

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS



# BONHOEFFER

*on the Christian Life*

FROM THE CROSS, FOR THE WORLD

“How I rejoice to see thinkers of Stephen Nichols’s caliber applying their fine minds to the life and thought of the inimitable Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There’s so much yet to be written about this great man. A hungry readership awaits!”

**Eric Metaxas**, *New York Times* best-selling author, *Bonhoeffer*:  
*Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*

“This book will quicken your pulse as you are drawn into the story and the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Stephen Nichols brings a long and complex life to a point of ongoing personal application. This book prompted me to pray for the kind of courage that comes only after intense communion with the living God. Read and be strengthened.”

**Russell D. Moore**, President, the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

“‘Human weakness paves the way for God’s grace.’ So writes Stephen Nichols, using Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a guide to the Christian life. But how could a man who stood up to Hitler be considered weak? That’s what makes Bonhoeffer so fascinating, and why he deserves your attention. Nichols helpfully brings Bonhoeffer’s Christ-centered insights to bear on issues where we need to grow in grace, such as confession, freedom, and love.”

**Collin Hansen**, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; coauthor,  
*A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories That Stretch and Stir*

“Bonhoeffer was a unique man who understood the power of both conviction and compassion, clarity and ambiguity, narrative and poetry. Through this man the church is powerfully reminded that all theology is *lived* theology. In this book, Steve Nichols takes us into Bonhoeffer’s complex world and offers a rich set of reflections on such crucial themes as cross, community, and the living Word. Here the reader discovers a wonderful mixture of fair-minded historical reconstruction and wise pastoral counsel.”

**Kelly M. Kapic**, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life illustrates the truth that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness. His courageous stand against the Nazi regime is a powerful testament to his cross-centered theology and belief that weakness is the starting point for Christian spirituality. With insight, clarity, and wisdom, Stephen Nichols guides us through the life and work of this humble yet heroic pastor, whose example shows that all Christian living flows from God’s grace in the cross of Christ.”

**Justin Holcomb**, Executive Director, Resurgence; author,  
*On the Grace of God*

THEOLOGIANS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EDITED BY STEPHEN J. NICHOLS AND JUSTIN TAYLOR

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Countercultural Spirituality,*  
William Edgar

*Warfield on the Christian Life:  
Living in Light of the Gospel,*  
Fred G. Zaspel

*Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life: From the Cross, for the World*

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# SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor





PART I

# INTRODUCTION

*Today I'm supposed to learn how to play golf.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER  
TO HIS BROTHER KARL-FRIEDRICH BONHOEFFER,  
FROM PHILADELPHIA, 1930



## CHAPTER I

# MEETING BONHOEFFER

*I believe that nothing meaningless has happened to me and also that it is good for us when things run counter to our desires. I see a purpose in my present existence and only hope that I fulfill it.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER<sup>1</sup>

On a hot summer's day in July 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stepped off the steamship *Bremen* and onto the docks of New York City's harbor. The harbor was busy that year. New York City was playing host to the World's Fair, an event altogether eclipsed by the tensions of the pending world war. By September, a United States Navy fleet had moved in to protect the harbor, and mines had been placed along the coast in fear of a German submarine attack. Bonhoeffer knew all too well the tension. He had lived with much worse for some time and was now on his way to America to escape.

Bonhoeffer had been to the United States before. His first trip had come nine years earlier. Already with a doctorate in hand, Bonhoeffer thought he might benefit from studying American theological developments firsthand before settling in to his faculty position at Berlin. So off he went to spend a year at Union Seminary in New York. During that first stay, he had forged deep friendships. One of those friends, Reinhold Niebuhr of Union's faculty, now led the way in arranging for Bonhoeffer's second trip to America. Niebuhr hurriedly posted letters to his academic colleagues throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Renate Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Brief Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 68.

America to cobble together a lecture tour for Bonhoeffer, in part to fund his stay and in part to shake out a more substantial and permanent teaching offer. At thirty-three years of age and with an impressive list of accomplishments already, Bonhoeffer had a bright career ahead of him.

Bonhoeffer, though, would elude Niebuhr's efforts. The moment Bonhoeffer stepped off the ship, he knew that he had made a mistake. He belonged back in Germany. His diary bears the record, "The decision has been made."<sup>2</sup> "I have made a mistake in coming to America," he wrote to Niebuhr. "I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the Christian people of Germany."<sup>3</sup> To their mutual friend Paul Lehmann, Bonhoeffer wrote, "I must be with my brothers when things become serious."<sup>4</sup>

Bonhoeffer anticipated that Germany would survive the war. He also realized that the German church, like the nation itself, would need to be rebuilt. After all, how could he play a role in rebuilding the church if he abandoned it during its hour of deepest need? No, he could not stay in America.

Writing to Lehmann, Niebuhr could only say of Bonhoeffer's decision, "I do not understand it all."<sup>5</sup> Who can understand Bonhoeffer's decision? What kind of person would be more at ease in facing down a totalitarian regime on the brink of destruction than conducting a college lecture tour in a free and democratic society an ocean away from the tumult and wreckage of war? What's more, this was no isolated decision, no adrenaline-charged heroism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's willingness to return to Germany, his willingness to face Hitler and the Nazi regime, ultimately his willingness to die, all stemmed from a deeply honed reflex. He could no more walk away from Germany in 1939—when he had opportunity to do so—than you or I can stop our hearts from beating. To understand Bonhoeffer's decision in the dog days of a New York summer of 1939, you need to understand Bonhoeffer.

We should not take this episode as evidence of Bonhoeffer's heroism. The impulse is understandable, even tempting, but would be a misunderstanding. The letters and his diary point in an entirely different direction. This was no act of blazoned courage. Rather, his decision reveals a brash faith. See him as humble, not heroic. See him as dependent upon God. As he writes in his diary, "God certainly sees how much personal concern, how much fear is contained in today's decision, as courageous as it may appear.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, "American Diary," June 20, 1939, *DBWE* 15:226. His entry on the following day reveals that he resolved the struggle over the decision by ultimately conceding, "God knows" (229).

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer to Reinhold Niebuhr, during the end of June 1939, *DBWE* 15:210.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer to Paul Lehmann, June 30, 1939, *DBWE* 15:209.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr to Paul Lehmann, July 8, 1939, *DBWE* 15:216.

. . . At the end of the day, I can only pray that God may hold merciful judgment over this day and all decisions. It is now in God's hands."<sup>6</sup> If we flip back a few pages to earlier in his American diary, we see that being in God's hands means being a recipient of God's mercy through and in Christ. The opening pages of his American diary bear the testimony, "Only when we ourselves live and speak entirely from the mercy of Christ and no longer at all out of our own particular knowledge and experience, then we will not be sanctimonious."<sup>7</sup>

To understand Bonhoeffer, we must understand, on the one hand, the limits of oneself and, on the other hand, the utter absence of limits of God. Bonhoeffer saw himself as limited in his understanding, limited in his experience, limited in his resolve, limited in his strength. To trust in himself would be purely—and merely—sanctimony, the religion of Pharisees. But to trust in God would be altogether different. To understand Bonhoeffer, we must first and foremost understand living by faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that to live by faith (he would say to live truly) means "living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities."<sup>8</sup> He wrote of the great cost of cheap grace to the church and its disciples in the modern world. He saw far too many examples of a culturally accommodated and culturally captive Christianity. He longed for a costly discipleship. So he compelled the church and its disciples to consider costly grace, to consider the cost of discipleship. Costly discipleship is held captive to Christ; it is Christ-centered. He might have even coined a German word to express this, *Christuswirklichkeit*, a living in the one realm of the Christ reality.<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer also wrote persuasively of how this Christ-centered or Christ-reality living is the "life together," the life of community, centered on our common union with Christ. No, we are not individual heroes achieving greatness—an unfortunate but prevalent model of living the Christian life in our day. Instead, we live together in Christ by faith.

Understanding Bonhoeffer, however, entails more than seeing this life of faith in Christ theologically. It also involves seeing how this theological center manifests itself in his life, in his daily comings and goings. Bonhoeffer was a theologian and a churchman, but he was also a person.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, "American Diary," June 20, 1939, *DBWE* 15:227.

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, "American Diary," June 8, 1939, *DBWE* 15:217.

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, July 21, 1944, *LPP*, 370.

<sup>9</sup> *DBWE* 6:58.

Bonhoeffer wrote poems, for example:

Distant or near,  
in joy or in sorrow,  
each in the other  
sees his true helper  
to brotherly freedom.<sup>10</sup>

He tried his hand at a novel. He had a twin sister. He was, for a time, a youth pastor who could play the guitar. He frequented the theater, knew his way around an art gallery. He had opinions on art, music, and architecture. “You’re quite right,” he wrote from his prison cell, “about the rarity of landscape painting in the South generally. Is the south of France an exception—and Gauguin?”<sup>11</sup> He was a professor of theology at the University of Berlin. He took on a rather rough band of youth on a different side of the tracks from which he had come of age. He prepared them for their first communion and, when the time had come for it, bought them all new suits for the occasion.

Bonhoeffer led an underground seminary, often looking out the window during his early afternoon lectures. On more than one day, with sun shining and a cool breeze gently bending tree limbs, he would grab a soccer ball on his way out the door and his students would fall in behind.

