

***Intentionally Christian:
A Study Guide to Bonhoeffer's Writings for an Underground Seminary***

Designed for Use and Study by Pastors and Deacons

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This study guide is prepared for and dedicated to pastors and deacons seeking to ground their lives and leadership deeply in the person and way of Jesus Christ. I am convinced that this is a time when church leaders need to devote themselves to being *intentionally Christian* through: 1) soul care: deepening one's own spiritual roots through the exercise of personal prayer, Bible study, meditation, and the practice of classical spiritual disciplines (Bonhoeffer's life alone), and 2) collegial care: taking time for the mutual conversation, encouragement, and consolation of the sisters and brothers by meeting together for communal worship, study, prayer, and support (Bonhoeffer's day together). Only by stewarding well our "life together" as church leaders (Heb 10:24-25) will we be formed also for the demands of neighbor care (Heb 13:2): serving the needs of others, especially the needs of the most marginalized persons in contemporary society, trusting the message that Jesus Christ truly promises to meet us in the least of these, who are his sisters and brothers (Mt 25:40).

This study guide is based on the classic writings of Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* and *Discipleship*, books which retain their abiding significance for the life, ministry, and mission of the church today in uncanny ways. Bonhoeffer's claim that the church as body of Christ really is "Christ existing as community" and that the church only fulfills its calling when it exists as the "church for others" remain as timely now as in their original context. This study guide aims to recollect how the church's identity and mission are rightly grounded only in devotion to and service of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

The church of Jesus Christ in the United States stands today at a juncture between two ways (Psalm 1). The first and majority Christian way is committed to a religious identity politics that has lost its capacity to distinguish between church and nationalism. Allegiance to nationalism at the cost of discipleship has overtaken overwhelming numbers of Americans, who identify being Christian with a theology of glory that confuses Christian faithfulness with a peculiar construal of the cause of the nation. In this construal those who do not conform to a particular understanding of righteousness are viewed as enemies: unassimilated minorities (black persons and Native Americans), Muslims, immigrants, GLBTQ persons, defenders of climate change, and those who support them. The second and minority Christian way is committed to a neighbor politics that draws its authority from the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) according to a theology of the cross. In this construal following Jesus Christ means costly discipleship that extends radical hospitality to all persons as neighbors--including creation

itself as a beloved neighbor--by extending welcome to all those facing discrimination and exclusion in society.

The meaning of patriotism differs according to these two ways. According to a religious identity politics, patriotism means defending the United States as God's chosen instrument in history based on the doctrine of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. In this view Christianity only will be preserved by defending the interests of this Christian nation in a world hostile to that for which it stands. According to a neighbor politics, by contrast, patriotism insists on holding every nation accountable, including the United States, to the teachings of Jesus Christ epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount, teachings that challenge conventional patriotism in the name of the universal shalom of God.

The contemporary situation parallels in haunting ways the context in which the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself in Germany in the mid-1930s. During these years there was as of yet no declaration of the conflagration that would be known as World War II, nor was there yet an enactment of the policy that came to be called the final solution. In the years of the underground seminary directed by Bonhoeffer at Zingst and Finkenwalde from 1935-1937 there was neither yet a loyalty oath to the Führer nor extreme public violence against the Jewish minority as would occur on Kristallnacht in November 1938. There were, however, already many other ominous signs of the times that led to the formation of the Confessing Church under the faith statement of the Barmen Declaration in May 1934.¹

Bonhoeffer, together with members of his family and circle, had been early and persistent critics of the policies National Socialism. He had deep commitments to the emerging ecumenical movement and to the cause of nonviolence. Bonhoeffer was shaped as a Lutheran pastor and theologian by international travel to Rome, a vicariate in Barcelona, a study year in New York, and a pastorate in London. In New York Bonhoeffer was especially formed by his experiences of the black church in Harlem, both by its deep spiritual roots for resisting racism and its embodiment of the social gospel.² Bonhoeffer also had been influenced by monasticism as a model for intentional Christian community, not only through his impressions on a trip to Rome during his youth but especially by visiting a number of Christian communities and seminaries in England in March 1935. As he accepted the call to become director of a Confessing Church seminary in April 1935, Bonhoeffer was deeply aware of the need to instill church leaders in practices that would form them to be *intentionally Christian* in a time and place that had mostly forgotten what that means.

