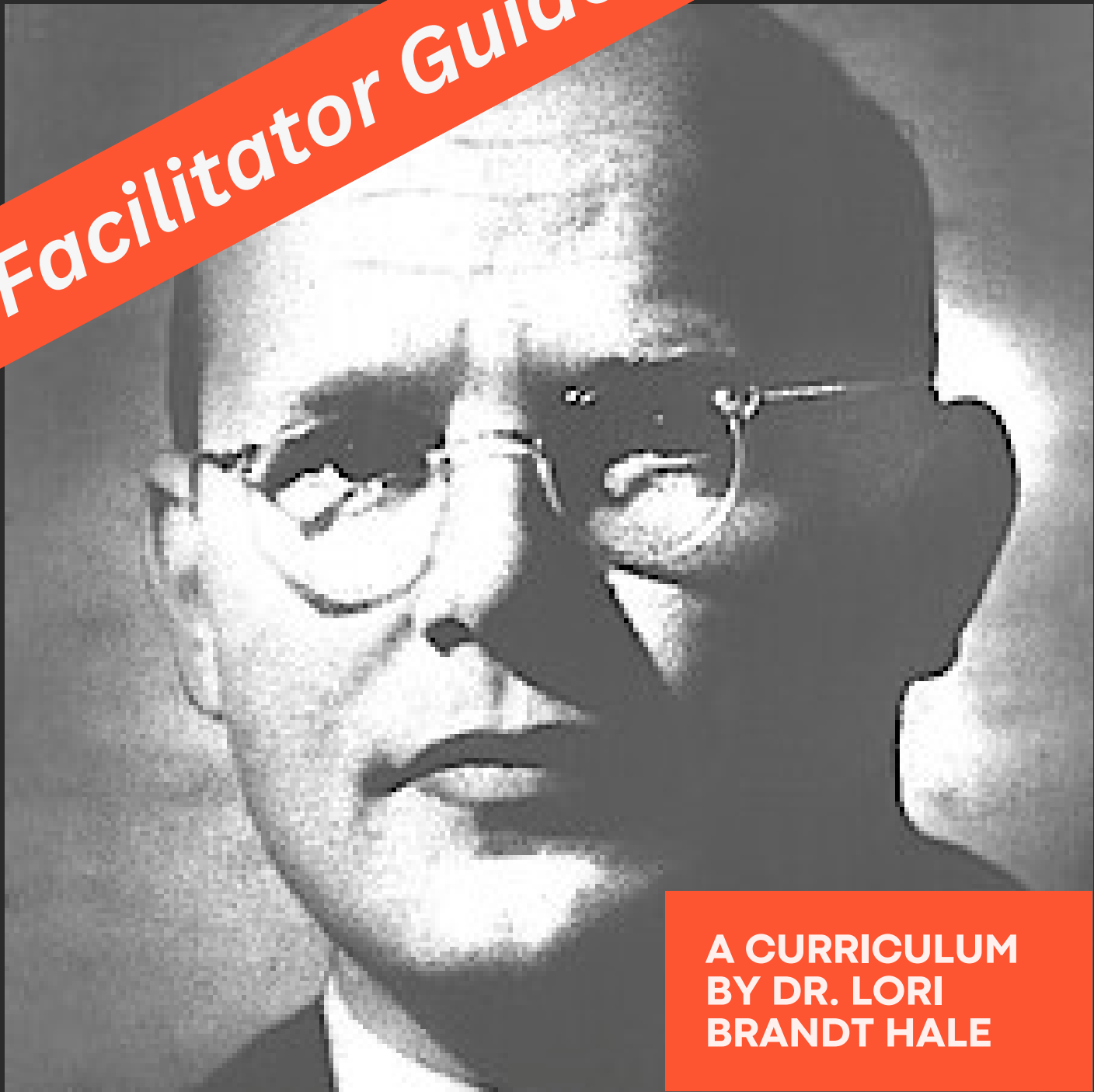


Facilitator Guide



**A CURRICULUM
BY DR. LORI
BRANDT HALE**

Lessons from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a House Divided and a World on Fire



An offering for congregations from
Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania and the
International Bonhoeffer Society -
English Language Section



Lessons from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a House Divided and a World on Fire

CURRICULUM FOR CONGREGATIONS BY DR. LORI BRANDT HALE

A complete four-week series:

Lesson 1 – Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life

Lesson 2 – It’s About the Neighbor

Lesson 3 – Faith is Worldly

Lesson 4 – Taking a Stand

Additional “modules” could be added for a six- or eight-week program:

Lesson 5 – Reading Bonhoeffer Today

Lesson 6 – Life Together

INTRODUCTION

Through our work at the intersection of civic life and faith, we often encounter a Church and world grappling with deep divisions and deep questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. How does one hold onto their convictions while staying in relationship with their neighbor? How does one engage passionately and peacefully? What is the most faithful path to take where hatred and spite seem to reign?