He was a spy. He helped Jews escape from the Nazis. He became part of a ring of conspirators in plots to assassinate Hitler.

He became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer in January 1943, and three months later he was imprisoned at Tegel. During the fall months of 1944, he was transferred to the Gestapo prison in Berlin. He spent the final weeks of his life listening to sirens signaling the incessant dropping of bombs while cut off from his books, paper, pens, and ink.

He was a martyr.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, both in his life and in his writings, draws us in. He demands our attention—not like the tantrums of a two-year-old, but like the quiet, trusted voice of a wise friend. That voice of Bonhoeffer’s, though quiet, has never been silent. A century after his birth, it resounds with clarity and grace. Historian and biographer David McCullough has said, “We are shaped by those we never met.” That’s quite true—or at least it should be.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The Friend,” c. August, 1944, *LPP*, 390.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, March 25, 1944, *LPP*, 239.

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Perhaps Bonhoeffer shapes us best by showing us in word and in deed, as a theologian and in his life, how to live the Christian life, how to be a disciple of Christ, how to live in the *Christuswirklichkeit*. His book *The Cost of Discipleship* gets all of the attention on this score, and rightfully so. *The Cost of Discipleship* would be a legacy in and of itself. But Bonhoeffer offers us more. We owe it to ourselves, as well as to the honor of his memory, to widen our attention. This present book on Bonhoeffer on the Christian life proposes to do just that.

From *The Cost of Discipleship* we learn of the difference between a Christianity that asks nothing of us and one that requires a 180-degree turn from all that comes naturally. We learn of the difference between cheap grace and costly grace.

From *Life Together* and from his doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio* (*The Communion of Saints*), written as he was not yet twenty-one, we learn that the Christian life is lived both alone and together. It is the together part that can be a challenge for us. It is also the together part that has become in our day the buzzword of community.

For Bonhoeffer, community was more than a trendy word; it was his life. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge and published posthumously, Bonhoeffer teaches us that “it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith,” words he wrote while living in a six-by-nine-foot prison cell.<sup>12</sup> We also learn from his unfinished and unpublished novel, written during his imprisonment, about the true nature and task and mission of the church. Academic books, like his unfinished magnum opus *Ethics*, as well as his numerous essays, lectures, sermons, and even his diaries and scribbled-down rough thoughts from his imprisonment, round out what Bonhoeffer has to offer us in words.

As for what Bonhoeffer offers us in deeds, both in his life and in his death he shows us how to love and serve God. Like Paul, Bonhoeffer knew firsthand both extremes of plenty and of want (Phil. 4:12). Growing up he enjoyed the life of moderate wealth. Childhood was punctuated with long vacations at the summer home, governesses, and family oratorios performed in their very own conservatory, which doubled as the family parlor. He started his academic career at the prestigious University of Berlin.

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<sup>12</sup> LPP, 369.

But along came Hitler. Bonhoeffer lost his license to teach, and he traded in Berlin for Finkenwalde. Yes, Finkenwalde was an estate, but better to think run-down monastery than paneled walls and luxurious rooms. And then he was sent to prison. While in prison he once wrote of his longing to hear birds and see color. He knew all too well what it meant to be in want.

Or am I only what I know of myself,  
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage.  
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat.  
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness.<sup>13</sup>

And, like Paul, these experiences of plenty and want led Bonhoeffer to contentment. He expressed this in a poem marking the occasion of the New Year in 1945. Bonhoeffer had spent the whole of 1944 in Nazi prisons. “The old year,” he writes of 1944, “still torments our hearts.”<sup>14</sup> By December he was in Berlin, and his precious flow of letters and books in and out had been cut to a mere trickle.

In one of those rare letters, allowed to be sent to his mother on her birthday, he tucked in his New Year’s poem entitled “The Powers of Good.”

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

But should it be thy will once more to release us  
to life’s enjoyment and its good sunshine,  
that which we’ve learned from sorrow shall increase us,  
and all our life be dedicated as thine.<sup>15</sup>

It was Christ who gave us the ultimate paradox of life: in the keeping of our life we lose it, but in the giving of our life we find it (Matt. 10:39). Christ spoke these words immediately on the heels of telling his disciples to take up their cross (10:38). From the very beginning that has been the call to discipleship, the call to live the Christian life. Bonhoeffer, as well as or if

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Who Am I?,” c. July 1944, *LPP*, 348.

<sup>14</sup> *LPP*, 400.

<sup>15</sup> *LPP*, 400.



not better than any other person in the twentieth century, understood this and lived it, both in darkest night and in the full light of the sun. He understood what it meant to be unreservedly dedicated to Christ, to live by faith.

Consequently, Bonhoeffer deserves a place among theologians of the past who can serve as guides for us in the present for living the Christian life. He literally wrote the book on discipleship, but he also, as mentioned above, has more to offer than his classic text *The Cost of Discipleship*. He *lived* discipleship. An old Carter family song croons, “It takes a worried man to sing a worried song.” I think that means authenticity matters. And the stakes regarding authenticity could not be higher than when it comes to discipleship. This lyric from the Carter song also means you can spot a fake. And Bonhoeffer was no imposter. He was a disciple, so he could well sing—and preach and write—of discipleship.

In our current day we have more material on living the Christian life—in the form of books, seminars, conferences, and DVDs—than at any other time in the history of the church. Much of that material focuses on the individual, on our personal prayer life and our private devotional time. Much of that material also focuses on duty—the roll-up-your-sleeves, get-it-done-by-grit-and-determination approach. Further still, much of this talk of spirituality also sounds rather otherworldly, disconnected from the twists and turns of daily life. Rodney Clapp writes of this otherworldly emphasis as resulting in a spirituality for angels, not for flesh-and-blood humans.<sup>16</sup> Especially in the context of North American evangelicalism, we tend to define living the Christian life and spirituality along these individualistic, works- or performance-oriented, and detached/otherworldly lines. More often than not, following these kinds of approaches to discipleship leaves us defeated and discouraged. Humans have a hard time performing on the level of angels.

While Bonhoeffer does speak of the personal spiritual disciplines, the “life alone” as he calls it, he also speaks of the “life together,” reminding us of our union with Christ and the common union we share with one another in the body of Christ, the church. While Bonhoeffer does speak of duty, he also heralds grace. He is, after all, a Lutheran, so he knows a thing or two about grace. Finally, while Bonhoeffer does speak of the life to come, his is a “worldly discipleship,” deeply connected to the ups and downs of life in this fallen world. This voice from the past can help us avoid missteps on

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<sup>16</sup>Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angels* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

our walk with Christ in the present. We owe it to ourselves to meet him and to listen to what he has to say—both in word and in deed.

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We will begin our explorations of all that Bonhoeffer has to offer fellow disciples by looking at the foundations of the Christian life. He commends to us the cross-centered life. Bonhoeffer scholars speak of “Christo-ecclesiology” as the center of Bonhoeffer’s thought, which is to say that Bonhoeffer has both christology (the doctrine of Christ) and ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) at the center of his theology, like the hub of a wheel. It might even be better to say that Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology flows from, naturally and necessarily, his christology. So we start with Bonhoeffer’s *christology* (chap. 2) and then move to Bonhoeffer’s *ecclesiology* (chap. 3).

Bonhoeffer takes a page from his favorite theologian, Martin Luther. For Luther, too, Christ is at the center. And at the center of the center is Christ on the cross. Early on and then throughout his life Luther spoke of a theology of the cross, as does Bonhoeffer. So theology, Christian living—all of reality—flows from the cross.

This life from the cross (Bonhoeffer’s christology) and life in the church (his ecclesiology) together lead to the disciplines of the Christian life. We will explore three of them: reading and obeying Scripture, prayer, and the practice of theology. I have chosen these three because Bonhoeffer, speaking in the context of the underground seminary he led in the late 1930s, saw this trilogy of disciplines as the essential ingredients for a ministerial education. He desired only that his students knew how to read *and did read* the Bible, that they knew how to *and did* pray, and that they both thought *and lived* theologically. For him seminary was about imparting knowledge (referred to as *scientia* by the ancients) and about spiritual formation and life (referred to as *formation* by the ancients). And this illustrates that what’s good for the goose is indeed good for the gander. In other words, what’s good for ministers is good for all of us. These three are the essential practices of the Christian life, and all of them constitute worship.

In chapter 4, we will see Bonhoeffer’s *doctrine of Scripture*—a significant item in the debate over whether Bonhoeffer was a conservative, even evangelical, theologian or a liberal theologian. But we will also explore Bonhoeffer’s own practice of reading Scripture and what we stand to learn from it. Next comes *prayer* (chap. 5), paradoxically the easiest but also the

hardest discipline of the Christian life. Finally, we look at the role of *thinking theologically and then living theologically* (chap. 6). Theology sometimes gets pitted against Christian life. One is theory, the other practice. Bonhoeffer will help us see the unity of the two and not fall prey to a deadly divide.

