conservative restoration body by trying to find a place for God in the broken world. This *retrenchment* was also criticized by Barth. The implications for preaching are enormous. If preachers feel that God's word and Christ are to be pushed to the boundaries and are only effective in a psychological or religious sphere, then where is preaching's prophetic power? The danger of this approach can be seen in the plethora of sermons today that treat the Gospel as if it is simply a form of therapy for a despairing world. However, should a faithful exposition of the Gospel also address the concrete political, social or existential issues of the moment? For Bonhoeffer, it was a resounding yes! We see this theme addressed early in his ministry in a sermon he delivered at a youth conference in Ciernohorske Kupele in the Carpathians in 1932:

> The Church must here and now be able concretely to speak the word of God, the word of power, from its own knowledge of the matter; if it does not, it is saying something different and human, a word of impotence. The Church must not proclaim principles that are always true, but only commandments that are true today. For what is 'always' true is not true 'today'. To us God is 'always' God 'today'.[22]

This must not be misconstrued as a facile statement in support of relativism. Rather, it is the deep commitment to the fact that God is speaking 'today'. Absolute truths are fine, but that is not the realm of the preacher. The preacher is to speak the word of God 'today'. We do not need to ask whether preaching is of any use.

Preaching is an act of confession rooted in the One who called us to confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour. That very confession, however, whether it is a *status confessionis* such as in South Africa's Kairos document during Apartheid, the Barmen Declaration, Belhar Confession or Kairos Palestine statements, calls the church to repent of its idolatry and hold on to the centrality of Christ. This position can address

---

[21] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, op.cit., 1979, 344.

[22] Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: An illustrated Introduction,* (London: William Collins and Son, 1976), 47.

the powers of this world from the perspective of justice, reconciliation and truth. It is right to be suspicious of our own sinful perspective, but in the darkest time, the preacher is encouraged by Bonhoeffer to reach beyond their own boundaries and fears and speak the word even if it meets resistance.

In a recent conversation I had with a pastor from Aleppo, Syria, who now resides in Canada, he said that after his church was destroyed there by the Assad forces, his flock feared for their lives. Some of them were arrested and others fled the country as refugees. They continued to maintain their faith and prayed for the liberation of their people. As a new regime emerges, they once again hope to be able to proclaim the Gospel with peace, and yet with some trepidation. They have no idea what the future holds, but preach they must, and undergirding it all is prayer and righteous action. In these people, and others, Bonhoeffer lives. May his legacy live in us too.

Finally, if for no other reason, preachers today have an obligation to offer the word as a gift to the next generation. Perhaps Bonhoeffer's own words, late in his life, are an inspiration to us all: "Thinking and acting for the sake of the coming generation but being ready to go any day without fear or anxiety—that, in practice, is the spirit in which we are forced to live."[23]

These are words written from a prison cell by a theologian/pastor who ultimately believed in the liberating hope of Christ.

[23] A reference by Russel Botman to *Letters and Papers from Prison* in, John De Gruchy, op.cit., 1997, 372.

A SPIRITUALITY OF LEADERSHIP INSPIRED BY DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

By Robert C. Fennell

"Are we still of any use?" This was the question haunting Dietrich Bonhoeffer in late 1942. In a Christmas-New Year's essay entitled "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943: After Ten Years," he was filled with doubt and faith, fearful of the present yet trusting in God's provision. Ten years had passed since the formation of the Pastors' Emergency League, an association of German pastors trying to resist the Nazi takeover of the Church, in the midst of their takeover of the nation. But the League had been outlawed. The war was well underway. Concentration camps were operating at full strength to eradicate Jews and others whom the Nazis deemed undesirable. Bonhoeffer was banned from publishing and teaching, and his experiments in forming counter-Nazi seminaries had collapsed. The church was fully under the control of the state. The cause of resistance, to all accounts, seemed hopeless and lost. "Are we still of any use?" was the vexing question that lesser persons might not have cared or dared to ask.

In the midst of today's struggles, which are nothing like Bonhoeffer's (for those who live with safety, privilege, and plenty) or are equally as bad (for the oppressed, impoverished, and invaded peoples of the world), how shall Christians bear witness and lead? This matter has been with me for many years. In this essay, I shall seek to offer some insights from Bonhoeffer's life and legacy that can inform a spiritual grounding for leadership and discipleship in our time.

Telling the truth about trouble

No one alert to the troubles of our era can doubt that authentic Christian discipleship and witness is difficult. Throughout my lifetime, the economic alarm bells seem always to be going off. The year 2024 has been recorded as the hottest year ever for planet earth. This is dire news for those concerned (and unconcerned) about global warming. Extreme weather plagues every region of the globe, from fires to floods, from droughts to catastrophic storms. Military occupations, armed conflict, and attempted genocides are still with us as a human family, despite every possible advance in science, technology, and education, not to mention the warnings of history. Paradoxically, strides forward in technology that might otherwise have rendered life more peaceful have made warmaking even more deadly. Proto-fascism is emerging afresh. Settled political orders and alliances that many have taken for granted are vulnerable and threatened

in surprising ways. The hoarding of resources by the ultra-rich is unaffected by the millions who go unhoused and underfed. A just society seems as remote as ever: a step forward is met with a step backward. In the world of the church, a great many congregations are in decline and seem to have given up on finding ways to offer the gospel in terms that the current generation can embrace. At a personal level, each of us can think of persons with struggles of their own, let alone what is in our own hearts.

In such a context, "are we still of any use?" is a fitting question. There are always temptations to apathy, despair, or resignation. The mountains to climb and the walls to scale can seem daunting. What can a Christian disciple or leader do and be in times of struggle and fear? Eight decades ago, this was Bonhoeffer's response:

> We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds. We have become cunning and learned the arts of obfuscation and equivocal speech. Experience has rendered us suspicious of human beings, and often we have failed to speak to them a true and open word. Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? We will not need geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, but *simple, uncomplicated, and honest human beings*.[1]

It is remarkable that Bonhoeffer did not give in to despair, even in prison, and even in the face of the collapse of the internal resistance to the Nazis' terrorizing of his society. He certainly felt despair: several of his poems and prayers reveal this. By the grace of God, he did not let it get the better of him. Bonhoeffer clung to the promise of Moses: "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (Deut 31:8). Even immediately before he was hanged at Flossenburg concentration camp on 9 April 1945, he is reputed to have said, "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life." Bonhoeffer's abiding confidence in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its significance for every person and for all of history, shaped and coloured his outlook and actions throughout his adult life and many ministries.

At our best, perhaps today's leaders and disciples can turn with Bonhoeffer toward a similar response to the troubles of our time. We can seek not only to find ways to deploy the gifts God has given us, but also to

---

[1] Bonhoeffer, "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943," in *Letters and Papers from Prison,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol.8, trans. B. and M. Rumscheidt (Fortress, 2010), 52.

entrust to God the futures of this and future generations. If the testimony of Scripture offers nothing else, surely evidence can be found in it that this is not the first time God has accompanied and empowered the faithful in the midst of social strife and indeed civilizational chaos. As Jeremiah overhears God saying to the nation in exile, "Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon . . . do not be afraid of him, says the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to rescue you from his hand" (Jer 42:11).

The best eucharistic liturgies similarly ground the faithful in salvation history. The *anamnesis* (the "remember when?" parts) of the liturgy remind us that time and again, God has faithfully accompanied, inspired, forgiven, and saved the people of God. The God who in Jesus Christ was enfleshed, taught, healed, redeemed, and transformed real persons—this God has been active in all of history to draw creation into the purposes of the Realm of God in which all harms are healed and the fullness of God's purposes are achieved. The in-between time—the time each of us is given—is the time of yearning for that consummation. But it is not a time to drop our tools and give up. Bonhoeffer, in prison and in the concentration camp, continued to pray, to preach, to study, to befriend those around him, and to write. What will we do with our days, we who are free to do so much more?