Like many, we turned to the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Not because of the superficial tendency of any “side” to equate the “other side” with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, but because Bonhoeffer’s writings give us great insight to the struggle of figuring out what is the next most faithful step in a broken and imperfect system.

We were delighted that our wonderings about what wisdom Bonhoeffer might offer us led us to Dr. Lori Brandt Hale of Augsburg University. In her role as the President of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section, which marks its 50th anniversary this year, she is well-versed in talking about Bonhoeffer with nuance, scholarship, and wisdom. And the Society was wondering about ways in which they could make the academic conversations happening around the anniversary more accessible to more people. We were happy to be a catalyst to make that happen.

As Lutherans, we know that there are certain hermeneutics, ways of reading and interpreting, that can lead to grace-filled understanding, or that lead to condemnation. We practice distinguishing these in the ways we read the Bible, remembering Luther’s exhortation that the Bible is “the cradle in which the Christ child is laid.” Where other harmful hermeneutics ignore Christ in favor of ideological interpretations, we hold Christ at the center.

Dr. Brandt Hale helps us understand that a similar tactic is needed in approaching the work of Bonhoeffer. Like the Bible, one can read any number of agendas or ideologies into Bonhoeffer’s words. But like any good Lutheran theologian, Bonhoeffer himself would insist that centering him and his words would be a mistake. “Who is Christ for us today?” is the question Bonhoeffer came back to again and again, in his writing and in discerning steps to take in his discipleship. Centering that question led him to reject the Nazi regime and other forces that sought to harm his most vulnerable neighbors.

This curriculum encourages us to ask that question for ourselves. In this particular time and place, who is Christ for us? How are we to best love our neighbors? What is the ethic of love and discipleship that will help us to be most faithful? What are the tools at our disposal to live this out?

The answers to those questions, we believe, are crucial for us to answer as individuals and as a Church. We are so grateful for the work of Dr. Brandt Hale in giving us a space and the resources to ask them, and to discern the answers together.

We hope this curriculum inspires your congregation or community to enter into deeper relationship with Christ and our neighbors, and to be bolder in calling out forces that breed misinformation and violence. May we always seek to answer the call of Christ to be with and love our neighbor, this year and always.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa)

INTRODUCTION

Dear Facilitators and Participants,

I am deeply grateful that you have chosen to dive into this multi-week series on the life and lessons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and hope it will move and comfort and challenge you – all at the same time. Bonhoeffer has been doing just that – moving and comforting and challenging me – for more than thirty years. Over and over again, I return to his words and wisdom. “I am still discovering to this day,” he wrote from Tegel Prison on July 21st, 1944, “that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life... living fully in the midsts of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities....” See what I mean? Moving, comforting, challenging. Exciting!

The curriculum is designed to take 4–6 weeks to complete, includes lesson plans, slides, facilitator scripts, and handouts. Each week also contains an activity and/or discussion questions. The lessons build on one another and should be done in order. Lessons 1–4 offer a complete program. Lesson 5 is optional. There is an additional supplement that can be used at any point along the way, or not at all. The slides are a critical component of the materials. Using a meeting space with projection capabilities would be optimal.

Throughout the lessons, primary source material used is from the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English collection and is abbreviated as DBWE. There are 16 volumes, plus an index volume, which are listed with titles in the “Recommended Bonhoeffer Bibliography” included in your respective guides. For example, the passage I cited in the first paragraph of this letter is from DBWE 8: 486, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English (Fortress Press), Volume 8, page 486. Volume 8, by the way, is Letters and Papers from Prison. In a few places, I have also included the page numbers from The Bonhoeffer Reader, or TBR. The Bonhoeffer Reader is an anthology of Bonhoeffer’s works, with helpful introductory pages by the editors, and a great way to access portions of Bonhoeffer’s most important contributions without buying sixteen books!

I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania for inviting me to write this curriculum. In our often fraught and superficial world of sound bites and social media posts, the opportunity to share materials that encourage and support sustained engagement with the life and legacy, theology and ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a gift. It is also a delightful way to mark the end of my first year as the President of the Board of Directors of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section and the end of the 50th Anniversary Year of the Society. I am lucky – we are all lucky – to be surrounded by Bonhoeffer colleagues and friends, from across the United States and around the world, who engage profoundly with Bonhoeffer’s work and with one another.

With all my best wishes for you and with love for the coming generations,

Lori

Lori Brandt Hale, Ph.D.