This life from the cross not only leads to these three disciplines of Scripture, prayer, and theology but also leads us out into the world. We would better say that it leads us to live for the world. The final three chapters explore what this means by looking first at Bonhoeffer's curious but delightful phrase "worldly Christianity." *Worldliness* (chap. 7) is something we should avoid—after all, we are not "of the world," and we should not be "conformed to the world" (John 15:19; Rom. 12:2)—but we first need to listen carefully to what Bonhoeffer really means. Next comes *freedom*, camouflaged as *service* and *sacrifice*, as chapter 8 looks at Bonhoeffer's spirit of service and the call to sacrifice. The classic text on living the Christian life, Romans 12:1–2, calls us to be living sacrifices. For Bonhoeffer this first entailed sacrificing his position as he lost his post at Berlin, then sacrificing his freedom as he was imprisoned, and then sacrificing his life as he was hanged at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp on April 9, 1945.

But his death should not have the final word. That goes to *love*, the subject of chapter 9. All of this—the service, the sacrifices, the worldliness, the Scripture reading, prayer, and practice of theology, that is, the life in community and the life from the cross—all of it is accentuated by love. Jesus laid down this characteristic as the hallmark of discipleship and of the church (John 13:34–35). Bonhoeffer called it the "extraordinary."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer died in his thirty-ninth year, a time when most people are just beginning to faintly understand life. He was, however, a quick study. Some of that had to do with circumstance, the utterly harsh and despicable experiences he endured. Think of the remarkable insight of the so young Anne Frank. Challenging circumstances can lead people into profound depths of understanding, no matter what their age. But in Bonhoeffer's case not all such depths can be chalked up to his mere experiences. Bonhoeffer so well understood how to live because he so well understood the cross on which Christ died. Bonhoeffer also grasped the all-encompassing implications of the cross for human existence. He lived from the cross for the world. This is why he's worth meeting.



## PART 2

# FOUNDATIONS

*What is the “extraordinary”? It is the love of Jesus Christ himself, who goes to the cross in suffering and obedience. It is the cross. What is unique in Christianity is the cross.*

**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER,  
THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, 1937**

*I think we’re going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious; the emptier our hands, the better we understand what Luther meant by his dying words: “We are beggars, it’s true.”*

**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER TO MARIA VON WEDEMEYER,  
FROM TEGEL PRISON, 1943**

*Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere. (To know Christ is to know his benefits.)*

**PHILIPP MELANCHTHON, *LOCI COMMUNES*, 1521**



## CHAPTER 2

# IN CHRIST: LIFE FROM THE CROSS

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.*

HEBREWS 4:15

*There is a certain inclination in human nature to keep off from all problems that might make us feel uncomfortable in our own situation.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, LONDON, 1934

*Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER,  
FROM TEGEL PRISON, 1944

As Hitler came to power and the Nazi Party gained momentum, pressure increased on the German church to acquiesce. A young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wise well beyond his years, could see the problems acutely. Bonhoeffer championed the cause to stand against the Nazi infiltration in the church. He also championed the cause to stand against the Nazi Party's eugenic crusade. The weak, the mentally and physically challenged, were called "useless eaters." Medical personnel and directors of clinics were ordered

to turn over the names of patients. Lists were drawn up. The Nazis mandated the sterilization of these “useless eaters,” many of whom simply disappeared. Nothing, or no one, would stand in the way of the “Programme”: the cleansing of the German people, the making of the master race. The ascendancy of the Aryan race, this was Hitler’s dream.

This was not 1940. All of this was already happening in 1933. The outside world, meaning essentially every nation besides Germany, would not be fully awakened to the problem for years to come.<sup>1</sup> Hitler’s program of eugenics would march on past the useless eaters, setting its sights on the Jews. By then the world would realize what was happening. But Bonhoeffer, and a tight circle of colleagues, knew all too well where things were headed back in 1933. A churchman by trade, Bonhoeffer looked to the church to take a stand, to lead the people to the truth and justice. But the national church in Germany balked. And then it caved. This would lead to the forming of a reform group within the church, a group of committed and genuine Christians. To Erwin Sutz, a pastor of the Reformed Swiss Church whom Bonhoeffer had met at Union Seminary in New York, Bonhoeffer wrote, “I have been completely absorbed with what is going on in the church. . . . There is no doubt in my mind that the victory will go the German Christians.”<sup>2</sup>

We need to understand the context here. In 1931, The German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) were formed by Ludwig Müller, a longtime Nazi sympathizer. Hitler, having brought the Nazi Party to power in 1933, appointed Müller as his personal confidant in all matters pertaining to the national church, the German Lutheran Church. In September 1933, after the months of bitter struggle that consumed Bonhoeffer, Müller was appointed bishop of the *Reichskirche* (as the church had now come to be called)—and, of all things, it took place at Luther’s former cathedral in Wittenberg. Müller sought out Hitler’s favor far more than Hitler sought out Müller’s. Undeterred, Müller consistently and assiduously put the *Reichskirche* at the service of the Nazis and, later, at that of the Gestapo. In 1945, with Nazi hopes and ideals reduced to rubble, Müller committed suicide.

Though more of a patsy than a capable administrator, Müller did contribute something of significance by bringing the “Aryan Paragraph” (or the “Aryan Clause”) into the church, forbidding Jews membership and defrock-

<sup>1</sup> Consider Winston Churchill’s difficulties in convincing Great Britain’s Parliament that Germany was a threat even as late as 1939. Or recall that Charles Lindbergh could only speak of how impressed he was with the German *Luftwaffe* right on up to the eve of the war.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer to Erwin Sutz, July 17, 1933, *DBWE* 12:140. See also Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, enl. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 293–323.



ing Jewish clergy. Müller also stood behind the propaganda campaign that claimed Jesus was not Jewish, but Aryan. In fact, Jesus in the *Reichskirche* and in Nazism was *the Aryan*, the *Übermensch*, the Superman.<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer, though only twenty-seven at the time, took his place among the leaders of the resistance in the church to these horrid moves that would come to have unspeakable consequences during the war. So there came a split within the German church, though to call it a split overestimates Bonhoeffer's dissenting party. *Splinter* fits better, as the vast majority stood by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer, and those of a like mind who formed this splinter group, called it the Confessing Church. These ministers and their parishes would swear allegiance to Christ—who was not Aryan—and not surrender the church to be captive to the political ideology of the Nazi Party.

Like John the Baptist, ministers of the Confessing Church would be the outsiders, raising their prophetic voice to the religious and political establishment. Frustrated by the *Kirchenkampf* (the German Church Struggle, as it was called), and even frustrated by fellow dissenters in the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer left Germany for some time to live in London.<sup>4</sup> There he would pastor two German Lutheran congregations. While there, he also worked tirelessly to alert the world to what was happening. And especially at this time, he was concerned more with alerting the ecclesiastical world than the political world of the reality of life in Germany. Bonhoeffer may have been living in London, but his heart was turned to Germany.

### ***Übermensch***

From 1933 through 1936 the Nazis launched a full-scale public relations war under the watchful eye of Joseph Goebbels, Reich minister of propaganda. The crown jewel of Goebbel's efforts in these early years at his post would be the 1936 Berlin Olympics. As the eyes of the world turned to Germany, Goebbels made sure they would see a pristine, God-fearing country. A lovely church was built right by the Olympic Village.<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer, meanwhile, the outsider prophet, proclaimed the truth.

<sup>3</sup> See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 304–23; and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Bethge notes how “greatly his views differed from those of his fellow fighters. In nearly all of his suggestions he stood alone.” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 325. Much of that difference concerned how theologically driven the Confessing Church would be and what kind of theology that church would espouse, matters picked up in chaps. 4 and 6 below.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this, as well as for the upstaging of Hitler at his own Olympics by African American track star Jesse Owens, see Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

And he preached. His sermons from his “London sojourn,” lasting from October 1933 until April 1934, reveal one of the most formative periods in Bonhoeffer’s life. He would return to London for short stays throughout 1934 and 1935. The part of the Bonhoeffer story that captivates us is the imprisonment and the final events leading up to his martyrdom. But that prison experience and the richness of his writing during it did not come from a vacuum. Long before his imprisonment Bonhoeffer had embraced certain ideas that had fortified him, given him the courage to stand, deepened his soul, and enabled him to write the kinds of things he wrote.

As an academic, Bonhoeffer had always been intrigued by and committed to ideas. Students and colleagues testify repeatedly to his dogged pursuit of an idea. Many years later, while sitting in Tegel Prison, Bonhoeffer would scratch out a few loose thoughts. Among them he penned, “Something new can always happen in conversation.”<sup>6</sup> It was conversations that dominated his relationship with his students. Conversations would start in the late evening and finish off in the early morning hours, as all dimensions of problems would be analyzed like some biologist’s dissecting a specimen. Students talked about his lecture style and his courses, but what they remembered the most were the times on the beach or the long walks in the woods—the times when the conversation was all about ideas, or rather a singular idea. Once Bonhoeffer got hold of an idea, he wouldn’t let go.

But that’s not the kind of embracing of an idea that forged Bonhoeffer’s mettle for the unthinkable experiences of the 1940s. Something far surpassing mental apprehension was needed, an idea penetrating Bonhoeffer’s very heart and then permeating his entire being. Here is that idea: God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness. Bonhoeffer of course first learned this from Paul (2 Cor. 12:9), whose embrace of this idea, like Bonhoeffer’s, went far deeper than mental apprehension.