With increasing frequency, I hear from ministers and other leaders about their struggle for emotional well-being, their mental health concerns, exhaustion, discouragement, difficult work, anger, resentment, and grief. In the church in which I grew up, there was a poster on the door leading to the sanctuary. It showed a tiny boat in the midst of huge ocean swells. On the poster was printed the famous Breton fisher's prayer: "Dear Lord, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small." That prayer has stayed with me since childhood. It is a kind of modern psalm, echoing the distress of David whose kingship was plagued with troubles. The prayer is filled with simple honesty about the realities of life, but also expresses trust in God, whose faithfulness has no limit.

Bonhoeffer's context and our own

Bonhoeffer is remembered not only for his courage and for his theological contributions, but also for engaging with the very difficult era in which he lived. He was a contextual theologian before we had a name for such a thing. Born in 1906 in the German-speaking town of Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland), Bonhoeffer began life with significant privilege. His family was culturally Christian (Lutheran) within Christendom, but they did not take personal spiritual commitment very seriously. Indeed, they found it somewhat gauche or embarrassing. As a result, Bonhoeffer's

interest in theology and ministry was not well received at first. The Bonhoeffers were bourgeois, perhaps even semi-aristocratic. They were financially well-off and socially respected. His father, Karl, was a psychiatrist and professor. His mother, Paula, was an accomplished musician and teacher. The family saw themselves solidly at the centre of the culture, well-connected, and part of the circle of Germans whose lives were considered normative and naturally influential in society.

The Germany of Bonhoeffer's youth and young adulthood underwent several crises. Germans were emerging from the devastating defeat of World War One. The Treaty of Versailles that finally ended the war in 1919 was extremely punitive and intentionally humiliating, designed to keep Germany exceedingly weak and dependent. Much of northern Europe was in ashes and rubble. Germany had a monumental national debt, had taken massive casualties, and hundreds of thousands were dead, including countless civilians. Millions had been gravely injured, and one can only imagine the extent of what is today called post-traumatic stress disorder. There was widespread poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, a collapsed economy, and massive human displacement in Germany and well beyond it. Germany was held responsible for all of it. In Bonhoeffer's early ministry years, Germany saw rapidly growing nationalism and deep resentment about the punishing effects of the treaty of Versailles. Shame ran deep, both about losing the war and about causing so much misery for non-Germans. Desperation remained widespread: economic, social, spiritual, and emotional.

By the time Bonhoeffer completed his education and was ordained, he had already travelled, served, studied, and taught widely in Europe, the UK, and the United States. He was active in international, ecumenical, and pacifist movements, and at the age of 27 was already maturely and wisely denouncing Jewish persecution by the state. When dissent within the state Church was banned, Bonhoeffer and others formed an underground seminary for the anti-Nazi Confessing Church. Over the next few years, that seminary experiment was shut down; he was banned from teaching, publishing, and speaking in public; and he became involved in a tertiary way with a plot to assassinate Hitler—and engaged to be married. His final condemnation by the state and execution in 1945 are well documented.

Bonhoeffer brought substantial intellectual, spiritual, and social resources to his determination to confront a tyrannical power. As was true for Bonhoeffer, perhaps as we in the North Atlantic might similarly observe that in our time the Church is not as it should be; society is not as

it should be; and governments are not as they should be. Then, war loomed and finally exploded. For us, perhaps, wars are further afield but signs of environmental catastrophe are everywhere. Bonhoeffer found himself in a well-educated, cultured country that turned to nationalism, bigotry, violence, persecution, divisiveness, corruption, and finally genocide.

The very pro-state, pro-establishment, pro-stability Protestant church in which Bonhoeffer struggled to function had close ties to governmental and social power. It is easy to forget (or perhaps we are reluctant to remember) that the subsuming of the church into the state was certainly resisted by Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, but a great many—indeed the majority—did little to object. The cultural Christianity within German society made the convergence of the Nazi "Blood and Soil" ideology easy enough to accept in the churches. Despite the revulsion most feel today to Nazism, these were cultured, educated, sophisticated people for whom acceptance of (or capitulation to) fascist ideology was not a great stretch. The convergence made sense. There was significant support for Hitler and nostalgia for the authority of a monarch. His views were not considered outrageous by most people. The majority church was a largely willing partner in Nazi antisemitism and what became ultra-nationalism. Theologically, this was the height of modernity, in which scepticism, Enlightenment rationalism, confidence in human capacity and powers, relegation of God's activity to the bits of reality that science cannot explain, and the centrality of the Self in epistemology all predominated. Eugenics, race segregation, and ethnic purging fit all too easily into that worldview. (Canadians are often unaware or forget how popular eugenics was in Canada in the early twentieth century, not to mention the presence and activity of the Ku Klux Klan in certain places, and the rampant antisemitism across the dominion.)

Today's context, about 100 years later, has disturbing similarities. Social upheaval is widespread, alongside the mass displacement of tens of millions of refugees worldwide. There is the ongoing emotional and economic upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering presence. Social fragmentation seems to be on the rise, together with surging nationalisms. Rationality (mixed with nature spirituality, and—perplexingly—with superstition and a new kind of gnosticism) is at least as vaunted as religious conviction. Technological advances are lauded. God is not central to everyday life, and for nearly everyone, the Self is the arbiter of meaning. Many Christians are prone to self-congratulatory, nostalgic cultural Christianity, and each person is quick to praise their own brand of faith or non-faith. Yet all this conceals guilt, despair, fear, and societal vulnerability.

A spirituality of leadership

Spirituality, for Bonhoeffer, was not the way *out* of his circumstances. He was not a mystic nor an escapist: he was too realistic for that. He was too committed to the concreteness of human life and Christ's presence within it. He saw and spoke clearly about the dire pit into which he, his family, his comrades, and his nation had fallen. But for him, spirituality was the way *through* his circumstances.

I want to suggest that we can turn to Bonhoeffer as a kind of spiritual guide for those who would lead today. He didn't set himself up for such a role. He didn't write a book about leadership, but he was a respected leader in a variety of settings. In the exercise of his leadership and his reflections on discipleship, we can see the quality and character of his spirituality. This spirituality, I would argue, can anchor today's leader in God, *in order to be able to confront the overwhelming challenges of the time*—challenges which indeed might accelerate.

What is the shape of a "Bonhoefferian" spirituality? Perhaps the first note to sound is this remark: "We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God."[2] In this, there is a certain humility about the crafting of one's own plans for life and leadership. It is right and good to be organized and press onward, but God might well interrupt our well-laid plans. Saul-Paul would testify to this (Acts 9), as would the unsuspecting Galilean fisherman-disciples and many others in the Biblical story. This *openness and vulnerability before God* is a keystone throughout Bonhoeffer's later writing. We can see these qualities again in a poem he wrote in prison in 1945, shortly before his execution:

Who am I?
They often tell me I step out from my cell
calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.

Who am I?
They often tell me I speak with my guards
freely, friendly and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.

[2] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol.5, trans. G.L. Müller and A. Schönherr (Fortress, 2015), 99.

Who am I?
They also tell me I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.

Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled,
starving for colors, for flowers, for birdsong,
thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
weary and ready to take my leave of it all?
Who am I? This one or the other?[3]

A second set of notes to sound is in Bonhoeffer's refreshing *honesty about loneliness and suffering,* and his patience with ambiguity and unknowing. As for many men of his generation, and certainly amid the "muscular," masculinist tendencies of Aryan-Nazism, perhaps the norm of projecting personal strength would have been appealing to him. Yet in his quieter moments, he was unafraid to record the truth of his fears and isolation, missing his family and friends, sadness, and uncertainty. The same poem continues:

Am I the one today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once before others a hypocrite
and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?
Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
fleeing in disarray for victory already won?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest me; O God, I am thine![4]

[3] Bonhoeffer, "Who Am I?" in *Letters and Papers from Prison,* trans. I. Best et al, 459-60.
[4] *Ibid.*, 460.