The plan implemented by Bonhoeffer consisted of two parts, corresponding to the two sections of this study guide: 1) a rule for community life that followed the instructions outlined in the book, *Life Together*, and 2) a biblically grounded curriculum constituted primarily by an extended commentary on the Sermon on the Mount that became the book, *Discipleship*. These materials, forged in response to the crucibles facing the Confessing Church in Germany, provided the regimen for instilling habits of resistance in church leaders. Bonhoeffer was clear that both personal spiritual practices and collegial communal practices were indispensable for remaining *intentionally Christian* in the challenging days ahead for a Confessing Church. These study materials are prepared for use by church leaders in our own context: "Yet, who knows whether it was not for such a time as this that you were made...?" (Esther 4:14).

*Part One: Life Together*³

Life together at the preachers' seminary was convened for five sessions from April 1935 to September 1937, when it was closed by the gestapo at the command of the national government. After meeting initially at a church retreat center in Zingst, the seminary relocated to an estate at Finkenwalde, near the town of Stettin, in June 1935. "Bonhoeffer believed that the preachers' seminary should not be a fellowship for its own sake, but that it needed to prepare its seminarians for the Church Struggle: 'the goal is not monastic isolation but rather the most intensive concentration for ministry in the world.' Only this could overcome the 'isolation' of parish ministry and the 'burden of proclamation'."⁴

Placed at the center of community life in the underground seminary was God's Word.⁵ The students covenanted to abide in silence in the morning until gathering together for community devotions. Daily worship included extended readings from the Psalms, certain hymn verses repeated daily, and other selected hymns. One goal was to pray through the entire Psalter each week. Bible readings included chapters from the Old Testament and lengthy passages from the New Testament. While Bonhoeffer prayed extemporaneously every day, only on Saturdays did he provide a biblical commentary, both of which were very influential for formation of the community. The service concluded with a hymn verse and benediction.

After breakfast the seminarians were expected to spend 30 minutes without interruption in personal meditation on a Bible text that was assigned for the week. This was a controversial practice that generated significant opposition from some students. Distracting thoughts were to be redirected toward intercessory prayer. Next on the schedule came time for theological instruction, especially Bonhoeffer's lectures on discipleship. Before lunch 30 minutes were set aside for unison singing or, on occasion, chorale singing. The midday meal was often accompanied by reading texts aloud. After time for games and music in the evening came the day's closing worship, following the same order as in the morning and lasting approximately 45 minutes. These were to be the last words of the day.

The community celebrated the Lord's Supper on a monthly basis. These services were greatly valued and stewarded with care. In preparation for Holy Communion Bonhoeffer introduced the practice of private confession, by which the seminarians were to engage one another in confessing and absolving one another's sins. This was consistent with the "Finkenwalde Rule" that members of the community were not to speak about another member in that person's absence. In all these disciplines Bonhoeffer clearly intended to form pastors both in personal spiritual disciplines and communal practices that could sustain them for the anticipated trials to come.

The structure of this study guide follows the order of the chapters and sections from the text of *Life Together*. Participants are encouraged to read, reflect upon, and discuss each of the five chapters successively in five (or more) sessions devoted to the book. The study guide selects key passages sequentially from each chapter for particular attention and provides questions for personal reflection or group discussion based on the reading. Participants are encouraged to begin each session with a prayer for enlightenment and to conclude each session with

intercessory prayer and singing. One particular hymn is suggested for use in relation to each of the five chapters.

Preface

"The subject matter I am presenting here is such that any further development can take place only through a common effort. We are not dealing with a concern of some private circles but with a mission entrusted to the church. Because of this, we are not searching for more or less haphazard individual solutions to a problem. This is, rather, a responsibility to be undertaken by the church as a whole" (25).

1. How is taking time for one's own soul care and collegial care a contribution to the mission of the church as a whole?
2. What is most needful for your own soul care?
3. What do you most hope to give to and receive from others in the practice of collegial care?