Sometime in 1934, Bonhoeffer preached on 2 Corinthians 12:9 in London.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that this idea of divine power made perfect through human weakness had captivated him. There are many dimensions to this idea of God’s strength set against our weakness. In our perplexity and confusion, even befuddlement, God’s wisdom is displayed. In our frailty and finitude, God’s infinity is displayed. But all that cuts across the grain of our natural instincts. Human beings are fueled by the sup-

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Notes,” July 1944, *LPP*, 343.

<sup>7</sup> He likely preached the sermon in late July 1934 during one of his shorter returns to London after his seven-month pastorate, *DBWE* 13:402n14.

posed limitless possibility of human potential. Like the Olympic motto, “*Citius, Altius, Fortius*,” we strive to be faster, higher, stronger. We don’t see ourselves as weak.

It was a German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who introduced the idea of the *Übermensch*, the Superman, or even more accurately, the *Übermenschen*, the Super Men or the Master Race.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche despised weakness and frailty. He despised religion, too, especially the religion of the German national Lutheran Church. And he despised Christ. In Nietzsche’s world, there is no room for suffering, no room for weakness. Nietzsche would not have applauded the attempts by Müller and the zealous Nazis to make Christ an Aryan. He was more than happy to leave Christ out of the Aryan race altogether.

Now, consider Paul’s take on being human, or more importantly, on being a Christian. In a rather autobiographical and self-reflective moment, Paul says, “On my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses” (2 Cor. 12:5). Nietzsche would not have wanted Paul on his team either.

### **Pauline Spirituality**

Second Corinthians 12:1–10 reveals the things that characterize God and the things that characterize us. In the divine column of the ledger we see strength and power. In the human column we see weakness. In Paul’s case the weakness consisted of the ever-mysterious “thorn in the flesh” (12:7), as well as his résumé of, in his own words, “insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (12:10)—not the kinds of things people sign up for.

The idea of God’s strength perfected in our weakness, as we’ve seen, was not something Paul knew merely on an intellectual plane. It was his autobiography, a summary of who he was and what he had gone through. And as he lived his life, he stumbled upon a significant, if not overriding, aspect of this idea: God’s grace meets us in and precisely because of our weakness. God said it directly to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). More than a mere piece of autobiographical reflection, this text provides a great deal of insight into Paul’s teaching on the Christian life. We should not be surprised, consequently, to find Bonhoeffer looking to this text as he constructs his view of the Christian life.

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<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1961), originally published 1883–1885.

### On Human Weakness

So why all this emphasis on human weakness? Because human weakness paves the way for God's grace. Human weakness leaves us unable—dependent on something beyond and outside us. Theologians use the word *alien* here, stressing that this something does not come from within, from the *will to power*, as Nietzsche so wrongly put it.

But here's the beauty of this idea. Paul puts a most surprising twist to all of this. For at one point in 1 Corinthians and at one point in 2 Corinthians he refers to *God* as weak. Long before Nietzsche, admired by Hitler as he was, put forth the idea of power, the Romans and the Greeks were obsessed with power. Weakness was not rewarded. On the contrary, power was celebrated. It was the Greeks, after all, who gave us the Olympics. And it was the Romans who built their monuments to their own glory all over the Mediterranean world, the world Paul inhabited.

Along with the obsession with power and strength came the obsession with wisdom, what the New Testament calls worldly or human wisdom. The wisdom the Greeks and Romans applauded was not the reliance on revelation—something outside the human mind, something alien—but rather that which came from within the human mind. Paul refers to this as mere sophistry (1 Cor. 1:20). Human rationality and wisdom, human power and human strength, these were the idols of the first-century culture into which Christ was born and Christianity had its incubation.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking directly to this Greco-Roman culture which celebrated power and wisdom, physical and intellectual heft, Paul writes of the foolishness and the weakness of God (1 Cor. 1:25). Paul later explains a bit more what he means by the weakness of God when, in 2 Corinthians, he speaks of an exact moment in history when this weakness of God occurred. It happened on the cross. So Paul tells us that Christ “was crucified in weakness” (2 Cor. 13:4).

If you're looking for the line of demarcation between what the Greco-Roman worldview had to offer and what Christianity has to offer, this is it. Either hope and redemption reside within human beings so we become the object of our own faith, or hope and redemption reside outside us, alien to us, so we look beyond ourselves to the object of our faith. Only when we come to the end of ourselves do we see our true need. That is the Christian view.

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<sup>9</sup> Consider John Dickson's thesis that humility was not recognized or touted as a virtue until Jesus Christ and early Christianity, in *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

And this is patently the line of demarcation between Bonhoeffer's Confessing Church and Müller's *Reichskirche*. Hitler was ultimately and pitifully the object of his own quest for redemption. And his program failed spectacularly.

This is an essential backdrop for understanding Bonhoeffer's view of Christ and the cross. Just as Paul's views of Christ, salvation, and the Christian life were diametrically opposed to the values and presuppositions of the Greco-Roman world, so too Bonhoeffer's views ran completely counter to the ideology of the Nazis. The Nazi worldview praised human strength and human achievement. The cross is truly foolish to such a worldview. But it would be a mistake to limit that faulty view to the Nazis in the twentieth century. In fact, modernism—that worldview which knows no geopolitical boundaries—very much shares this unfettered belief in human wisdom, human power, and human potential. To trumpet, "I will only boast in my weakness," as Paul did and as Bonhoeffer echoed, is to sound a dissonant note to a modernist. Bonhoeffer puts it succinctly: "It is true that encounter with Jesus meant the reversal of all human values."<sup>10</sup> In his unfinished *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer would also write accordingly, "The figure of the judged and crucified one remains alien, and at best pitiable, to a world where success is the measure and justification of all things."<sup>11</sup>

We could summarize all of this background to Bonhoeffer's christology in one sentence, albeit a complex one: The cross was a stumbling block to the Romans; the cross was a stumbling block to the Nazis; the cross was a stumbling block to moderns; and—unless we are humbled and brought low beneath the cross to see its power and beauty—the cross can be a stumbling block to us.

The lesson here is not simply to wag our fingers in disgust at a Nietzsche or a Hitler, but to do a little soul-searching ourselves. Do I think of myself as weak and unable and frail? Or do I think of myself as strong, capable, and able to pull it off? We will not see Christ aright—and, consequently, we will not live the Christian life aright—until we get this question right.

### Via Wittenberg

Bonhoeffer did not by himself discover Paul's idea of weakness as the starting point for spirituality and living the Christian life. He had a mediator,

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, June 30, 1944, *LPP*, 341.

<sup>11</sup> *DBWE* 6:88.

a mentor—none other than the original German Lutheran academic and pastor, Martin Luther himself. For Luther, like Paul before him and Bonhoeffer after, this idea of strength through weakness went much deeper than intellectual approbation. It became warp and woof of their very lives and identities.

Luther had a profound sense of human weakness precisely because he tried so hard. He once quipped, “If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, I was the monk.”<sup>12</sup> To say he was dedicated and committed, to say that he strove for excellence with every fiber of his being, is like saying a lot of water goes over Niagara Falls. But for all that striving, Luther never got any closer to God. It was like he was on a treadmill, and no matter how fast he ran he never got anywhere. In fact, it was worse: the faster he ran, the greater the distance between him and God. As Luther strove toward God, God seemed to move farther and farther beyond his reach.

In this regard Luther was a true child of his age—obsessed with “a theology of glory,” as he summarized it. Glory is usually a good thing, but Luther was using it here as shorthand for human achievement, strength, and power. When he criticized the medieval Roman Catholic Church for proclaiming a theology of glory, he was accusing them of trusting in their own might, of relying on their own power. Hence the striving, the dedication, and all the monkery he himself was a part of.

To cut across this theology of glory, Luther proposed a “theology of the cross.” It is at the cross that we meet God, and the God we meet at the cross is a God of weakness. This is a God who suffers. And this confounds all human wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

We could easily expand this notion of a God of weakness. From the moment of the incarnation, we see the display of weakness. In fact, we see it even from the moment of the announcement to the Virgin Mary. Bonhoeffer, in one of his London sermons of 1934, makes the case:

It begins with Mary herself, the carpenter’s wife: as we would say, a poor working man’s wife, unknown, not highly regarded by others; yet now, just as she is, unremarkable and lowly in the eyes of others, regarded by

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, cited in Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 388.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Luther’s theology of the cross, see Martin Luther, “The Heidelberg Disputation”; Stephen J. Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 69–85; and Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

God and chosen to be the mother of the Savior of the world. She was not chosen because of any human merit, not even for being, as she undoubtedly was, deeply devout, nor even for her humility or any other virtue, but entirely and uniquely because it is God's gracious will to love, to choose, to make great what is lowly, unremarkable, considered to be of little value.<sup>14</sup>

A few moments later in the sermon Bonhoeffer adds, "God draws near to the lowly, loving the lost, the unnoticed, the unremarkable, the excluded, the powerless, and the broken."<sup>15</sup> And then we come to the unremarkable, lowly manger. Bonhoeffer offers up two palpable images of the weakness and powerlessness of God: the manger and the cross.

Christ came as a powerless, dependent infant. And though on the cross, the hymn writer reminds us, he could have called ten thousand angels, his full limitations and weakness came to the fore as he suffered and died. In Christ we see the weakness of God.