Third, we can look to Bonhoeffer's *sociality*—that is, his commitment to friendship, compassion, and solidarity. In the person of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer found not a God of distant stars who looks benevolently upon creation from afar, but an incarnate, suffering Lord whose presence among the unrighteous signals God's love for all persons. On the cross, God in Christ reveals the ultimate price God will pay to redeem the sin of the world. From this, in combination with his natural affections, Bonhoeffer looked at those around him and all humankind as persons worthy of love and friendship. "I can no longer condemn or hate other Christians for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me," he wrote. "In intercessory prayer the face that may have been strange and intolerable to me is transformed into the face of one for whom Christ died, the face of a pardoned sinner. That is a blessed discovery for the Christian who is beginning to offer intercessory prayer for others."[5]

For Bonhoeffer, even the practices of writing, reading, and studying were forms of encounter, both with those who had preceded him and his living peers. In prison, these actions connected him with those from whom he was forcibly separated. They were echoes and substitutes for his love of conversing with others, visiting, teaching, and making music. These practices of sociality reflected his underlying conviction that Christ is present as the Church-community. In communing with others, he was communing with the Lord. At the same time, he was aspiring to live as a man for others, just as he consistently taught that Jesus Christ lives *pro nobis*—for us.

Fourth, and perhaps most obvious, Bonhoffer was undoubtedly anchored in the ancient Christian practices of *reading the Bible devotionally, the sacraments, and prayer*. While these might be somewhat out of fashion today, Bonhoeffer repeatedly spoke of their value and moreover engaged in these practices daily, or at least with the frequency that circumstances permitted. Despite its imperfections, Scripture remained vital to him: "through the Bible in all its fragility, God comes to meet us at the Risen One."[6] Similarly, prayer is indispensable. As Patrick Nullens remarks, "Prayer for Bonhoeffer is in essence a form of belonging to and participation with Christ and the world."[7] Even in prison he tried to

---

[5] *Life Together*, 90.

[6] "Lectures on Christology (Student Notes) [summer 1933]," in *Berlin: 1932-1933,* trans. I. Best and D. Higgins, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12 (Fortress, 2009), 331.

[7] Nullens, "Towards a Spirituality of Public Leadership: Engaging Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *International Journal of Public Theology* 7 (2013): 109.

find ways to celebrate communion and to pray with his fellow prisoners.

Finally, and again unsurprisingly, Bonhoeffer's spirituality was not theologically narrow but remained both *ecumenical and thoroughly Christ-centered*. He remained curious and open to a range of Christian thought and experience, including a greater openness to the Roman Catholic tradition than that of most of his peers. Each step of Bonhoeffer's journey was accompanied by a deep sense of Christ's presence and companionship. It was for the sake of Jesus, his gospel, and the world God loves that Bonhoeffer lived his life.

Despite his sharp awareness that following Jesus fully was demanding, even extraordinarily so, Bonhoeffer put Christ at the centre, rather than himself or his own needs and aspirations. Obedience to Jesus Christ is often the most complex and demanding aspect of discipleship, but Bonhoeffer remained committed to it. For this reason, he could not excuse his own sinfulness in conspiring against Hitler, the head of state, which he contended was a violation of divine law. He could only throw himself upon the mercy of God.

A spirituality like Bonhoeffer's expresses the intrinsic human yearning for God. To explore and express our spirituality is a natural part of being human. We deny our humanity—and become more machine-like—if we shut off this tap or don't get around to visiting the refreshing well of the Spirit. But we remain human, and are blessed as human creatures, when we invite the Spirit to nourish us. For Bonhoeffer, spirituality and spiritual practices were necessary for survival; for the living out of his commitment to follow Jesus Christ; and for the exercise of his vocation as a pastor, scholar, and leader.

And for we who remain…

To be a follower of Jesus Christ in our time remains complex and demanding. A great many voices call for our obedience, not least among them the overblown Self whose voice is loud and blaring. All around and within us are the challenges and suffering of this moment in history. We remain baffled by these sin-filled conditions; distraught by trouble; grief-stricken by our losses. Even so, the gospel draws the Christian leader forward, promising in the power of the Holy Spirit to restore, renew, overcome, and rebuild. God, who is not daunted by the imperfections of this age nor the imperfections within us, sees beyond our vision to a world reborn and remade.

A spirituality informed by the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is characterized by searching honesty, vulnerability, and patience. It keeps us grounded in a commitment to Scripture, the

sacraments, and prayer. It cheers us through the mutual love of friends, family, and all our companions along the way. It is theologically broad, yet Christ-centered, for Jesus means life. As Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, to whom [else] can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). Such a spirituality is not a way out of the troubles of our day, but a way through them. We play our part, but God who is the final playwright on this stage will decide how the story ends.

Bonhoeffer, this great saint of our time, this great Christian heart, went on to write the following prayers a few months after his reflections on the question, "are we still of any use?"

Lord Jesus Christ,
you were poor and miserable, imprisoned and abandoned as I am.
You know all human need,
you remain with me when no human being stands by me,
you do not forget me and you seek me,
you want me to recognize you and turn back to you.
Lord, I hear your call and follow.
Help me!
…
Merciful God…
I trust in your grace and commit my life entirely into your hand…
Whether I live or die, I am with you, and you are with me, my God.[8]

For those ready to give their best, to open their hands to serve in great or small ways, for every "simple, uncomplicated, and honest human being," this remains true: *You are with me, my God.*

I suspect Bonhoeffer would be embarrassed by (or dismissive of) attempts to remember him sentimentally as a kind of helpless but valiant martyr. I am convinced he would be horrified by attempts to lionize him as a culture warrior and armed "patriot," as some recent films and books have tried to do. I hope he would be content with an effort to access his theological and personal writing for resources that fund a spiritual orientation to our discipleship and leadership. But apart from all of that, it is commitment to the person and way of Jesus Christ that Bonhoeffer most valued—and to which he would direct us today—as the sure path that leads to life.

---

[8] Bonhoeffer, "Prayers for Prisoners: Morning Prayer" and "Prayer in Particular Need," in *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 195, 198.

REV. ALBERT THOMAS KING. 1887-1982. The Last Congregationalist Minister Ordained before Church Union 1925

By Leslie-Elizabeth King

Rev. Albert Thomas King (A.T.) was born in Islington, London, England in the family home on Liverpool Road. He was the third of four boys and had three sisters. His father and uncle operated a Hansom cab business, which went bankrupt with the arrival of automobiles and cars and the family fell on hard times. In 1901, at the age of fourteen, A. T. began an apprenticeship building huge wooden tripod cameras at a salary of seven shillings for a fifty-hour week. He eventually worked up to employment with a building contractor and machine shop. As a journeyman he was given "first bench in the Model Shop and had to keep the record of materials used." His business card read "A.T. King. Carpenter and Joiner. All kinds of repairs and alterations." After some years of work at full wages he responded to a call to take up church work.