President, International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section

Director, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Augsburg University (Minneapolis, MN)

Professor, Department of Religion and Philosophy, Augsburg University (Minneapolis, MN)

FACILITATOR RESOURCE: OVERVIEW OF BONHOEFFER'S MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Note: This overview tends to Volumes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English (DBWE). Volume 7 is a collection of Bonhoeffer's fiction from prison, and is not included here. There are two entries for Volume 8; one addresses the essay "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943," and the other addresses the key theological material, written from prison, from April to August 1944.

SANCTORUM COMMUNIO (1930)

Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church
Written in 1927 as Bonhoeffer's dissertation; Published in 1930. DBWE 1

Key Themes:

Stellvertretung, vicarious representative action (as a theological concept)

"Christ existing as community"

Bonhoeffer concludes that basic existential, ontological, theological, and ethical questions have an integrated answer, namely, 'the concepts of person, community, and God are inseparably and essentially interrelated' (DBWE 1:34).

He says that theology is inherently social. What it means to be human comes in encounter with and ethical response to other humans.

Bonhoeffer introduces the concept of ***Stellvertretung*** – vicarious representative action – as a theological concept: Christ's vicarious representative action on behalf of (fallen) humanity restores community between humans and God as well as between humans.

The famous dictum from *Sanctorum Communio*, "**Christ existing as community**" uncovers Bonhoeffer's understanding that the church is both the ongoing revelation of God in the world and a concrete community (DBWE 1:199).

ACT AND BEING (1931)

Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology
Written in 1929 as *Habilitationsschrift* (Second Dissertation); Submitted in 1930; Published in 1931. DBWE 2

Key Theme:

Revelation understood as "Christ existing as community." (He synthesizes articulations that lean too heavily on seeing revelation as act or as being.)

Act and Being is an ambitious attempt to articulate a theological methodology that synthesizes the long-standing 'problem of act and being' through a new understanding of revelation.

"What is needed... is a theological epistemology, or philosophy of knowledge, capable of articulating an alternative version of divine and human community that transcends the desire of the knower to grasp and control the object of knowledge, whether God or another human being" (DBWE 2:8, Editor's Introduction).

One of the points of this work is to sort out the ethical problem of "the Other, the stranger, the neighbor" (DBWE 2:12, Editor's Introduction; see also 2:88 and 2:127).

In this way, *Act and Being* takes up questions from his dissertation on matters of sociality and points ahead to work he will do in his *Ethics*. In both dissertations, Bonhoeffer's Christology is central, and grounds his theology.

CREATION AND FALL (1933)

Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3

Series of lectures given at the University of Berlin 1932-1933; Published 1933. DBWE 3

Key Theme:

Freedom for Others

Bonhoeffer continues to consider the themes that he explored in his dissertations, including sociality, in these lectures, but now in conversation with the Biblical text rather than philosophy.

He also introduces themes that will be important in his later work, including an ethic of responsibility and a theological anthropology that is intrinsically Christological.

Bonhoeffer, influenced by Karl Barth, reads the Bible as a living word intended to address contemporary readers - attune to modern sensibilities and scholarship, but not conformed to them (see TBR 210, 415-416).

"Freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means 'being-free-for-the-other'" (DBWE 3: 63).

DISCIPLESHIP (1937)

Discipleship

Written in 1935-1936 to answer the question (among others): what does it mean to follow after Christ and act responsibly in the context of Nazi Germany? Published 1937. DBWE 4

Key Themes:

Discipleship

Costly Grace

Freedom for Others

Stellvertretung

Discipleship, formerly translated as *The Cost of Discipleship*, is famous for the distinction Bonhoeffer draws between cheap grace and costly grace. (See DBWE 4:43-56)

It often gets misread as a guide to Christian spirituality divorced from the world, but Bonhoeffer's work on grace rectifies a long-standing misunderstanding of Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by asserting the connection between faith and obedience.

Informed by his re-reading of the Biblical text, of New Testament stories calling people to discipleship, and of the Sermon on the Mount calling people to love their enemies, this text is an astute, politically informed call to live and suffer vicariously on behalf of others, in commitment (faith) and obedience to Christ alone.

LIFE TOGETHER (1939)

Life Together

Written in 1938; Published in 1939. DBWE 5

Key Theme:

Community

Life Together details life in Christian community at the preacher's seminary of the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde. The days comprise time together, time alone, time in prayer – including intercessory prayer – and time in service.

The Christological and ecclesiological foundations of Bonhoeffer's dissertations are evident in this concrete expression of community.

ETHICS (1949)

Ethics

Thirteen Manuscripts written 1940–1942; Collected by Eberhard Bethge; Published 1949, posthumously

Key Themes:

Stellvertretung, vicarious representative action (as an ethical concept)

Ethics as Formation

Responsible Action

Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

Bonhoeffer rejects the idea that ethics can be universally valid or derived from general principles. He advances a Christological understanding of responsibility that is tied to concrete reality and reiterates his idea that one is called to respond to another in need: "Christ was not concerned with whether 'the maxim of an action' could become 'a principle of universal law,' but whether my action now helps my neighbor..." (DBWE 6:98–99).