### **In Christ**

At this point we need to acknowledge that something more profound lies beneath both weakness and power. Behind our weakness lies sin, and behind divine power lies holiness. The true problem consists not of our weakness. Weakness is a symptom, merely pointing to our true problem: sinfulness. And the great gulf between us and God is not merely measured by finite weakness compared to infinite strength. The great gulf consists in our utter sinfulness compared to God's incomparable holiness.

Weakness and strength catch our attention because they stick out above the surface like the proverbial tip of the iceberg. If you could ask survivors of the Titanic, they would tell you that what matters is what lies beneath the surface. We can dodge what we see and we can compensate for appearances. But what defense have we for what lies beneath the surface? The issue there is that God is holy, and we are sinful. These are the two fundamental propositions to life. It's really that simple and, at the same time, that profound. No dodging, no compensating. Nothing within us can overcome this problem.

In his classic book *The Holiness of God*, R. C. Sproul makes this link

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<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, sermon on Luke 1:46–55, *DBWE* 13:343.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

from weakness to sinfulness and from strength to holiness when it comes to the thought of Martin Luther.<sup>16</sup> This dilemma was precisely why Luther blurted out, “I hate God.” He came to realize the full force of these two propositions—our sinfulness and God’s holiness—and it sent him reeling. Only a third proposition could produce the elusive peace he so desperately sought during his quest to come to terms with God in the monastery.

This third proposition that Luther needed and eventually found was actually a person: Christ, the God-man, the only Mediator between a holy God and sinful humanity. Theologians refer to this as a two-nature christology or the hypostatic union. This means that Christ is two natures, fully human and fully divine, in one person. The Greek word for person, used in the Chalcedonian Creed (AD 451) is *hypostasis*, from which comes the theological expression *hypostatic union*. The early church was plagued by various heresies denying the humanity of Christ and the deity of Christ, followed by heresies related to how the two natures came together in one person.

In his lectures on all this, Bonhoeffer concludes, “The Chalcedonian formula [or Creed] is an objective, living assertion about Christ that goes beyond all conceptual forms. Everything is encompassed in its very clear yet paradoxical agility.”<sup>17</sup> This last expression, “paradoxical agility,” refers to the presence of mystery in the creed, reflective of the mystery we encounter in the person of Christ. To say full humanity and full deity join together in one person is mystery indeed, one that Bonhoeffer deeply appreciated.

For Bonhoeffer, Christ as the God-man is essential to understanding all of Christ’s work, but especially his work of humiliation that culminates with his crucifixion. Bonhoeffer observes, “The God-man who is humiliated is the stumbling block to the pious human being and to the human being, period.”<sup>18</sup> It’s as if Bonhoeffer’s lectures up to this point have been merely a revving up to deliver this line. Christ as the God-man is the stumbling block because this accentuates the absolute holiness of God and the utter sinfulness of humanity and the great, gaping gulf between the two. So we must have Christ as the God-man; we must have this third proposition—this person. There is no hope without him.

The work of Christ immediately brings to mind one of Luther’s favorite words, *justification*. Bonhoeffer had much to say about this word as well.

<sup>16</sup> R. C. Sproul cleverly titled the chapter “The Insanity of Luther.” See Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 25th anniversary ed. (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier, 2010), 91–116.

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” *DBWE* 12:343.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.



In his lectures on the history of twentieth-century systematic theology, preserved for us in the form of student notes, Bonhoeffer addresses Christ, justification, God, Scripture, and ethics—all themes dear to his heart and, sadly, occasions for many of his fellow-German theologians to go astray. Of justification, Bonhoeffer begins by reminding us of the way the cross of Christ says no to our effort: “It comes through the cross, the radical No of God, the word telling the person you don’t have any possibility of reaching God.”<sup>19</sup> There’s nothing we can do to reach God, so God does it for us, through Christ. This leads Bonhoeffer to conclude, “Thus human beings receive their righteousness from God alone.” Bonhoeffer continues: “This is the reason for the cross. Christology is by nature bound up with the doctrine of justification.”<sup>20</sup>

We need, as Bonhoeffer cites the Latin, *iustitia aliena*, an “alien righteousness,” or a righteousness that is outside of and apart from us. This is the righteousness that comes to us from God through Christ’s work on the cross, by faith. In fact, Bonhoeffer calls faith “the most profound human passivity.” Justification is all God’s work. Bonhoeffer even speaks of the Spirit’s work: “The Holy Spirit allows human beings to believe and to hear that the righteousness of humankind lies entirely in Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Sola Gratia***

These three propositions—the holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and the person and work of Christ—form the essence of the gospel. They also form the backbone of spirituality, since they leave room for only one thing, *grace*. Grace comes to us not because of our merits or our accomplishments or our potential. Grace comes to us in spite of all these things. Some say that grace is unconditional; it would be more accurate to say that it is contra-conditional. Grace brings us to Christ, keeps us in Christ, and causes us to grow in Christ. Hence, Christ as the God-man is the stumbling block. We are so sure, *self*-assured, that we can achieve God’s approval. But that self-assurance is actually self-deception. The cross shouts a resounding *no!*

These three propositions, and the notion of grace they all underscore, are the theological props not only holding up salvation, but also holding up

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The History of Twentieth-Century Systematic Theology, 1931–1932,” *DBWE* 11:236. See the editors’ note on the history of this text, 177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 237–38.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

the Christian life and discipleship. We err when we see these as only having to do with our justification. When we leave these three propositions, and especially grace, at the door of initial salvation and try to walk on without them, we are doomed to a Christian life marked by frustration.

“It’s very hard,” Luther once wrote, “for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can’t grasp this.”<sup>22</sup> We can’t grasp grace because our natural instincts think more in terms of merits and demerits. And since we can’t grasp grace, it grasps us. Grace grasps us at salvation and at every waking moment of our lives thereafter.

Theologians like to speak of efficacious grace or soteric grace—grace that saves. It is efficacious because it accomplishes God’s purposes. Those purposes may be summed up in terms of how God calls a people unto himself (salvation or the moment of conversion) and conforms that people to the image of his Son, the perfect reflection of glory and holiness (sanctification or the process of living of the Christian life).

To be sure, there are differences between coming to Christ at salvation and growing in Christ in sanctification. As Luther put it in “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” once we are in Christ, “the Spirit and the gifts are ours.” Paul speaks of our being raised in newness of life after we have come to Christ (Rom. 6:1–4). Nevertheless, these three propositions remain true for us from the day of our coming to Christ until we reach the end of our earthly lives: God is holy, we are sinful, and Christ is our only hope. And that hope comes not only through Christ’s resurrection, but also through Christ’s death on the cross.

Christ’s resurrection and his resurrection power are the means for our sanctification. As Easter approached in 1944 and Bonhoeffer sat in his prison cell in Tegel, he wrote to his student and eventual biographer Eberhard Bethge of how Christ’s resurrection conquered death and that only from the resurrection of Christ, “a new and purifying wind can blow through our present world.” Then he expressed his wish for even a mere few “to live in the light of the resurrection.”<sup>23</sup> In his lectures on christology, he castigates those who would deny the historicity of the resurrection, and he makes a clear and definitive statement of the necessity of the empty tomb. “Between the humiliation and exaltation of Christ,” Bonhoeffer writes of the cross and ascension, “lies the historical fact of the empty grave. . . . If it

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, “Table Talk, No. 137,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, March 27, 1944, *LPP*, 240.

is not empty, then Christ is not resurrected. It seems as though our ‘resurrection faith’ is bound up with the story of the empty grave. If the grave were not empty, we would not have our faith.”<sup>24</sup> Our faith stands on the historicity of the resurrection.

Paul reminds us that to know Christ is *both* to know the power of Christ’s resurrection and to share in Christ’s sufferings (Phil. 3:10). Bonhoeffer follows suit, reminding us to focus also on the cross and the weakness of Christ as an additional, crucial means for our growth in knowing Christ and conforming to his image. “We are the church beneath the cross,” Bonhoeffer would say.<sup>25</sup> After we have first come to the cross, we must return there again and again. In Christ’s suffering and weakness God meets us in our suffering and weakness.

### Bonhoeffer at Bethel

Bonhoeffer scholar Bernd Wannewetsch draws attention to Bonhoeffer’s 1933 visit to the city of Bethel, Germany. He contrasts Bonhoeffer’s time at Bethel, and what he learned there, with his experience at the city of Buchenwald, and what Hitler attempted to do there. “The time here in Bethel,” Bonhoeffer wrote to his grandmother Julie on August 20, 1933, “has left a deep impression on me.”<sup>26</sup> That deep impression would have far-reaching consequence for the rest of his theology, his view of sanctification, and even his very life.

With no small level of enthusiasm, Bonhoeffer describes in his letter the participants at the church service at Bethel: “I have just come back from the worship service. It is an extraordinary sight, the whole church filled with crowds of epileptics and other ill persons, interspersed with the deacons and deaconesses who are there to help in case one of them falls.”<sup>27</sup> He then adds, “There are elderly tramps who come in off the country roads, the

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” *DBWE* 12:359–60; cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–28, especially vv. 18–20. In the wake of German theologians after Bonhoeffer, Wolfhart Pannenberg stands out as one who continued this stress on the historicity of the resurrection. The empty tomb is for Pannenberg the linchpin to the deity of Christ and christology. Pannenberg even sees the empty tomb as the starting point for epistemology—the starting point for everything we know and how we know what we know. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 343–62. Pannenberg, though, in the end stops shy of a full subscription to the Chalcedonian Creed. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, appreciates the mystery of the Chalcedonian Creed, which reflects the mystery in the union of the full humanity and divinity in Christ, the two natures in one person (*DBWE* 12:342–43).