His family had mixed religious affiliations. A.T. preferred to attend evangelical meetings over going to the dances his brother played for. He connected with the Congregationalist church and went as a missionary to the Orkney and Shetland Islands under the auspices of the Congregational Union of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. He also worked in Arbroath where he ministered to "God-fearing fisher-folk who followed the herring fleet south to Yarmouth."[1] The details of his work in Scotland are unknown and he may have gone completely independently, perhaps as a "tent making" missionary; that same article reported that ". . . he lacked a guaranteed income, a fixed address and the side benefits expected by wage-earners . . ." [2]

A.T. told his son, Rev. Albert (Bert) Edward King that one day he "was walking along a coastal road in the rain, heard a service being held in a schoolhouse so he went in for protection against the elements and

[1] Chris Stewart, "Happiness is Serving Other." *The Lethbridge Herald*, 1 February 1975, 5.
[2] Stewart, *Happiness is Serving Others*.

found Annie Jefferson conducting a worship service."[3] They had first met on the boat taking them to their mission fields. She thought he was sleeping on a deckchair and gave him a blanket because it was cold. Annie had been appointed to the Orkneys and Shetland Islands by the Presbyterian Missionary Society.[4] After this second chance meeting they corresponded for a year and were married in 1915 in the Masonic Hall in Cuper, Fife, Scotland. Both were listed as Salvation Army officers on the marriage certificate, but I have no other evidence of that affiliation.

In 1917 during the First World War A.T. was a conscientious objector and did his war service in North Wales and Salisbury Plain in the canteens.[5] His brothers had all joined the Navy. After the war A.T. and Annie were pleased when the Congregationalist Union sent them to Newfoundland, which had gained Dominion status in 1907 as an independent country. The Colonial Missionary Society, established in 1837, was formed" as a distinct society for the Colonies" following the report of a deputation to Canada by representatives of Congregational churches from Britain. Its principal mission effort was directed towards promoting Congregationalist forms of Christianity among "British or other European settlers" rather than "indigenous peoples."

A letter of 17th May 1920 reads: "The Directors of the Colonial Missionary Society acting for the Home Missionary Society of Newfoundland have pleasure in extending to you on behalf of the Home Missionary Society of Newfoundland a most hearty invitation to become minister at Little Bay East and its outstations, Fortune Bay, Newfoundland, at a salary of $1000 per annum together with the free use of the Manse."[6] A.T. was to work cooperatively with the missionary at Pools Cove and exchange pulpits quarterly with the "principal settlements." He was required to take extramural courses through Congregational College, Montreal and work toward ordination.

The outport was accessible only by boat or by walking five miles from the nearest village. Fresh food was scarce. There were no modern facilities, even for the times. A.T. didn't like being out on the water in a small boat and Annie was always afraid of an accident. Among his duties

---

[3] Rev. Albert E. King, *My Journey from Coast to Coast* (Victoria, BC: Conway Publishing 1995), 2.

[4] Eulogy for Annie E. King 4 January 1972, (personal papers Leslie King).

[5] Personal communication.[6] *Colonial Missionary Society*, Wikipedia contributors (Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia 2 September 2021, 2.

[6] Personal papers, Leslie King.

was the role of administrator of the local school. When the regular teacher was away, he taught in the classroom. He brought a football for playing with the local kids, and a 12-gauge double barreled shot gun from England, which the fishermen sometimes used.[7] He was minister and dentist, and set bones (having read some medical books), wrote letters for people, and administered certain medicines. His serious lack of medical training became a problem of conscience for him. When uncertain about what was wrong with a patient, he would leave the room and consult his medical book, then go back in and try again. One woman was insistent that he give her medicine. Finally in desperation he gave her coloured water, several times, and each time, she recovered. But he was always uncomfortable about doing so.[8] There was the expectation that A.T. would serve the field for five years; however, he and the family left after three because the salary was not paid.

The family sailed to North Sydney, Nova Scotia and stayed there until the Congregational Union of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick found a place for him in Sheffield, NB in 1922. Sheffield Congregational Church was established in 1763 by planters from Massachusetts who were descendants of the Puritans. It joined The United Church of Canada in 1925 Each congregation was formed as a result of nine settlers signing a covenant to form a church society. A.T. arranged for a memorial cairn to note the congregation's historical significance as the first Protestant church in New Brunswick. The building, originally in Maugerville, had been moved downstream to Sheffield.[9] This congregation was well established in a productive agricultural area with good business and educational connections, very different from Little Bay East. A.T. continued his academic studies toward ordination and finished just in time to be ordained as a Congregational minister on June 8, 1925, two days before Church Union, by Congregational Union Moderator Rev. Churchill Moore. Rev. Moore's son, A.B.B. Moore who later became Moderator of The United Church of Canada was present at the ordination.[10]

According to family lore, A.T. was too sick one Saturday evening to lead worship the next day. Annie didn't tell anyone. She just went in on Easter Sunday morning and led worship. No woman had ever preached in that church, but the elders told A.T. he could get sick any time he liked!

---

[7] King, 5, 7.
[8] Cathy Nicholson, personal communication.
[9] E. Arthur Betts, *Congregational Churches in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick 1749-1925* (Maritime Conference, The United Church of Canada 1985),
[10] Betts, 135.

She had preached a wonderfully rousing resurrection service.

Church Union complicated this pastoral charge, as Sheffield Congregationalist Church and Lakeville (Ripples) Corner Methodist Circuit with two different ministers were amalgamated. The Committee on Re-arrangement of Fields of Fredericton Presbytery recommended that the amalgamated church become Ripples Pastoral Charge with the minister living in the Sheffield parsonage. Both ministers offered their resignations. The Ripples Methodist congregation wanted neither of the two ministers, but instead, a Presbyterian minister who had not had a connection with either congregation. Sheffield, however, wanted to keep Rev. A.T King. His resignation was rejected by Sheffield and negotiations ensued. The situation was resolved by A.T. leaving Sheffield Congregationalist on 1 October, 1926 but acting as supply minister of the new Ripples Pastoral Charge between 1 July and 1 October, 1926. The dedication was attended by the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, the Premier, MPP, MP and a member of the Historical Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Presbytery Chairman and many others [11]

A.T. was then appointed to Nashawaak and Stanley, two new pastoral charges of four congregations, Methodist and Presbyterian, but before his work at Sheffield was finished the arrangement became "disorganized through an adverse Union vote."[12] This impacted A.T.'s income. He applied for $30.00 to cover his losses and eventually it was paid. The Presbytery voted to place on record its "high appreciation of this fine brotherly spirit manifested by Mr. King in all matters pertaining to the work of Presbytery, and also its great regret at his removal, and prays that the Divine Spirit may graciously lead and bless him in all his undertakings."

In the meantime, he was placed in New Carlisle, Quebec in Miramichi Presbytery. The Presbyterian congregation of New Carlisle had split at the time of Union into two: Zion United and a new Presbyterian church (built directly across the street). He declined a gospel call from Zion United even though it offered $1400/year, a manse, and one month vacation[13] choosing to "remain for a time in the field." Prior to Union the Presbyterian church in New Carlisle was involved in the New Carlisle Academy and provided $1000 yearly to offset the moving costs for

[11] Minutes of Fredericton Presbytery, The United Church of Canada Archives, Sackville, NB. 3 September 1926, 56-59.
[12] Minutes of Fredericton Presbytery, 6 Sept. 1927, 56-57.
[13] Minutes of Miramichi Presbytery, 24 February 1927, 35-36.

teachers.[14] A.T. expressed concern, however, about the management of the New Carlisle Student Home for those who came to the Academy from across the Gaspe Peninsula.[15] In January 1928 he resigned from New Carlisle and requested Settlement.

He became the minister of the uniting congregations that were forming the New Bandon United Church Pastoral Charge, which wrote a very detailed basis for their union prior to its "consummation".[16] Immediately after his induction into the New Bandon United Church Pastoral Charge,[17] he raised the urgent need for a manse. Presbytery approved the plans for financing but at the same time the congregation was selling the house in which the King family was living. In less than a year his salary was in arrears. His children remembered that he was paid with apples and potatoes even after Presbytery had tried to get the situation corrected.