Chapter One: Community

Chapter One places Jesus Christ at the center of Christian community, mediating every relationship. Christian community is not an ideal community, as we demand it to be based on our wishful dreaming, but a spiritual community. Christian community finds itself in the world amid enemies and is called to welcome the weak and insignificant people for the sake of Jesus Christ. The proper response to the gift of Christian community is gratitude.

Hymn: "The Church's One Foundation"

"The Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. In the end all his disciples abandoned him. On the cross he was all alone, surrounded by criminals and the jeering crowds. He had come for the express purpose of bring peace to the enemies of God" (27).

1. How do you experience your ministry as being lived in the midst of enemies?
2. How do you practice the command to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you?
3. Can you recall an instance where an enemy became your friend?

"Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is not Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ" (31).

1. What does it mean to you that Jesus Christ mediates every relationship with other people?
2. How can you come to preserve awareness that Jesus Christ is mediating every relationship?
3. How does this affirmation influence how you think about what is happening in your life right now?

"God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly" (36).

1. What is meant by "wishful dreaming"? Why is it destructive of genuine Christian community?
2. What is the difference between "wishful dreaming" and having a vision for the church's mission?
3. How can you address your own tendency to make demands about how the church ought to be rather than being grateful for what the Christian community really is?

"The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door" (45-46).

1. Who are the weak and insignificant people in your local community? Who are the useless people in our society?
2. What does it mean that excluding the weak and insignificant people is excluding Christ?
3. How have you witnessed the presence of Christ through weak, insignificant, and useless people?

Chapter Two: The Day Together

Chapter Two rehearses how the community can remain intentionally Christian by attending to the flow of the day: waking, worshipping, praying Psalms, reading Scripture, singing together, extemporaneous prayer, eating together, working, and reconciling at day's end. The chapter offers wisdom for how we can encourage one another to approach the daily activities of life in ways that are intentionally Christian.

Hymn: "Blest Be the Tie That Binds"

"For Christians the beginning of the day should not be burdened and haunted by various kinds of concerns they face during the working day. The Lord stands above the new day, for God has made it. All the darkness and confusion of the night with its dreams gives way to the clear light of Jesus Christ and his awakening Word" (51-52).

1. What does it mean to begin the new day in worship of God with others in Christian community?
2. How can you develop a regular practice of beginning your day with worship?
3. How does beginning your day with worship affect the rest of what you do that day?

"The *human* Jesus Christ to whom no affliction, no illness, no suffering is unknown, and who yet was the wholly innocent and righteous one, is praying the Psalter through the mouth of his congregation. The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word" (54-55).

1. What does it mean that Jesus Christ prays the Psalms through the mouth of the congregation?
2. Why do some congregations avoid praying the Psalms on a regular basis? What is lost when this happens?
3. How can you enliven the praying of the Psalms in your ministry?

"We must once again get to know the Scriptures as the reformers and our forebears knew them. We must not shy away from the work and the time required for the task. We must become acquainted with the Scriptures first and foremost for the sake of our salvation" (63).

1. Why is it important for us as church leaders to come to an ever deeper knowledge and grounding in the Scriptures?
2. How can we encourage one another in taking the time required for the task of deeper knowledge of the Scriptures?
3. How can we increase the knowledge and love of the Scriptures among the Christian community?

"Singing, however, should be practiced not just in the daily worship services, but at regular times during the day or week. The more we sing, the more joy we will derive from it" (68).

1. What happens to the Christian community when it sings together at worship?

2. How have you experienced spiritual strength in singing together with others outside of worship services?
3. How can we encourage one another as church leaders through song and music?

"Extemporaneous prayer in daily worship together should be the prayer of the community and not that of the individual who is praying. It is this individual's talk to pray for the community. Thus such a person will have to share the daily life of the community and must know the cares and needs, the joys and thanksgivings, the requests and hopes of others" (69).

1. How have you benefitted from the extemporaneous prayer of others?
2. How do you approach the calling to lead extemporaneous prayer for the community?
3. How can you encourage and teach others the practice of extemporaneous prayer?

"The breaking of bread together teaches Christians that here they still eat the perishable bread of the earthly pilgrimage. But if they share this bread with one another, they will also one day receive together imperishable bread in the Father's house" (74).