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, devotional, Berlin Technical University, 1932, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Meditations on the Cross*, ed. Manfred Weber, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 8.

<sup>26</sup> *DBWE* 12:157.

<sup>27</sup> *DBWE* 12:157–58.

theological students, the children from the lab school, doctors and pastors with their families.” He quickly points out, “But the sick people dominate the picture.”<sup>28</sup>

This eclectic and diverse mix of worshipers comes as a result of the place, Bethel. At Bethel, just outside the city of Bielefeld, a community was established as a hospital and care facility for the disabled. Bethel also housed a seminary. Bonhoeffer went to Bethel between stays in London. He would spend the month of July in London, preaching a few times and scouting out the church situation there. Then he spent August at Bethel, intending some time for relaxation after a busy cycle of lectures at Berlin and after the frustrations of the ecclesiastical battles. He would return to London for his extended stay and pastorate from October 1933 until the late spring weeks of 1934.

Bonhoeffer had hoped to relax in Bethel, but he didn't. Or, rather, he couldn't. In collaboration with Hermann Sasse, who had just moved from his pastoral work in Berlin to an academic post at the University of Erlangen near Nuremberg, Bonhoeffer worked feverishly on a confession of faith for the splinter group from the German church. While the Bethel Confession would be eclipsed by the Barmen Declaration (1934), the document shows significant differences between the splinter group and the main body of the German Lutheran Church. The acquiescence to Hitler and the Nazi Party was “the presenting problem,” as counselors might say; the real issue, however, concerned Scripture. Does the church take Scripture and all of its demands seriously? That, to Bonhoeffer, was the bottom-line question of the controversies of the hour. And as he saw things, his church did not submit to Scripture.

In fact, though we'll explore this further in chapter 4, this is one of the most fundamental questions for us to ask as disciples: Do we take Scripture and all of its demands seriously? We will have a warped view of the Christian life if we see Scripture as something to be negotiated rather than obeyed.

### **Christ at Bethel**

In light of Bonhoeffer's ability to see to the heart of the matter, through the Bethel Confession Bonhoeffer addresses far deeper issues than simply the church-state relationship between the Reich and the Reich Church. As

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<sup>28</sup> DBWE 12:158.

Bethge puts it so well, “Bonhoeffer, though thoroughly shaped by a liberal tradition, was growing antiliberal.”<sup>29</sup> Two theological issues in particular were responsible for this widening gulf between Bonhoeffer’s conservative theologizing and his liberal education and context: Scripture and christology.

In his Berlin lectures on christology, published as *Christ the Center* from the notes of his students, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that “Christ as idea” or “Christ as myth” simply won’t do. Bonhoeffer declares, “It is not so, as Wilhelm Herrmann says, that our conscience in its distress encounters Jesus in our inner life, and that through this encounter we become convinced that Jesus existed in history.”<sup>30</sup> Jesus is in reality, in space-and-time history, not an abiding idea within. “The church must reject every form of docetism,” Bonhoeffer would go on to lecture. “Along with it we must refuse every form of Greek idealistic thinking to the extent that it works with the distinction between idea and appearance.” Docetism was a generic name applied to a variety of heresies in the era of the New Testament and in the early centuries of the church. The Greek word *dokeō* means “appear.” This heresy taught that Jesus only appeared to be human; he only appeared to be in flesh and blood. The apostle John himself refutes this false teaching (1 John 4:1–4).

Bonhoeffer explains why this false thinking about Christ is so out of bounds: “For with this distinction, such idealism abolishes the first premise of all theology, that God, out of mercy freely given, truly became a human being.”<sup>31</sup> “Nothing human,” Bonhoeffer will later add, “is foreign to him.”<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer later draws upon the humiliation of Christ—his becoming human and suffering and eventually meeting judgment on the cross—as a hallmark of the true church. This is what the church must confess (orthodoxy) and this confession must impact how we in the church live (“orthopraxy”).

Only a Christ who was truly human, who *really* came in the flesh, and who simultaneously was very God of very God would be sufficient for the church’s stance in any time and place, but especially in the tumultuous time and precarious place of the rising Reich and *Reichskirche* in 1933 Germany. Only such a Christ can eclipse human kingdoms and demand our

<sup>29</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 289.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” *DBWE* 12:330. His lecture series, again as recorded by students, is also published as *Christ the Center* (New York: HarperOne, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> *DBWE* 12:338.

<sup>32</sup> *DBWE* 12:353.

allegiance above all else, as the Barmen Declaration will so definitively exclaim. To put the whole matter succinctly, christology is the key for understanding Bonhoeffer's theology and also his view of the Christian life.

But in the midst of his ecclesiastical work and theologizing, Bonhoeffer couldn't help but be moved, "deeply impressed," by what he saw at Bethel. On the one side stood Hitler and his eugenic plan for German superiority, already revealed and initiated at that time. On the other side stood Bethel, haven for the sick, the infirm, and the weak. That it was called Bethel, "house of God," was not at all lost on Bonhoeffer. He saw in Bethel far more than the church as a place of variety and diversity. He saw in Bethel true humanity. To his grandmother he writes, "Their situation of being truly defenseless perhaps gives these people a much clearer insight into certain realities of human existence, the fact that we are indeed basically defenseless, than can be possible for healthy persons."<sup>33</sup>

Bethel provided Bonhoeffer with insight into the nature of humanity and even into the nature of the church. It also provided him with insight into the nature of Christ. In the early summer of 1933, before he went to Bethel, Bonhoeffer gave his aforementioned christology lectures at Berlin. Near the very end of the lectures, when discussing the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, he observes, "The humiliation of Christ is not a principle for the church to follow but rather a fact."<sup>34</sup>

Theologians use the language of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ in reference to Paul's teaching in Philippians 2 on the person and work of Christ. Philippians 2 is among Scripture's fuller statements on two-nature christology, on Christ as the God-man. What we learn in this chapter concerning Christ's humanity thrusts us right back to this idea of Christ's weakness and suffering. In the larger context of Philippians 2 we also see how crucial learning this lesson is for living the Christian life. Humility becomes for Paul the necessary ingredient for church life. And that humility comes to life in Christians who imitate Christ, the one whose humility exceeds all bounds, even the bounds of death on the cross. Bonhoeffer would also bring the full weight of Christ's example of humiliation—of suffering and weakness and of frailty and limitation—to bear upon being a disciple when he got back to London and took to the pulpits of the United Congregation of Sydenham and St. Paul's Reformed Church in East London.

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<sup>33</sup> DBWE 13:158.

<sup>34</sup> DBWE 13:360.

### Sermons in London

Before we consider Bonhoeffer's London sermons, and one sermon in particular, it is helpful to see one more of his Berlin lectures from early summer of 1933, entitled "What Should a Student of Theology Do Today?" To answer his own question Bonhoeffer states,

The real study of *theologia sacra* [sacred theology] begins when, in the midst of questioning and seeking, human beings encounter the cross; when they recognize the endpoint of all their own passions in the suffering of God at the hands of humankind, and realize that their entire vitality stands under judgment.<sup>35</sup>

Bonhoeffer wouldn't mind extending the application. This is not merely the requisite for academic theology students. It is the requisite for us all. We all start at the cross. All encounters with God begin there. Bonhoeffer's message was the same. He preached or proclaimed the same ideas whether he was in the classroom in Berlin with a room full of future pastors and theologians or he was in the pulpit in London before a largely working class congregation of German immigrants.

One of Bonhoeffer's London sermons in particular brings all of this discussion to a head. The handwritten manuscript of his sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:9 is in English. The congregation at St. Paul's Reformed Church included many who had already assimilated into British culture, forcing Bonhoeffer to preach in his second language. It is a sermon on weakness, and Bonhoeffer rightly opens with a question, "Why is this problem of weakness so all-important?"<sup>36</sup> The first answer is that Christianity has historically been the religion of the weak, a "religion of slaves" as Bonhoeffer calls it.<sup>37</sup> But the real answer is that suffering and weakness are holy because "our God is a suffering God," and "God has suffered on the cross."<sup>38</sup>

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer will say similarly that God not merely embraces human beings. In fact, to say as much "is not enough."<sup>39</sup> God does far more than embrace us. In Christ he becomes us.

God overrules every reproach of untruth, doubt, and uncertainty, raised against God's love by entering as a human being into human life, by tak-

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<sup>35</sup> DBWE 12:433.

<sup>36</sup> DBWE 13:401.

<sup>37</sup> DBWE 13:402.

<sup>38</sup> DBWE 13:403.