A.T. was next inducted as the minister at Silver Falls, St. John Presbytery in southern New Brunswick on 5 July 1929. He served there seven years and oversaw at least three complex reorganizations of the pastoral charge.

As we can see from A.T. King's experiences, the difficult and long-lasting efforts to reorganize pastoral charges that came into Union in 1925 were hard on many congregations and ministers active in the church at the time. A majority vote does not a union make, it seems.

In 1936 the King family moved back to the Red Bank, Whitney, and English Settlement Pastoral Charge in Miramichi Presbytery. They were there during the lead up to the Second World War. Newcastle is just down river from Red Bank and is the head of navigable water on the Miramichi River and an important transportation link from Halifax to Montreal. This location may be why A.T. began to suspect that their temporary boarder may be a German spy. Ernest, A.T.'s middle child, recalled that they were "visited" by people asking a lot of questions.

---

[14] *atlas.cieq.ca* Rural Protestant Schools.
[15] Minutes of Miramichi Presbytery, 36-37.
[16] Allen Seager, Minto, New Brunswick: *A Study in Canadian Class Relations Between Wars* (Labour/Travail Vol 5 Canadian Committee on Labour History, Canadian Historical Assoc., Labour/Travail Vol 5 1980 www.lltjournal.ca).
[17] Laurel Lewey *A Near Golden Age: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in New Brunswick, 1940-1949 Journal of New Brunswick Studies Revue d'etudes Sur Le Nouveau Brunswick* (3 December. https://journals.lib.unb.ca)

Considering A.T.'s choice to be a conscientious objector during WW 1 such a visit could be understood.

In late 1940, A.T. moved northeast of Fredericton to Minto United Church in Sunbury County where coal mining was the major industry. His predecessor in Minto had complained that he had not been paid his full salary but since he was also the treasurer and for two years kept no financial records, there was no way Fredericton Presbytery's arbitration committee could determine what had happened. A.T. was actively involved in Fredericton Presbytery and must have been aware of the difficulties within that pastoral charge. The minute book covering this time period is missing.

The years 1940-1944 were demanding times for this minister who had begun his work during the years of labour unrest in England among poverty-stricken and powerless people. A.T. was also aware of the class inequalities that had been imported to New Brunswick from Britain. The mine owners had the wealth, opportunities, and political power to maintain their own advantages. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) had established a New Brunswick branch in 1933 and A.T. had become a charter member while serving Rothesay. His experience, faith and personal convictions came together in Minto. There had been two strikes by the United Mine Workers in 1938 and 1939. A family story recounts that during the continuing struggle to establish a union that would benefit the miners, A.T. took the side of the union and was involved in the negotiations. The CCF's policies of disarmament and peace were attractive to the former conscientious objector. It was daunting to challenge entrenched power structures at a time when a worker risked being fired for publicly showing interest in a union or the CCF. However, it is significant that the CCF achieved support in New Brunswick in the 1940's when the hegemonic forces were decidedly anti-labour and anti-CCF.

There were two CCF clubs in Sunbury County.[18] Because of his work helping with the organization of the United Mine Workers of America Union, A.T. was persuaded to run for the CCF in the 1944 provincial election. The mine managers were members of the Minto congregation and they "gave him their approval" to run but would reduce his salary to $1.00/year. The United Mine Workers union gave him an honorary membership so he could collect strike pay.[19] "His one satisfaction was that he got more votes from the town of Minto than any other candidate.

[18] David King personal communication.
[19] King, 60.

However, he lost out badly in the country where the farmers disliked the action of the miners.[20]

In 1944 Fredericton Presbytery approved his call to Restigouche Pastoral Charge, Miramichi Presbytery effective 1 December 1944.[21] In 1945 A.T. served other United churches in northern New Brunswick, and in 1947 moved to his last pastoral charge in New Brunswick at Douglastown and Nelson across the Miramichi River from Chatham, now simply called Miramichi. This was a familiar area since it is just downriver from Red Bank and Whitneyville where he had been ten years earlier.

Retirement was on the horizon and A.T. and Annie had always planned to move closer to their children. Ernest and family were in Hamilton, ON. Their daughter Muriel and family were in Lethbridge, AB. Their son A.E. King, a United Church minister, was serving in Cardston, AB so the decision was made to move to Alberta.

A.T. was sixty-five years old but not ready for retirement. The United Church of Canada pension was not what it is today, and finances were tight. He had only been in the United Church for 27 years so continuing to work may have been a necessity. It is also probable that his call from God, the call he answered in his early twenties, was more important to him than financial needs. From 1952-54 he served the church at Fort McLeod, AB. From 1955 to 1972 he served McKillop United and Southminster United Church in Lethbridge, AB, where he is remembered as being particularly good with adolescents and teenagers.[22] He also preached in the Lethbridge Presbyterian Church in Monarch, and other congregations.[23] He sent the family a letter and clipping from *The Lethbridge Herald* describing the reaction to one of his services. “The well-loved minister, Mr. A.T. King, conducted a service which was a benediction. The sermon came from the preacher's own experience with moving eloquence, sincerity, and an all too rare relevance.”[24]

When A.T. was fully retired and moving to Calgary in 1975, *The Lethbridge Herald* published an article in which the author, Chris Stewart, quoted A.T. as saying that the recipe for happiness is summed up in the Presbyterian catechism “to know God and enjoy him forever.” His chosen purpose was “to give his life to spreading the Christian gospel.” He did this

[20]Fredericton Presbytery Executive Minutes (P-53-4) p.2.
[21] Miramichi Presbytery Minutes (P-33-16) 12 February 1946.
[22] David King personal communication.
[23] A.T. King letter to family 1972.
[24] A.T. King undated letter to family.

through formal ministry and very importantly to him, his community work. He likely saw no distinction. In addition to his work with fishermen in Scotland and Newfoundland, and miners in New Brunswick, in Lethbridge he was chairman of the Senior Citizens' Home Service, a board member of the original Pensioners and Senior Citizen's Society, and instrumental in bringing senior citizens' housing to the city.

"Claiming to be modern in his theology while evangelical in his delivery he refutes the view that education alone can change the world. 'What's needed' he said, 'is a recognition of Christ as the Redeemer, the One, who can give spiritual life to all who believe in Him. This alone can provide the moral foundation the world needs.' And, 'The greatness of a man is . . . measured by the depth of his love and devotion.'"[25]

A.T's son, the Rev. A.E. (Bert) King wrote about his parents: "Mother was warmly evangelical while Dad's religious faith was inclined to be cerebral. He felt that Jesus was a very wise person who, in human terms, revealed the nature of God and that we should abide by what he said and did."[26] He didn't take the Bible literally. Stories like Jonah and the whale were "just a story" and he brought an interpretive understanding of the Bible to his ministry in the United Church. He believed in acting out his faith through active participation in society and was dedicated to a lifelong calling to serve the church.[27] His guidance to young people was non-judgmental, with a focus on looking forward not back. But his advice was not limited to the young. A few years before his death at age 95, he was still the evangelist when he wrote: "My health is as good as I can expect it to be . . . One of the surprises of the place I am in is the very few old people who can look forward to the future with any hopes or expectations that give them daily pleasure and every day I can think of so much that makes me glad I am living. You know I am in a Nursing Home. There are 200 people here most of them younger than I and it's so hard to teach them to look forward as to a great and wonderful adventure." [28]

A.T. seems to have experienced a high degree of insecurity from his first missionary journey to the north of Scotland all the way to Lethbridge Alberta. Perhaps he embraced it. His wife was tired of it more than once but she too was a missionary. The Congregationalist ethos emphasized the freedom of ministers and congregations to function

---

[25] Dr. Frank Morley *The Family Pew*, The Lethbridge Herald – no date on the clipping.
[26] King 17.
[27] Ron Holberton personal communication.
[28] Cathie Nicholson personal communication.

in a way that met their needs so as to be able to serve God. It emphasized mutual support. It emphasized sharing the Gospel. Perhaps the Settlement Committees knew that A.T. could deal respectfully with congregations struggling to know who they would become during the first ten years of Union. Those kinds of assessments are not recorded in Presbytery minutes. What is obvious to me is that he often went where there was poverty and conflict. Those congregations continued for a long time after he left. It may be that he had guided them well.