The ethical question, for Bonhoeffer, is not "how can I be good?" but rather, "what is the will of God?" (DBWE 6:47). In other words, what am I called to do, in this time, and in this place, and in response to those in need in front of me?

Christians should conform themselves to Christ and turn "toward a concrete ethic. We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about how Christ may take form among us today and here" (DBWE 6:99).

Bonhoeffer's theological understanding of *Stellvertretung*, introduced in his dissertation and developed in *Discipleship*, is reiterated in ethical terms in this work.

AN ACCOUNT AT THE TURN OF THE YEAR (1942-1943)

Collection of seventeen connected meditations, found in *Letters and Papers in Prison*, DBWE 8

Key Themes:

Responsible Action

View from Below

Bonhoeffer reflects, with insight and poignancy, on a decade of Nazi tyranny. He names the confusion of the times – a “huge masquerade of evil” – and acknowledges the courage of his friends, family, and co-conspirators to resist (DBWE 8:37-38).

He calls for responsible action, “for hope for a better future on earth” and for “building anew for the coming generation” (DBWE 51).

Most famously, Bonhoeffer asserts the importance of learning to see the events of the world from the perspective “of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering” (DBWE 8:52).

LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (1951)

Letters and Papers from Prison

Written 1943-1944; Published 1951, posthumously

Key Themes:

World Come of Age

Religionless Christianity/This-Worldly Christianity

Who is Christ actually for us today?

Bonhoeffer writes letters that comprise what is known as the “prison theology” to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, beginning on April 30th, 1944. In that first theological letter, Bonhoeffer says he cannot stop thinking about the questions: “What is Christianity? or who is Christ actually for us today?” (DBWE 8:362).

In subsequent letters, Bonhoeffer claims that we are living in a “world come of age” – with advances in science, technology, psychoanalysis, and more – and that God can no longer be viewed as a stopgap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. And, that this news is good news (DBWE 8:425).

Religion, for Bonhoeffer, is an arrogant human construction; a human attempt to reach God. It is always incomplete. The ‘religious act’ is always something partial, whereas ‘faith’ is something whole and involves the whole of one’s whole life. Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life” (DBWE 8: 482).

His work in the rest of the letters is to work out what it means, then, to talk about a “religionless Christianity,” to live fully in the “this-worldliness” of life – in its tasks, questions, successes, failures, sorrows, joys, and “to take seriously no longer one’s own suffering but rather the suffering of God in the world” (DBWE 8:486).

LESSON 1

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S LIFE: 10 KEY TURNING POINTS

**“WHAT KEEPS GNAWING AT ME IS THE QUESTION, WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY,
OR WHO IS CHRIST ACTUALLY FOR US TODAY?”**

LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (DBWE, VOLUME 8: 362)

Objectives:

- Introduce Dietrich Bonhoeffer through key turning points in his life and historical context.
- Encourage participants to think about critical turning points in their own life stories.
- Identify key turning points in Bonhoeffer's life and historical context.
- Recognize the humanity of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Outcomes:

By engaging in this session, participants will learn (more) about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and will recognize that his life choices were shaped by his faith commitments, family values, life experiences, deep reflection, and a particular historical context. They will consider the ways their own choices are shaped in the same way, paying particular attention to their own historical and political context.

Materials:

Script (Brief Biography)

Accompanying Slide Deck

Handout 1 – 10 Turning Points in Your Life

Handout 2 – Bonhoeffer's 10 Key Turning Points

Timeline (~50 minutes)

5 minutes: Welcome and Introduction

5-10 minutes: Activity – Ten Key Turning Points
-Use activity **hand-out** provided.

25 minutes: Bonhoeffer Ten Key Turning Points
-Use **script and slides** provided.
-Use **hand-out** provided.

5 minutes: Table Conversations

10-15 minutes: Discussion and Q&A

FACILITATOR'S SCRIPT

INTRODUCING DIETRICH BONHOEFFER THROUGH KEY TURNING POINTS IN HIS LIFE

*This script accompanies the “Ten Key Turning Points in Bonhoeffer’s Life” hand-out for the participants and the **slides** with the same title.*

The point of today is to recognize that Bonhoeffer’s life choices were shaped by his faith commitments, family values, life experiences, deep reflection, and a particular historical context. In other words, while he was extraordinary by many measures, he was also just a human, an ordinary guy, trying to navigate a very complicated world. That said, he paid attention, and was incredibly responsive to his times and his neighbors, but the propensity to think about Bonhoeffer as a saint or martyr often obscures his humanity and the profound ways he can speak to each one of us.