<sup>39</sup> DBWE 6:84.

ing on and bearing bodily the nature, essence, guilt, and suffering of human beings. God becomes human out of love for humanity. God does not seek the most perfect human being with whom to be united but takes on human nature as it is. Jesus Christ is not the transfiguration of noble humanity but the Yes of God to real human beings, not the dispassionate yes of a judge but the merciful yes of a compassionate sufferer.<sup>40</sup>

We prefer to avoid such topics as weakness and suffering. Instead, we celebrate power. In fact, going back to his London sermon, Bonhoeffer contrasts this Christian view, stressing as it does weakness, with what he terms the aristocratic view, stressing strength and power. He also sets his targets on the means by which the aristocratic view accomplishes its ends, the means of violence and oppression. "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence," Bonhoeffer thunders in the sermon, "against arbitrariness and pride of power and with its apologia for the weak."<sup>41</sup> No doubt he has Bethel in mind when he spins off this last sentence. He also has in mind what will come to be represented in Buchenwald and Flossenbürg and the other concentration camps when he solemnly points out, "Christianity has adjusted itself much too easily to the worship of power."<sup>42</sup>

The situation, as Bonhoeffer sees it, calls for nothing other than a Copernican revolution in worldview, or as Bonhoeffer put it himself, "a new order of values in the sight of Christ."<sup>43</sup> Power no longer asserts itself, but submits and defers. So Bonhoeffer insists, "Christian love and help for the weak means humiliation of the strong before the weak, of the healthy before the suffering, of the mighty before the exploited."<sup>44</sup>

Bonhoeffer cast a broader vision here than one solely focused on Germany. He mentions, in the course of the sermon, the exploitation of "a coloured man in a white country," referring to his experiences in a black Harlem church in New York City as 1929 rolled into 1930.<sup>45</sup> He also refers to the experiences of the "untouchable," referring to his long-distance appreciation for Ghandi's work in India and the oppressive caste system there.

<sup>40</sup> DBWE 6:84–85. That Bonhoeffer is here thinking of christology as counter to the Aryan way is clear when in the very next paragraph he contrasts God as the lover of humanity with Hitler, "the tyrannical despiser of humanity."

<sup>41</sup> DBWE 13:402.

<sup>42</sup> DBWE 13:402.

<sup>43</sup> DBWE 13:403.

<sup>44</sup> DBWE 13:403.

<sup>45</sup> DBWE 13:402.



In short, Bonhoeffer was questioning the new values of the twentieth century regarding the estimation of life. Or maybe there's nothing all that new about twentieth-century perspectives after all.

Bonhoeffer saw implications within an orthodox christology for how one lives. By coming to grips with our own sinfulness we cultivate a little humility. By coming to grips with Christ's *humiliation* and his taking on flesh and fully identifying with us, we cultivate a little more humility (Philippians 2). And from this stance of humility comes service to others.

Based on what Bonhoeffer learned of Christ and of his incarnation and cross work, Bonhoeffer proceeded to turn the worldview of his contemporaries upside down. A very close next step after this christology concerns how we as disciples view people, how we treat them, and the lengths to which we are willing to serve them. Our natural inclination tilts far more inward. Christ's humiliation forces us first upward to look to him, then outward to look to others.

No doubt the London congregation sensed something heavily pressing upon Bonhoeffer. It's intriguing to be around someone who is on to something. Such a person has a way of drawing you in. So it was for Bonhoeffer, and so it was for his congregation. And once they were drawn in to an understanding of the depth and length and breadth of what being a disciple means, he led them right back to the cross in his conclusion. The man who goes to the cross finds God's strength manifest in weakness and suffering, and as Bonhoeffer offers, "There he feels God being with him, there he is open for God's strength, that is God's grace, God's love, God's comfort, which passeth all understanding and all human values." He then crescendos, "God glorifies himself in the weak as He glorified himself in the cross. God is mighty where man is nothing."<sup>46</sup>

These experiences from 1933 and 1934 are formative in Bonhoeffer's life. The Berlin lectures on christology, the time at Bethel, the writing of the Bethel Confession, and his London pastorate all shaped him in definitive ways. We'll see in the next chapter how the idea of community—a concept for Bonhoeffer that can only flow from Christ and the cross—also shaped both the actions of his life and his theology. Taken together, these twin ideas of Christ and community, hammered out in the 1930s, are responsible for the heroic moments to come in Bonhoeffer's life of the 1940s.

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<sup>46</sup>DBWE 13:404.

### Heroic Christianity

It was during one of those moments in the 1940s that his mind took him back to his earlier travels. He spent the last year of the so-called Roaring Twenties in New York City. His studies at Union Seminary, the ostensible reason for his visit, left him a bit chagrined. He found his most enjoyable moments in the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, collecting Negro spiritual and early blues seventy-eights and taking a cross-country trip. Everywhere he went he plunged himself into local life, and on his road trip, he saw plenty of it. Some things in America left him nonplussed. Prohibition made no sense. "How frightfully tedious," he wrote in a letter to his twin sister, Sabine.<sup>47</sup> He was equally bored by the theater: "The Theater programs here are usually quite dreadful, so I rarely go." He could even say that Arturo Toscanini helming the New York Philharmonic "hasn't really moved me much."<sup>48</sup> But the road trip west and south to Mexico in the summer of 1930 would be something else altogether.

The trip's impact on Bonhoeffer was made in no small part by his companions, especially Jean Lasserre, who would later pastor Reformed Churches in France. Lasserre's intensity alone caught Bonhoeffer's attention, but the substance of his thought and commitment kept Bonhoeffer listening.

So deep was the impact that decades later, sitting in his jail cell in Tegel Prison, Bonhoeffer would recall conversations with Lasserre, presumably in a pup tent somewhere alongside one of America's highways. It was the kind of conversation had by young men with good starts and bright futures. They talked about what they wanted to do with their lives. Lasserre, Bonhoeffer recalls, "said he would like to be a saint." Still remembering the conversation, Bonhoeffer adds, "At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith." He further explains the kind of faith he meant:

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (so-called priestly-type!), a righteous one or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> DBWE 10:271.

<sup>48</sup> DBWE 10:271.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, July 21, 1944, *LPP*, 369–70.

One could likely add to the list *hero*, a word used so many times in reference to Bonhoeffer and one he would resist with every fiber of his being. The kind of living by faith Bonhoeffer longed to have back in America in the summer of 1930 and in Tegel in the summer of 1944, as well as the summers in between, eschewed the goals we typically set for our lives and the benchmarks we use to estimate our lives. And that kind of faith comes by our union with Christ and staying close to the cross. Actually, at this time, Bonhoeffer was thinking of Christ at Gethsemane. So he writes, “I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane.”<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer learned to embrace the perplexities, the failures, the suffering, and the times when his weakness was right up on the surface and in plain view.

This isn’t the sort of talk one hears orbiting conversations on spirituality and living the Christian life. We tend to prefer the language of victory, of achievement and accomplishment, and of success and overcoming. We prefer a more heroic Christianity. It’s likely that a book on weakling Christianity would either be perceived as a joke or be dismissed with a shrug.

Bonhoeffer realized, though, that a theology of the Christian life which flows from the cross offers a different metric than that of heroism and victory. “How can success make us arrogant,” he writes, “or failure lead us astray, when we share in God’s sufferings through a life of this kind?” So Bonhoeffer can affirm, while in a prison cell as his hopes for release and (far more of concern to him) his hopes for temporal justice ebb away with each bit of news received, “I’m grateful for the past and present, and content with them.”<sup>51</sup> To be able to say such words and to live such a contented life comes only in grasping what faith is really all about. And even at that, we need to remember that our faith is a gift.

It is ironic that decades, even an entire generation, later we have made so much of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his courage, and his heroic efforts. He would have no problem with being an example. In fact, while in prison he sketched out a book, one of many, he would never write. In the concluding chapter he asserts, “[The church] must not underestimate the importance of human example (which has its origins in the humanity of Jesus and is

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

so important in Paul's teaching)." <sup>52</sup> That Bonhoeffer is used as an example would likely embarrass him, but it would not be met with a reprimand; as an exemplar of heroism is another thing altogether. He would issue a rebuke, reminding us that it is only in our weakness that God's strength is displayed. When we say we are nothing, as he concluded his London sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:9, we are finally on the right track to becoming something *in Christ*. Bonhoeffer's example is in this: Christ is magnified in his life, in his sufferings, in his perplexities, and in his joys.

Jesus himself taught that he "must suffer many things" (Luke 9:22). In fact, after his death, he also reminded the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that he must "suffer these things" (Luke 24:26). His suffering meant rejection and it meant crucifixion—the ultimate sacrifice of love in laying down his life for his people. And after his suffering, rejection, and death on the cross, as he told those same two traveling disciples, he "enter[s] into his glory" (Luke 24:26).

Christ follows up his earlier self-reference to suffering in Luke 9:22 with a clarion call to commitment: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Any would-be disciple is called upon to face both suffering and rejection, the experience of weakness and oppression. "Outsider status" becomes the hallmark of Jesus and his followers. This verse, which Bonhoeffer mulled over while in London, stands behind and under and all around his classic text *The Cost of Discipleship*. Again, as we have already seen, whenever we look into Bonhoeffer on living the Christian life, we are always bumping into Bonhoeffer's christology.