There has been talk of creeping Congregationalism in the United Church, but if my grandfather's ministry is any example, it wasn't creeping at all. From the very beginning, he and my grandmother were open to working with any denomination that was willing to send them where the hope for fullness of life and knowledge of the love and hope known through Jesus Christ was needed. When resources were too limited to meet that goal, Congregationalism willingly entered Union in 1925. A.T. served congregations that had been Methodist and Presbyterian. He lived the love he knew in Jesus and acted at a cost to himself, but this was his way of leading his congregations into a wider understanding of living faithfully. Rev. Albert Thomas King died Dec. 31, 1982, in Calgary, Alberta and is buried next to Annie in Lethbridge. They died eleven years apart, to the day.

On June 8, 1969, the 44th Anniversary of The United Church of Canada and his ordination, A.T. preached:

> Do we still need a church? . . . Today our word faces problems so complicated and immense that the human mind staggers in their presence. Then is there not need of a strong immovable institution which shall bear calm witness to a few great facts and moral principles upon which the hope of our humanity depends. There are voices in our past that speak to us of unity, fellowship. We have a wonderful heritage in the United Church. We have Methodist evangelical zeal, and we have Presbyterian thoroughness, and Congregational freedom. Our Christian heritage has been bought with a price.

If we have a goodly heritage, others have paid the price that we might have it. We are not on our own, we are bought with a price. We hardly realize it because we have such freedom and abundance. We are reaping where others have sown. Because of what others have done and

given, we have opportunity to live and worship in freedom, comfort, and peace. May we be worthy of so great an inheritance.

From the Heart

RESTLESS HOPE: EMBRACING BONHOEFFER'S CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

By Kassandra Matthews

The first time I encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings; I was navigating a season of exhaustion and disconnection. As a seminary student balancing ministry, motherhood, marital breakdown and coursework, my faith had become reduced to a checklist. I was so focused on keeping up—finishing assignments, delivering sermons, and making it through the day—that I had forgotten why I was there in the first place. But then, in a course with the Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell, I opened *The Cost of Discipleship*, and Bonhoeffer's words reached through my haze.

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."[1] Bonhoeffer's writing reminded me of the depth and call of the faith I had forgotten. His theology wasn't just something to study; it was a living invitation, a summons to embody grace and discipleship in every aspect of life—even and especially through trial. Bonhoeffer reminded me why I had answered the call to ministry—not to simply complete tasks or check boxes, but to follow Christ with vulnerability, authenticity, and courage.

This encounter with Bonhoeffer set me on a path of restless dissatisfaction—a refusal to settle for complacency or comfort. His thought continues to shape how I approach ministry, challenging me to see discipleship as costly, community as sacred, and the church as a living witness to Christ's presence in the world.

A Faith That Costs Everything

Bonhoeffer's critique of "cheap grace" in *The Cost of Discipleship* is one of his most enduring contributions to Christian theology. He contrasts this with "costly grace," which demands everything because it is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, grace is not a licence to live unchanged but a transformative call to discipleship.

This understanding shapes how I approach ministry. Bonhoeffer's words remind me that faith is not about comfort but about entering into the costly, redeeming work of Christ. His challenge compels me to confront the hard truths of the Gospel, even when they are uncomfortable. It also encourages me to embrace my own vulnerability, knowing that grace is

[1] Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 99.

most transformative when it meets us in our weakness. Discipleship is not about ease or accomplishment; it is about living in daily response to Christ's call.

But Bonhoeffer's vision of costly grace does not remain an individual pursuit. It calls us into shared lives of vulnerability and accountability, where we extend that grace to one another. This leads naturally to Bonhoeffer's understanding of community—not as an escape from the world's demands, but as a sacred place where God's grace becomes tangible.

Community as a Sacred Reality

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer describes Christian community as both a divine gift and a human responsibility. He critiques our "wish dreams"—idealized notions of community that often lead to disillusionment—and instead calls us to receive one another as we are, in the grace of Christ. True community, he writes, is grounded in confession, mutual service, and the reality that Christ mediates every relationship.

This understanding reframes how I think about relationships within the church. Community is not something I create or control but something I steward. The inevitable tensions and imperfections of human relationships, rather than being failures, become opportunities for grace to take root. Bonhoeffer's insistence that Christ stands between us challenges me to view conflict and difference not as barriers but as sacred spaces where God's reconciling work unfolds.

Religion-less Christianity: A Faith for the World

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer introduces the idea of "religion-less Christianity." He envisioned a "world come of age," where traditional religious forms no longer held sway, and the church was called to embody Christ's presence in the here and now. He wrote, "Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life."[2] This critique of cultural Christianity was not a rejection of the church but a call to reimagine faith in a way that engages fully with the world.

This concept prompts me to examine whether my faith reflects the living Christ or merely props up institutional tradition. It invites me to consider how the church can strip away unnecessary barriers and embody a faith that resonates with those disillusioned by empty religiosity. Bonhoeffer's vision reminds me that the church exists not for itself but as a witness to God's transformative presence in the world. This vision of a

[2] Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 2011: 154.

faith that fully engages the world naturally extends to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church as a community existing only for others.

The Church for Others

One of Bonhoeffer's most radical ideas is his insistence that the church exists "only for others." This vision of the church as a servant community challenges me to consider whether my ministry reflects this outward focus. Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church calls me to see it not as a refuge from the world but as an active participant in God's mission of reconciliation.

This shapes how I think about the purpose of the church. It compels me to approach mission not as a program—but a posture—of humility and openness to where God is already at work. How can the church embody Christ's self-giving love in tangible ways? How can we, as a community, reflect the reality of the kingdom of God breaking into the world? These questions guide my understanding of what it means to serve faithfully.

Hope in the Midst of Uncertainty

Bonhoeffer's letters from prison offer a profound witness of hope in the midst of uncertainty. His conviction that "nothing is lost before God", and that God will turn even the greatest evil for good, reflects a deep trust in God's sovereignty, even in the face of immense suffering.

His wisdom shapes how I approach challenges in ministry. Bonhoeffer's life and writings remind me that faith is most powerful in the midst of struggle. His hope was not rooted in ideal circumstances but in the unshakable reality of God's presence. And I believe he was right—I see glimpses often of God's sustaining and renewing power. When I feel inadequate or overwhelmed, Bonhoeffer's words and life help me to see my own challenges within the larger story of God's redemptive work.

A Restless Hope

Writing about Bonhoeffer feels both humbling and daunting, as though standing before a theological giant. I am acutely aware of my own inadequacies, my inability to live up to the radical discipleship he embodied. Yet his thought has left an indelible mark on my ministry and my faith. It has given me a restless dissatisfaction that keeps me from settling for less than the costly grace of the Gospel, a vision of community rooted in Christ, and a hope grounded in God's sovereignty. This restless dissatisfaction is not a burden but a gift, reminding me that God's call is always more beautiful and challenging than I can imagine.

But to allow Bonhoeffer to reshape only my thoughts would fall short of his vision. His theology demands not just reflection but transformation—an ongoing remaking of who I am and how I live in response to Christ's call. It compels me to continually ask how I am embodying the costly grace I proclaim, how I am answering the call to discipleship in each moment, and how I am allowing myself to be remade by God's Spirit.