KEY TURNING POINT 1: DEATH OF HIS BROTHER, WALTER (1918)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian, pastor, and Nazi resister in Germany during World War II. He was born on February 4th, 1906, with his twin sister, Sabine, into a **large, tight-knit family** that was highly educated, politically engaged, but not very religious.

No one expected Bonhoeffer to pursue a theological education. In fact, he was a very accomplished pianist and everyone thought he would pursue a career as a professional musician. But, in 1918, when Dietrich and Sabine were twelve years old, their older brothers – Karl-Friedrich and **Walter** – left to fight for the monarchy in what would be the last year of the first world war. Karl-Friedrich returned, but Walter did not. He was wounded, and died, just a few weeks after his departure from home. His death took an emotional toll on the family and raised deep existential questions for the young Dietrich – about life, death, and the nature and impact of violent political realities (see DBWE 9:9).

By age fourteen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided and announced that he would become a theologian and minister.¹ His older brothers mocked him, warning ‘that becoming a theologian would amount to a retreat from reality.’² But Bonhoeffer’s theological path would not lead him away from the world, but more deeply into it. Famously, he wrote, the **‘ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living’** (DBWE 8:42).

KEY TURNING POINT 2: STUDY AT UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (1930-1931)

KEY TURNING POINT 3: WORSHIP AT ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH IN HARLEM (1930-1931)

Bonhoeffer studied first at Tübingen, then at the University of Berlin, finishing his doctoral dissertation, ***Sanctorum Communio***, in 1927. He served for a year as an associate pastor in Barcelona before writing his post-doctoral dissertation, ***Act and Being***, followed by a fellowship at **Union Theological Seminary in New York**, during the 1930-1931 academic year.

It would be difficult to overstate the impact Bonhoeffer’s year at Union had on his thought. His experiences, including classes with social ethicist **Reinhold Niebuhr**, his observations, and friendships there – as well as at **Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem** – were life-changing. He began to see the events of the world from below, from the perspective of real and racialized human beings suffering in the world.³ The year at Union was also instrumental in Bonhoeffer’s move toward ecumenism and pacifism, or a strong peace ethic.

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

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, he took on roles as a youth secretary in two international ecumenical councils. In addition, Bonhoeffer lectured at the University of Berlin and served as a student chaplain in a working-class neighborhood of the city. His work in the church and the community influenced his academic inquiry and teaching. His questions, even in the classroom, were less exercises in academic abstraction and conjecture, and more existential and urgent questions about life and faith, eventually leading him to the question: **who is Jesus Christ for us today?** He wrote, **"Thereby we are turned away from any abstract ethic and toward a concrete ethic. We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about how Christ may take form among us today and here"**(DBWE 6:99).

KEY TURNING POINT 4: RISE OF NATIONAL SOCIALISTS AND ADOLF HITLER (1933)

The rise of the National Socialists in Germany had concerned the Bonhoeffer family since before Dietrich's return from New York; the ascent of Adolf Hitler to power at the end of January 1933 brought their fears to the fore. Immediately, Bonhoeffer delivered a **radio address** warning his fellow Germans against making an idol of the Führer, or leader (See DBWE 12:268–282).

Within months, Hitler opened the first concentration camp, passed the "Law for the Restoration of Professional Civil Service" which removed all Jews and persons of Jewish descent from civil service – also known as the **"Aryan paragraph,"** and attempted to unify twenty-eight independent, Protestant *Landeskirche* (regional churches) into a unified *Reichskirche* (a national, state church).

While this attempt was ultimately abandoned, a significant sector of the German Protestant Church, the "Christian German Faith Movement," embraced Nazi ideology, the idea of aligning the church with the Nazi state, and pushed for a church version of the "Aryan paragraph."

Bonhoeffer was one the first to recognize "Hitler's policies against the Jews as a problem for the church... and eminently a political one."⁴ He began writing his essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question," even before the law on civil service law was issued. In August of 1933, Bonhoeffer helped draft the **Bethel Confession**, opposing false doctrines of the German Christians, though he refused to sign the final, watered down version.

In September, he, Martin Niemöller, and others formed the **Pastors' Emergency League** to help clergy who had already been dismissed. But by October, about six months before the adoption of the Barmen Theological Declaration and the creation of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer left for London, in both frustration and humility, to lead two German-speaking churches to, in his words, **'go into the wilderness for a spell, and simply work as a pastor, as unobtrusively as possible'** (DBWE 13:22–23).