### **Discipleship as Living in Christ, in Community, in Love**

Bonhoeffer, though, noticed something about the words "in Christ" as he surveyed his current landscape. He noticed their absence. In fact, he noticed a more fundamental absence, the absence of Christ himself. As he put it, "Jesus is disappearing from sight." <sup>53</sup> This comment comes in the context of Bonhoeffer's estimation of the Protestant denominations, such as his own German Lutheran Church. The Jesus that disappeared was the crucified Jesus, the humiliated Jesus, the Jesus who himself taught that he "must suffer many things." In a profound irony, the Lutheran Church—the

<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Outline for a Book," *LPP*, 383.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

church that claimed to be following in Luther's footsteps—was forgetting the theology of the cross.

Bonhoeffer had been thinking this way long before he went to prison. In a 1932 sermon preached in Berlin, even before Hitler's coming to power, Bonhoeffer contrasted invoking God's name instead of Christ's. How safe it is to say, "in the name of God." It is another thing altogether to say, "You have been raised in Christ," from Colossians 3:1, his text for the sermon.<sup>54</sup>

While the church could not see Jesus, let alone have him as Lord over them, Bonhoeffer saw clearly that the church must have Jesus at the center and that the church must have room for the Jesus who suffers. In the outline for the book he never wrote, Bonhoeffer also spoke of Jesus the crucified as the model for us. As the crucified one, Jesus suffered rejection. As the crucified one, Jesus came and acted and lived for others. As the crucified one, Jesus, having lived a sacrificial life of love for others, died a sacrificial death in love for others. This serves as both the basis for and the model of living the Christian life. This is the basis and model for Bonhoeffer's theology of spirituality.

From his christology, which entails a robust and orthodox view of the God-man and of the sacrificial life, atoning death, and triumphant resurrection of Christ, flows all of Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics. In fact, as we've noted, Bonhoeffer scholars have recently taken to identifying the center of all of his thought as "Christo-ecclesiology." What that expression means is not that he simply emphasized christology and ecclesiology, but that his ecclesiology, seen in such books as *Life Together*, flows from and is connected to his christology. This is more than a symbiotic relationship. This is even more than a case of cookies *and* milk or of Romeo *and* Juliet.

But there is one more piece to the picture of Bonhoeffer's theology. That piece is ethics. So, while this may be cumbersome, we can identify the center of Bonhoeffer's thought as "Christo-ecclesiological-ethics." Or we could simply say that according to Bonhoeffer, *life is lived in Christ, in community, in love.*

The kind of grasping and embracing of Christ that Bonhoeffer talks about demands ethics, that we live for others in a sacrificial, loving way. To anticipate some of the themes in the next chapter, Bonhoeffer declares that "the church is the church only when it exists for others."<sup>55</sup> If we start

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<sup>54</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Risen with Christ," in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 41–48.

<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Outline for a Book," *LPP*, 382.

with the church, we are pushed back to Christ and pushed forward to a life of love for others, a life of action for others. This for Bonhoeffer was both theory and practice. And as for us, we could do no better than to have such a Christo-ecclesiological-ethic. We could do no better than *to live in Christ, in community, in love*.

### **Conclusion: Christ and the Cost of Discipleship**

Those familiar with Bonhoeffer will likely wonder why in a discussion of the foundation of Bonhoeffer's thought on the Christian life his classic book on the subject, *The Cost of Discipleship*, has only been briefly mentioned. Now's the time to rectify that. *The Cost of Discipleship* (the German title is simply *Nachfolge*) was published in 1937, but Bonhoeffer began thinking about the book in 1933 and 1934 during his time in London. Once he returned to Germany, he worked on the book in earnest in 1935, putting the finishing touches on it in 1936. The years of the book's coming to life, in other words, correspond directly with the formative years of the 1930s that have been our subject in this chapter. And while he worked on the book from its inception in 1933 until its publication in 1937, he *lived* the book pretty nearly his entire life. He certainly lived it as the 1930s ebbed into the 1940s and he found himself in prison and on the martyr's gallows.

The book could not be clearer. "Discipleship is commitment to Christ," Bonhoeffer writes.<sup>56</sup> Christ calls, we follow. That much is straightforward, even easy. The doing of it is another story. By chapter 6, Bonhoeffer leads us to the Sermon on the Mount and the difficulties in the simple command to follow Christ. These are heavy demands. But we must not run to chapter 6 and the following chapters of his book without spending time at chapter 4, "Discipleship and the Cross."

Bonhoeffer starts this chapter with Christ's word that he must suffer, be rejected, and die. He uses Mark 8:31–38, which parallels Luke 9. Here Bonhoeffer reminds us of Christ's imperative: we must, like Christ, take up our cross and share in his suffering. Bonhoeffer ticks off what this entails. "The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ."<sup>57</sup> This death, though, is the beginning of our life, our life *in Christ*. Second, this following of Christ in his

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<sup>56</sup> DBWE 4:59.

<sup>57</sup> DBWE 4:87.

suffering leads us into our everyday battles with temptation and our daily struggles with sin and Satan. These battles leave scars.

But then Bonhoeffer offers words of comfort. "Christian suffering is not disconcerting," he assures us. "Instead, it is nothing but grace and joy."<sup>58</sup> Christ not only suffered, but bore the suffering on the cross. In his bearing of the suffering, he triumphed over it. Bonhoeffer puts it plainly, "His cross is the triumph over suffering."<sup>59</sup> We are called to such a life. We follow Christ "under the cross."<sup>60</sup>

We might prefer to slip out from under such a call, the burden of bearing the cross. Bonhoeffer points us to Christ, both his example and words, when we feel such temptation. In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ provided the example for us by yielding his will to the Father's. Such submission ultimately brought about peace for Christ and reconciliation with the Father. As for Christ's words, Bonhoeffer takes us to Matthew 11:30. He writes of how people desire to and even can "shake off the burdens laid on them."<sup>61</sup> They can slip out from under the cross. But listen to what Bonhoeffer has to say about such a move: "Doing so does not free them at all from their burdens. Instead, it loads them with a heavier, more unbearable burden. They bear the self-chosen yoke of their own selves."<sup>62</sup> So we should hear again Bonhoeffer's salient point from his lectures on christology: "The God-man who is humiliated is the stumbling block to the pious human being and to the human being, period."<sup>63</sup> In other words: God, preserve us from our piety.

Compared to our self-chosen yokes and pious endeavors and white-knuckled strivings, Christ's burden is easy and light. Christ's burden is welcome indeed. So Bonhoeffer concludes:

Bearing the cross does not bring misery and despair. Rather, it provides refreshment and peace for our souls; it is our greatest joy. Here we are no longer laden with self-made laws and burdens, but with the yoke of him who knows us and who himself goes with us under the same yoke. Under his yoke we are assured of nearness and communion. It is he himself who disciples find when they take up their cross.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *DBWE* 4:89.

<sup>59</sup> *DBWE* 4:90.

<sup>60</sup> *DBWE* 4:90.

<sup>61</sup> *DBWE* 4:91.

<sup>62</sup> *DBWE* 4:91.

<sup>63</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," *DBWE* 12:358.

<sup>64</sup> *DBWE* 4:91.

For Bonhoeffer, living the Christian life begins with Christ, with his call to discipleship, with the cross. We live *in Christ*. We live from the cross. Or, as Bonhoeffer would prefer, reminding us that we live in community, “We are the church beneath the cross.”<sup>65</sup> It is here—oh the paradox!—where our final joy is found.

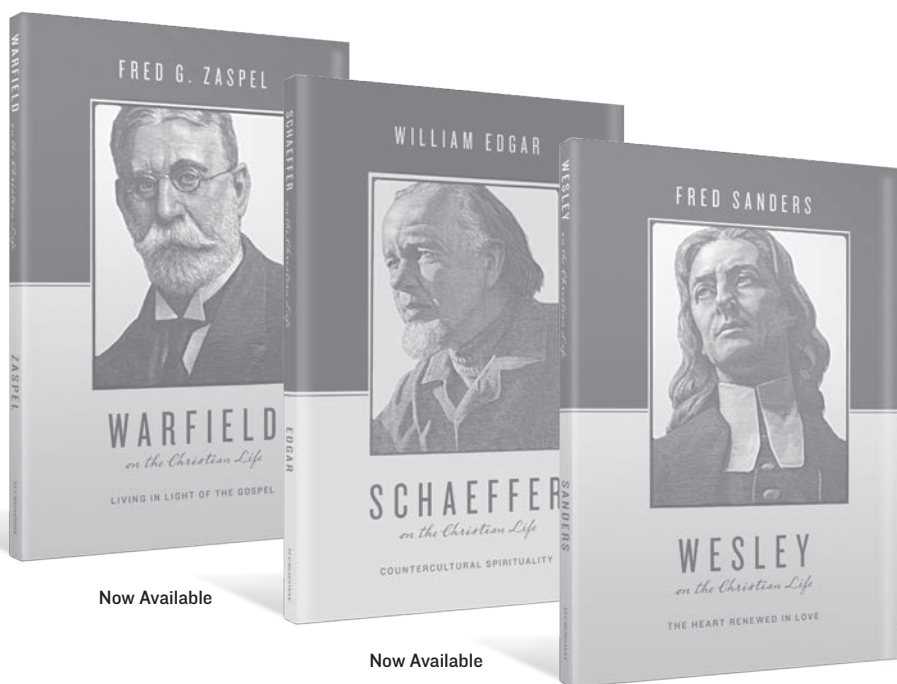
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<sup>65</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Cross*, 8.



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