Bonhoeffer's life and theology remind me that ministry is not about building institutions or maintaining comfort but about living faithfully in response to Christ's call. It's about trusting that God is present in the messiness of human life, weaving redemption into the fabric of history. My prayer is that, in some small way, his witness might shape my own, calling me—and the church—not only to think differently but to live differently, with deeper spirituality, bolder discipleship, daring justice and greater love.

The People of the Parables: Galilee In the Time of Jesus
By R. Alan Culpepper. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024. xxix + 369 Pp. $45.00 US (Paper).

Alan Culpepper is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. This well-written, significant book combines the findings of many scholars' archaeological and historical research into the economics, politics, culture and religion of Galilee in Jesus' time. The result is a judicious, in-depth account of where he lived and carried out his ministry. As Culpepper lays out what can be known about life in Galilee, he shows how it is related to Jesus' parables and ministry.

The book has seven parts. The Introduction sketches the history of Galilee up to the time of Jesus, the historical sources for this context, and what can be known about the general contours of Galilean society and how it worked in Jesus' day. It was an economically prosperous but troubled context. Life was hard for many. Most lived at a subsistence level.

Part II, "Homes and Families," has chapters on children, education, fathers and sons, women and meals. Most education happened in the home, with fathers giving their children practical and religious instruction. We learn what, when and how people ate. Life was particularly hard for children in peasant families. It is estimated that up to 30% died at birth and another 30% died before they were five years old. It was a patriarchal, male-dominated society. Yet women typically had a central place in household affairs, child-rearing and a variety of work and community activities.

Part III, "Galilean Society," looks at occupations such as farming and fishing and at relationships, such as masters and slaves, landowners and tenants. Culpepper notes that Galilee was predominantly rural and densely populated. A person could reach perhaps forty villages in a day's walk. For subsistence farmers, work was strenuous and never ending. The characters in Jesus' parables and the way they are depicted indicate Jesus' compassion for the poor and outrage at the economic system exploiting them. Yet rather than instigate open revolt against Rome, Jesus called for solidarity with and compassion for the poor and marginalized.

Part IV, "Officials," has chapters on tax collectors and judges. Jesus had a preferential option for the poor, yet he also reached out to tax collectors and others who oppressed them. Part V, "Religious Leaders," has chapters on the Pharisees and the Priests and Levites. Culpepper notes how in Jesus' time Judaism greatly emphasized ritual purity. In contrast, in Jesus' vision the holiness of people was marked not by their purity, but by

their compassion and care for the most vulnerable. Culpepper's excellent section comparing Jesus to the Pharisees helps dispel ancient Christian prejudices against the latter. Part VI, "Outcasts," has chapters on Samaritans and bandits. Culpepper notes that Samaritanism was a living tradition in Jesus' day and still is today.

Having described Jesus' time and place in preceding chapters, Part VII, "Jesus," sketches what can be known historically about Jesus and his ministry. Jesus was an itinerant preacher/teacher/healer, who was understood by some early Christians according to the model of Elijah. His healings and exorcisms stood out from those of other folk healers, in that he proclaimed them to be signs of the inbreaking of God's reign. Jesus gave hope and comfort to Galileans. He also challenged them to live in light of God's coming reign and illustrated what this meant with parables about masters who forgave debts, a compassionate Samaritan and a vineyard owner who cared about his laborers.

There is a wealth of detail here about life in Galilee. Culpepper helpfully concludes each chapter with a concise summary and observations that will be helpful for busy clergy. The information distilled and conveyed in this book is presented in a very accessible style. It will greatly enhance people's understanding of the parables and other aspects of Jesus' ministry. Culpepper is careful to present his material as the result of current study, recognizing the fallible nature of historiography and the limits of what can be known about Galilee at the start of the common era. He concludes by observing that the emancipatory meaning of Jesus' parables and ministry still speaks powerfully to the world today. This book will greatly aid theologians, clergy and lay people understand that meaning and relate it to current society. Every theological library should have this book. Public libraries might acquire it too.

Don Schweitzer,
Saskatoon, SK
don.schweitzer@saskatoontheologicalunion.ca

Improvising Church: Scripture as a Source of Harmony, Rhythm, and Soul

By Mark R. Glanville. Intervarsity Press, 2024, pp. 210

It's still a small community but growing. We are intrigued by what jazz can teach the church in this liminal time of unraveling and reformulating that is becoming more and more apparent to those still engaged in and contributing to the life and witness of the institutional church. Two books have been published in 2024 that provide provocative suggestions for digging more deeply into the ways in which the workings, wisdom and wit of jazz can provoke new perspectives and possibilities for the reformulating of the church in this age of unravelling, to use one of Alan Roxburgh's favourite images.

This review will deal with Mark Glanville's *Improvising Church*. The book has garnered very positive attention and chosen as one of the 15 most important theology books of 2024 by the Englewood Review of Books. I hope to review William G. Carter's *Thriving on a Riff: Jazz and the Spiritual Life* in a future issue of *Touchstone*.

Glanville has been teaching pastoral theology at Regent College in Vancouver for the past two years and, as of January 1, 2025, has moved over to St. Andrew's Hall, where Ross Lockhart is dean, as the director of their Centre for Missional Leadership. His roots are in the Presbyterian Church of Australia, a conservative evangelical body that stayed out of the union that formed the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977. He has pastored in congregations in Western Sydney and East Vancouver, both in neighbourhoods with significant social challenges. His doctorate in is Old Testament. Much of his previous writing has dealt with the current implications of the kinship codes in Deuteronomy, especially related to immigrants. He is also an accomplished jazz pianist, a calling he brought with him into his church work.

Improvising Church is shaped by what Glanville calls a "triad," a chord with three tones that creates something new and beautiful when the tones are played together in various improvised combinations. The first tone arises from the missional church conversations, especially the contributions of Lesslie Newbiggin and Michael W. Goheen. The second tone flows from his Old Testaments studies on kinship. The third tone is "the warmth, the hearth, the adventure, and the pain of incarnational communities". Glanville sees this latter tone as a "gaping hole" in the missional literature, though he does see Stefan Pass addressing it.

Emerging from this chord are twelve "notes" for improvising church that draw creatively on the dynamics of jazz. The imaginative notes arise from his pastoral experience, are informed by his scholarly integrity, and are inspired by the witness of the Scriptures. As a teaser to invite you to read the book, here are the twelve notes Glanville has composed for this book:

Harmony – considering the personality, the characteristic spirit of the community

- The Text *Grants* – improvising afresh on the scriptural traditions
- Leader-Full – bringing forth the ingenuity of every person
- Local – making a deep investment of time and love in the neighbourhood
- Beauty – imagining creative expressions of the gospel's beauty

Rhythm – imagining what animates contributions to the kingdom of God

- Worship in Polyrhythms – layering creativity related to Scripture, community, neighbourhood, and the wider church
- Shared Life – listening to the unique riffs that create something greater than the sum of the individuals engaged in the conversation
- Healing, Kinship, and Material Nurture – loving your neighbourhood to life
- Creation – connecting with creation in ways that nourish humility, wonder, and joy

Soul – hearing with an open and full heart

- Voice - finding new phrases for the act of speaking about Jesus
- Conversations – convening discussions that generate kin-keeping, resolving conflict, doing restorative justice, facilitating, listening, having hard conversations, and deciding collaboratively
- Sins of our Kin – lamenting those things that divide us and not accepting them as the final chord
- Prayer – communicating with God in a wide variety of creative ways

It is well worth reading the book to get a deeper sense of the tones Glanville develops in playing these notes. He has written a provocative

theological suite that is rich in suggestions for those engaged in reformulating our ways of missioning.