Despite his hope to work unobtrusively, Bonhoeffer continued to pay attention to developments in Germany and reject the idea being purported by the leadership of the German Christians in Berlin that the work of the Third Reich was some kind of fulfillment of scripture, an unholy kairos, if you will. He rejected the words of Nazi Pastor Reinhold Krause, who said, "When we draw from the gospel that which speaks to our German hearts, then the essentials of the teaching of Jesus emerge clearly and revealingly, coinciding completely with the demands of National Socialism, and we can be proud of that" (Tietz 47). Rather, Bonhoeffer preached that Christians "**should read the Bible not only 'for' ourselves... but also 'against' ourselves**" to know and love the world in which we actually live, even one filled with struggle, poverty, and uncertainty (Best xxiii-xxiv). He remained active in the ecumenical movement, discussing developments in Germany with **Bishop George Bell** and other leaders, and he reunited with his friend, Jean Lassere, at a conference in Fanø, Denmark, in the summer of 1934, where Bonhoeffer insisted that the conference pass a resolution, proclaiming "**we are immediately faced with the decision: National Socialist or Christian**" (DBWE 13:192). It was here that he also issued a clarion call to peace, noting that peace is not reached by a path of security, but only with risk. "**The hour is late,**" he said. "**The world is choked with weapons, and dreadful is the distrust which looks out of all men's eyes. The trumpets of war may blow tomorrow. For what are we waiting?**" (DBWE 13:309). "*For what are we waiting?*"

KEY TURNING POINT 5: APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF CONFESSING CHURCH SEMINARY AT FINKENWALDE (1935)

A year and a half later, in 1935, Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation to direct a preachers' seminary of the Confessing Church, first at Zingsthoft, then at **Finkenwalde**. His acceptance meant abandoning a planned trip to India, to study non-violent resistance with Gandhi. At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer tightly structured the days of the seminarians. He was accused by some of his colleagues, including Karl Barth, of legalism, of fostering a monastic retreat from the world, when his intention was to prepare the students for the difficult reality of life in parish ministry, in opposition to the Nazi regime (DBWE 14:268).

KEY TURNING POINT 6: KRISTALLNACHT POGROMS (1938)

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

KEY TURNING POINT 7: DECISION TO RETURN TO GERMANY (1939)
KEY TURNING POINT 8: DECISION TO JOIN THE RESISTANCE (1940)

Bonhoeffer's friends abroad were worried for his safety; with their help, he returned to the United States in June of 1939. But Bonhoeffer never felt settled about this decision and returned to Germany within a month. **"Christians in Germany will face a terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security"** (DBWE 15:210).

Upon his return, Bonhoeffer began work as an agent of the **Abwehr**, the German Military Intelligence and the seat of the resistance. Ostensibly, Bonhoeffer was using his ecumenical contacts throughout Europe to gather information for the Nazis when, actually, he was passing information about the resistance in the other direction. In this context, he began work on his *Ethics*.

KEY TURNING POINT 9: ARREST AND IMPRISONMENT (1943)
**KEY TURNING POINT 10: DISCOVERY OF INVOLVEMENT
IN RESISTANCE AND EXECUTION (1944-1945)**

On April 5th, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested on tenuous charges related to his resistance work and sent to **Tegel prison** in Berlin. More than a year later, on July 20th, 1944, the final attempt on Hitler's life failed. The Gestapo subsequently discovered files in which Bonhoeffer was implicated in the planned coup.

In October he was taken to the Gestapo prison in Berlin, moved to Buchenwald in February, and then to the **Flossenbürg** concentration camp where, on April 9th, 1945, he was executed by hanging. He was 39 years old.

Bonhoeffer's family and friends, including his fiancé, **Maria von Wedemeyer**, did not learn of his death until the end of June. His brother, Klaus Bonhoeffer, and brothers-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi and Rudiger Schleicher, were all executed the same week as Dietrich.

Notes:

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

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

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

4 Schlingensiepen, 125.

HANDOUT

10 KEY TURNING POINTS IN YOUR LIFE

What childhood or family events and experiences shaped you?

What educational and career choices did you make?

Which friendships or relationships formed you?

Who influenced or mentored you? Who have you influenced or mentored?

What political or social events impacted your life, your convictions, and/or your actions?

| | When | What Happened? | Why is it a Turning Point? |
|---|------|----------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | | | |
| 2 | | | |
| 3 | | | |
| 4 | | | |
| 5 | | | |

| | When | What Happened? | Why is it a Turning Point? |
|----|------|----------------|----------------------------|
| 6 | | | |
| 7 | | | |
| 8 | | | |
| 9 | | | |
| 10 | | | |

Additional notes:

HANDOUT

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S LIFE: 10 KEY TURNING POINTS

| | When | What Happened? | Why is it a Turning Point? |
|---|------------------|--|---|
| 1 | April 28th, 1918 | Impacted by the death of his brother, Walter, who was killed in action in WWI. | Walter's death raised profound questions for 12-year-old Dietrich that contributed to his decision to study theology. |
| 2 | 1930 | Studied at Union Theological Seminary in NYC on a Sloane Fellowship (1930-1931). | Bonhoeffer studied with social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr and studied American philosophy (pragmatism) with Eugene Lyman. He also developed important friendships (with Jean Lassere, Paul and Marion Lehmann, and Erwin Sutz) that transformed his thinking. |
| 3 | 1930 | Attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, NYC, while a student at Union. It was during the Harlem Renaissance. | Bonhoeffer participated in worship and community with this dynamic, politically engaged African-American church, and saw - through his friendship with fellow Union student Albert Franklin Fisher - the horrors of racism. |
| 4 | 1933 | Hitler appointed Chancellor in January; Enabling Act signed in March; Dachau Concentration Camp opened in March; Anti-Jewish Boycott & "Aryan Paragraph" adopted in April. | These political developments fundamentally changed Bonhoeffer's context, and that of the whole world. He immediately recognized the dangers of a leader who becomes an idol of the people, and issued a public warning against making Hitler into one (via the radio). He also pushed back against the Nazification of the church. |
| 5 | 1935 | Directed the Confessing Church Seminary at Finkenwalde. | Bonhoeffer was appointed the director of pastoral training at the newly formed (underground/illegal) seminary at Finkenwalde. He gave up an opportunity to study non-violent resistance with Mahatma Gandhi to take the post. One of the seminarians, Eberhard Bethge, became Bonhoeffer's best friend, theological confidant, and (eventual) biographer. |

| | When | What Happened? | Why is is a Turning Point? |
|----|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 6 | Nov. 9, 1938 | Witnessed <i>Kristallnacht</i> - The Night of Broken Glass. | Bonhoeffer was horrified by the Nazi terror carried out against Jewish communities vandalizing and destroying Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues. He was also horrified by the silence of the churches in the aftermath. Bonhoeffer's worldview was forever changed by the November pogroms. |
| 7 | Summer 1939 | Traveled to NYC, but returned almost immediately to Germany. WWII begins with the German invasion of Poland on September 1 | In June, Bonhoeffer returned to NYC at the insistence of his friends and colleagues who were worried about his safety, but he was unsettled and felt that his place was in Germany, in the midst of the crisis. On July 7th, he boarded a ship heading back to Europe. |
| 8 | Oct. 30, 1940 | Appointed Secret Agent of the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) - the seat of the resistance to Hitler and the Nazis. | Bonhoeffer knew about the plans for a coup before he left for America in 1939, but did not join the effort - as double agent for the Abwehr - until the fall of 1940. He was prepared to sacrifice his life on behalf of others. At the same time, he continued to support pastors in the Confessing Church and work on his Ethics. He faced and wrote about real, concrete ethical challenges. |
| 9 | April 5, 1943 | Arrested and imprisoned at Tegel Prison in Berlin. | Bonhoeffer was arrested on tenuous charges unrelated to the conspiracy. During his time at Tegel Prison, Bonhoeffer continued to write and think through new theological ideas, including the idea of religionless Christianity, which he recorded in letters and sent to Eberhard Bethge. |
| 10 | July 20, 1944 April 4, 1945 | Failed attempt on Hitler's life at the Wolf's Lair. Executed at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp. | When the attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20th, 1944 failed, it sealed Bonhoeffer's fate. The resistance group's secret files were discovered in September, and Bonhoeffer was implicated in the plans. In October he was moved from Tegel to the Reich Central Security Headquarters, then to Buchenwald, and finally to Flossenbürg, where he was executed by hanging. |

LESSON 2

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE NEIGHBOR: THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL IDEAS

"THE ATTENTION OF RESPONSIBLE PEOPLE IS DIRECTED TO CONCRETE NEIGHBORS IN THEIR CONCRETE NEED."

ETHICS (DBWE, VOLUME 6: 261)

Objectives:

- Introduce Bonhoeffer's key theological and ethical themes.
- Recognize the interconnection and continuity of these themes.
- Highlight Bonhoeffer's lifelong theological and ethical commitment to the neighbor.
- Begin to consider Bonhoeffer's understanding of responsibility, or responsible action.

Outcomes:

By engaging in this session, participants will be introduced to Bonhoeffer's theological and ethical thinking about the "neighbor," starting in his earliest writing in his dissertation to his latest work in his letters and papers from prison. They will begin to think about the relevance of Bonhoeffer's thought for our politically fraught and divisive times.

Materials:

Script

Accompanying Slide Deck

Handout - Eight Theological and Ethical Claims about the Neighbor

Optional - Facilitator Resource - Overview of Bonhoeffer's Major Works

Timeline (~50 minutes)

5-10 minutes: Welcome and Check-In
-Review Week 1

15 minutes: Bonhoeffer's Key Themes
-Use **script** and **slides** provided.