1. What is the spiritual significance of eating together in Christian community?
2. What is the relationship of eating together in community meals to our eating together the Lord's Supper?
3. How can church leaders foster awareness of the presence of Jesus Christ in all our times of eating together?

"Thus every word, every deed, every piece of work of the Christian becomes a prayer, not in the unreal sense of being constantly distracted from the task that must be done, but in a real breakthrough from the hard It to the gracious You" (76).

1. When you pause to reflect on your daily work, how is this work an expression of prayer?
2. How can we encourage one another to view our daily work, no matter how seemingly insignificant, as expressions of prayer?
3. How can church leaders foster appreciation in the Christian community that daily work is an expression of prayer?

"Therefore, it is a good idea especially to include the request for mutual forgiveness in every evening's prayers, so that reconciliation can be achieved and renewal of the community established. Finally, in all the old evening prayers, it is striking how frequently we encounter the plea for preservation during the night from the devil, from terror and from an evil, sudden death" (79).

1. How can we practice mutual forgiveness and reconciliation at the close of each day?
2. Why are we particularly vulnerable to doubts, fears, and spiritual attacks during the night?
3. What are some spiritual practices that you find edifying at the close of the day?

Chapter Three: The Day Alone

Chapter Three addresses the need to develop daily spiritual disciplines to maintain integrity and well-being: cultivating silence, daily meditation practices, intercessory prayer, and deliverance from times of testing. This chapter encourages us to take time to deepen our spiritual roots on a daily basis in order to face the trials and tribulations of the world in which we live, whether locally or globally.

Hymn: "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less"

"The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium. Those who take refuge in community while fleeing from themselves are misusing it to indulge in empty talk and distraction, no matter how spiritual this idle talk and distraction may appear" (82).

1. What are some of the ways you flee from taking time for personal reflection and silence?
2. What does this mean: "Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community? Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone" (82)?
3. How can church leaders encourage one another and church members to appreciate the gift of silence?

"There are three things for which the Christian needs a regular time alone during the day: *meditation on Scripture, prayer, and intercession*. All three should find a place in the *daily period of meditation*" (86).

1. How do you practice daily meditation? Which of these three practices come most easily to you among your spiritual practices?
2. What have you learned from past experience about stewardship of your own spiritual well-being?
3. How can we as church leaders encourage and hold accountable one another for maintaining spiritual wholeness?

"Offering intercessory prayer means nothing other than Christians bring one another into the presence of God, seeing each other under the cross of Jesus as poor human beings and sinners in need of grace. Then, everything about other people that repels me falls away. Then I see them in all their need, hardship, and distress" (90).

1. How do you practice bringing others into the presence of God as those in need of grace?
2. What makes the practice of personal intercessory prayer difficult for you?
3. How can church leaders encourage one another and church members in the practice of personal intercessory prayer?

"Every day brings the Christian many hours of being alone in an unchristian environment. These are time of *testing*. This is the proving ground of genuine time of meditation and genuine Christian community" (91).

1. What are the things that make you feel isolated and lonely as a church leader?

2. What are the things that test your faith about living in an unchristian environment?
3. How can we accompany one another in dealing with testing and the temptation to despair?

Chapter Four: Service

Chapter Four offers guidance for how the Christian community can engage in mutual service to one another for the sake of service to the world: "the service of listening, helping, forbearing, and proclaiming" (106). Without such service to one another, including the service of admonishing, we become distracted from our calling to be intentionally Christian in our relationships to one another and to our neighbors in the world.

Hymn: "Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service"

"No sooner are people together than they begin to observe, judge, and classify each other. Thus, even as Christian community is in the process of being formed, an invisible, often unknown, yet terrible life-and-death struggle commences" (93).

1. How have you experienced the erosion of Christian community by judging and classifying others? How have you contributed to this?
2. How have you perceived the life-and-death struggle for authentic Christian community?
3. How can church leaders counteract the tendency of Christian community to self-destruct through competitiveness?

"The Christian community should not be governed by self-justification, which violates others, but by justification by grace, which serves others. Once individuals have experienced the mercy of God in their lives, from then on they desire only to serve" (96).

1. How have you experience the mercy of God in your life, justification by grace?
2. How can the Christian community keep justification by grace, the mercy of God, at the center of its life together?
3. How have you witnessed the power of the mercy of God, justification by grace, setting people free to serve? How have you experienced this in your own life?