But in the end, and this is the reason for this very brief summary of how I read this work, Glanville is inviting us to take these notes and find our own improvisations, including different notes, that arise from and suit best our particular situations. We are invited to contribute our own unique voices, our own tones and textures, to the community of reformulators whose missioning proceeds from and is sustained by the forgiving and reconciling love of the Spirit of our Creator's Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jazz musicians flourish in conversation with each other. It's a seminal model for leadership in the church. Engaging colleagues in conversations about the provocations in Glanville's book would generate a spirited vibe that might well become infectious.

Brian Fraser,
Burnaby, BC
jazzthinkbrian@gmail.com

The Mind in Another Place: My Life as a Scholar
By Luke Timothy Johnson: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. pp. 272

The Mind in Another Place is Roman Catholic biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson's moving and informative account of his life as a scholar. Johnson portrays scholarship not as merely an interest or a career but as a vocation.

Born in 1943 in small town Wisconsin, the youngest of six children raised by a single mother, orphaned at age 12, and sent to Mississippi to be raised by his eldest brother, Johnson's biography is a compelling tale of resilience in the face of adversity. In the midst of chaos and upheaval, Catholic education provided him with structure, stability and the formative mentorship of caring teachers. Johnson entered seminary at age 14 to begin preparation for the priesthood, an environment that he considered "the ideal setting in which to cultivate mind and spirit." In the schools he attended and the Benedictine religious life he entered at age 19, Johnson cultivated a lifelong habit of wide and voracious reading and a solid grounding in philosophy and theology that shaped his long and productive career.

Johnson left the priesthood when he fell in love with a divorced woman ten years his senior who had six children. From that point on, his was a life of academic scholarship.

Johnson pursued doctoral studies at Yale University where, under the influence of Wayne Meeks, he developed an interest in the social origins of ancient communities. After receiving his Ph.D. he embarked on a long career of teaching research at Yale, the University of Indiana, the Candler School of Theology and Emory University.

Johnson's life story is interesting in itself, opening a window onto the breadth, depth, texture, and human joys and sorrows of the academic life. A good Aristotelian, Johnson devotes the last two chapters to the intellectual and moral virtues that scholars must cultivate.

First among the intellectual virtues is "Curiosity." Johnson's career has been motivated by his curiosity about the question "*Why* did Christianity take root and spread in the ancient world?" Early on, he incorporated sociology of knowledge, and cultural anthropology into his New Testament research. He sought to fill gaps in knowledge about Christian origins and correct blind spots in NT studies, especially its neglect of the *religious* context of early Christianity. Much of Protestant historical criticism treats early Christianity as if it existed in a religious vacuum. Johnson addressed this issue primarily in his *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*

Next is "Respect for the Evidence," which, for Johnson, must include an understanding of the *limits* of that evidence. Johnson is a noted critic of the Jesus Seminar whose fanciful reconstructions of the historical Jesus go far beyond what the evidence justifies.

"Mastery of the Subject" refers to "knowledge that is wide, deep, flexible, and creative." Johnson was a vocal critic of the trend towards increasingly narrow and insulated academic specialization. The scholar must cultivate the habit of "Wide Reading," within but also beyond his or her chosen area of speciality. Good scholarship requires "Imagination"—the ability to think synthetically about a wide diversity of material in order to create a coherent vision of the subject and its parts—and "Clarity and Cogency." Ideas that are not expressed sufficiently clearly that people can understand them do not contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

Johnson enumerates six "Moral Virtues" that accentuate his view of scholarship as a moral and spiritual calling. First is the "Courage" to trust one's perception of the subject. Second is "Ambition," not the craven pursuit of fame and money, but the same desire for excellence that drives athletes and artists.

The scholar needs "Discipline." The book's title, *The Mind in Another Place,* describes the ability to focus on the work to which one is called in the midst of the pressures and distractions of life. Johnson's life story is an exemplar of the ability to do this. "Persistence" describes the continued pursuit of a topic over time. "Detachment" is both the ability to not be overly concerned with reputation or financial gain but also resisting the temptation to impose one's presuppositions on the material.

Finally, the scholar's life is characterised by the virtue of "Contentment." Before one is a scholar, one is a human being, one whose worth does not depend on accomplishments and successes, but on the love of the God who has created us and for whom Christ gave his life.

This is a book for scholars and non-scholars alike. It may be read with profit not only by those who aspire to the professional scholarly life, but by anyone interested in the pursuit of the human and divine knowledge that make for a life well-lived.

Paul Miller
St. Catharines, ON
paulridleymiller@gmail.com

Moments in time: sermons from the United Church of Canada, 1910-2020

HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Don Schweitzer. Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2024. Pp. 427.

Kim-Cragg and Schweitzer have created a text that gathers together a series of snapshots of The United Church of Canada over its century-long history in the form of sermons from each decade of the denomination's existence. In total, there are 28 sermons. This is a collection that will be of interest to those who preach, those who are interested in using a different historical lens to approach the history and practices of The United Church, and those who seek to examine the act of preaching as it is and has been carried out in this denomination.

The text is organized by decade, starting in 1910-1919 and ending in 2020. For each decade a brief historical overview is provided, highlighting world events, North American political and social changes, and significant events in The United Church of Canada. Two or three sermons are selected for each decade, and a short biography of each preacher is provided prior to the sermon presented in its original language (followed by English text, if applicable). After each sermon, some analysis

is provided relating to the homiletical and historical importance of the sermon. A few closing thoughts conclude each chapter.

As with the denomination it examines, this collection of sermons highlights the work of white, urban (often Toronto-based), men. One might be excused in thinking that if this is representative of the denomination as a whole that rural and sub-urban communities of faith have little to offer in the way of rich and theologically thoughtful preaching. Or that women, BIPOC preachers, and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community are not present or significant in their offerings unless they are truly exceptional and/or a former Moderator. That said, the authors do not claim to be seeking to be representative of the whole denomination—they are seeking to show a range of preaching moments (7). Nevertheless, that range appears very white and very male overall.

The analysis offered for each sermon varies in depth, with some sticking closely to the text and offering thorough analysis of that material presented, while other reflections seem to skim the surface of the sermon. I cannot help but wonder what the authors of these sermons would think of the analysis offered. Are these works truly so deep? Or are they more likely to have been words dashed out to the ever-present weekly deadline based on memory, experience, and practice—not necessarily with the words of Augustine or the Chalcedonian Definition ringing in their authors' ears? After all, as Kim-Cragg and Schweitzer note: "It would be a mistake to make too much of such subtle changes to a doctrinal formula being referred to in a sermon" (227). Analyzing a sermon, particularly the weekly sermons included here (rather than the anniversary, ordination, or other special occasion sermons also included), is a delicate balance, and one which Kim-Cragg and Schweitzer generally strike.

Overall, the sermons and analysis presented in this text are wide ranging, engaging, and a fascinating insight into the history and practice of preaching and life within The United Church of Canada over the past century. At their best, these sermons are called forth by love (411)—love of God, love of people, love of the world. Additionally, there is a consistent theme within the material present that extols the idea that "Christian faith should issue in action" (93). While this is already a substantial text, a second volume perhaps focusing on minority and rural voices would be welcome.

This text is well suited both to those individuals who are at the beginning of their preaching journey as well as veterans. There is always value in learning from the works and words of others in the field, after all: "[most] good preachers are good because they keep working at it" (409). If you are interested in the art and craft of preaching, simply enjoy a good

sermon, or are wanting to examine the history of The United Church of Canada from a new angle, this is a worthwhile and thoroughly enjoyable text.

Kathleen Anderson,
Halifax, NS