"The *first* service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them" (98).

1. How have you received the gift of listening from others? What difference did this listening make in your life?
2. How can the Christian community become more proficient in the practice of listening to one another?
3. How can church leaders make time and space for holy listening to one another?

"...we speak of the service involved in bearing with others. 'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ' (Gal 6:2). Thus the law of Christ is a law of forbearance. Forbearance means enduring and suffering" (100).

1. What are some of the things that you have a hard time bearing in relationship to others?
2. What are some of the things that you have a hard time bearing about yourself?

3. How can we develop the patience to bear what is difficult about others and about ourselves?

"[The service of the Word of God] has to do with the free word from person to person, not the word bound to a particular pastoral office, time, and place. It is a matter of the unique situation in which one person bears witness in human words to another person regarding all the comfort, the admonition, the kindness, and the firmness of God" (103).

1. How have you experienced the service of the word as comfort and kindness spoken to you?
2. How have you experienced the service of the word as needful admonition spoken to you?
3. How can we increase the practice of mutual conversation and consolation, including appropriate admonition, among church leaders?

Chapter Five: Confession and the Lord's Supper

Chapter Five centers the Christian community on the practice of private confession and absolution and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This chapter places strong emphasis on the renewal of the practice of private confession and absolution between Christians on a regular basis. Bonhoeffer concludes: "The community of the holy Lord's Supper is above all the fulfillment of Christian community" (118).

Hymn: "God, When Human Bond Are Broken"

"In the presence of another Christian's presence I no longer need to pretend. In another Christian's presence I am permitted to be the sinner that I am, for there alone in all the world the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ rule" (109).

1. What makes us want to pretend and hide our sinfulness from one another?
2. What makes it possible for Christians to be vulnerable in admitting their sins to one another?
3. How can church leaders develop a climate of trust that allows them to have honest and genuine conversations with one another about their struggles and failings?

"To stand there before another Christian as a sinner is an almost unbearable disgrace. By confessing actual sins the old self dies a painful, humiliating death before the eyes of another Christian. Because this humiliation is so difficult, we keep thinking we can avoid confessing to one another" (111).

1. Why has the practice of private confession and absolution fallen into disuse in the Christian community?
2. What makes it hard for you to confess your concrete sins privately to another Christian?
3. What would be the benefit to church leaders in practicing private confession and absolution with each other?

"Whoever has once been appalled by the horror of their own sin, which nailed Jesus to the cross, will no longer be appalled by even the most serious sin of another Christian; rather they know the human heart from the cross of Jesus. Such persons know how totally lost is the human heart in sin and weakness, how it goes astray in the ways of sin--and know too that this same heart is accepted in grace and mercy" (115).

1. What are the sins of the human heart that nailed Jesus to the cross?
2. How can confessing your own sin make you more compassionate toward the sins of others?
3. What joy do you experience in receiving the forgiveness of Jesus Christ in grace and mercy spoken by another person?

"The day of the Lord's Supper is a joyous occasion for the Christian community. Reconciled in their hearts with God and one another, the community of faith receives the gift of Jesus Christ's body and blood, therein receiving forgiveness, new life, and salvation" (118).

1. What does it mean to you to receive the Lord's Supper?
2. What does it mean for the life of the Christian community to receive the Lord's Supper?
3. How can church leaders encourage one another in their ministries of Word and Sacrament and/or Word and Service?

Questions at the end of this study of *Life Together*:

1. What insights did you gain for your life and ministry from this study of *Life Together*?
2. What questions persist for you at the end of this study?
3. How can we continue to encourage one another as church leaders in being intentionally Christian in our lives and ministries for the sake of serving neighbors in the world?

Hymn: "By Gracious Powers," #626, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006. [Text by Dietrich Bonhoeffer; can also be sung to Finlandia.]

Part Two: Discipleship

In preparation.

¹ The Theological Declaration of Barmen, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>.

² Cf. Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

³ Quotes and page numbers are based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together/Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English (DBWE), Volume 5, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁴ Christiane Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 57-58. The DB quote is from DBWE 14:96.

⁵ For the following description of daily life at Finkenwalde, see Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition," in Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 123-124.