15-20 minutes: Table Conversations
-Use hand-out provided.
-Use discussion questions on hand-out.

10 minutes: Discussion and Q&A

FACILITATOR'S SCRIPT

INTRODUCING BONHOEFFER'S KEY THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL THEMES; FOCUS: NEIGHBOR

This script accompanies the "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Key Theological and Ethical Themes" slides. There is another "Facilitator's Resource" earlier in this packet that includes a more detailed walk through Bonhoeffer's major works and themes. If your participants are already familiar with Bonhoeffer, you might consider sharing it or using it as a type of script before sharing the slides. Some of the material from that resource is incorporated into this script.

Slide 1

It would be difficult to overstate the continuity in Bonhoeffer's theological and ethical thought. In fact, it makes the most sense to think about his key themes as iterative and evolving – over the course of his life – with new, enriching layers added along the way.

Slide 2

The graphic on the first slide, and slides to follow, is cyclical (on purpose) and introduces his four primary themes: Other (or neighbor), Community, Grace, and Responsibility. If you walk away from these sessions with those four ideas, you will have a great framework for understanding all Bonhoeffer's works. (Next week, we'll add another theme in the center and note the Christ-centered or Christ-centric character of all his work, too.)

To think about the development of Bonhoeffer's thinking, start in the top right corner with **"other,"** or neighbor. In his **dissertation**, written in 1927 and published in 1930, he says that what it means to be human comes in encounter with, and ethical response to, other humans. And, unlike philosophers who wrote before him who were only interested in others or an "other" insofar as that "other" served as reflection of my own I (or my own self), Bonhoeffer emphasized the **importance and integrity of the other as other**. Put another way, he saw the value in others – so the use of this term "other" is not negative (as in "othering" someone), but **positive and affirming**.

Moving around the circle, he wrote about **community**, about the interrelation of people, and community, and God. He wrote about community in his dissertation, **Sanctorum Communio**, and later in his well-known book, **Life Together**.

Grace is a central theme, discussed at length in his book **Discipleship**. You might know that book as **The Cost of Discipleship**. He made a distinction between **cheap grace and costly grace**. In the end, Bonhoeffer concluded that grace is an unmerited gift of mercy and forgiveness from God (like Luther), and recognized that it is a gift that transforms you (like Augustine, and Luther properly understood), and calls you to discipleship. **"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ"** (DBWE 4: 44). Costly grace "causes a disciple to leave [one's] nets and follow" Christ (DBWE 4:45). Costly grace "did not excuse one from works. Instead, it endlessly sharpened the call to discipleship" (DBWE 4: 49).

All together, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the other, of community, of grace – coupled with the evolving historical, religious, and political landscape of Nazi Germany – coalesced in his theological and ethical thinking as a **call to responsibility, or responsible action**. The ethical question, for Bonhoeffer, is not "how can I be good?" but rather, **"what is the will of God?"** (DBWE 6: 47.) In other words, what am I called to do, in this time and place, and in response to those in need in front of me?

These four themes – Other, Community, Grace, and Responsibility – have theological and ethical significance in Bonhoeffer's thought, persist throughout his work, and build on one another.

Slide 3

In Bonhoeffer's **dissertation**, you can find expanded treatments of these first two themes: **Other** and **Community**. Bonhoeffer developed what scholar Clifford Green calls a "**theology of sociality**." The outcome of this idea, this "theology of sociality," is a "**new social form of humanity in which love liberates people from dominating and exploitative power over others to the freedom of being with and for others**." (Green 2). Take note of this understanding of freedom.

The famous dictum from the dissertation is important to note here, too. "**Christ existing as community**" uncovers Bonhoeffer's understanding that the church is both the ongoing revelation of God in the world and a concrete community (DBWE 1:199).

Slide 4

Bonhoeffer also introduces the concept of vicarious **representative action** (in German, *Stellvertretung*) as a theological concept. It is a reference to Christ's vicarious representative action on behalf of (fallen) humanity which restores community between humans and God as well as between humans.

Slides 5 and 6

Bonhoeffer's **Discipleship** often gets misread as a guide to Christian spirituality divorced from the world, but Bonhoeffer's work on **grace** rectifies a long-standing misunderstanding of Martin Luther's **doctrine of justification** by asserting the connection between faith and obedience. Informed by his re-reading of the Biblical text, of New Testament stories calling people to **discipleship**, and of the **Sermon on the Mount** calling people to **love their enemies**, it is an astute, politically informed call to live and suffer vicariously on behalf of others, in commitment (faith) and obedience to Christ alone. **The freedom of a Christian**, offered up by that gift of grace, is not a blank check, offering Christians the freedom to do whatever they wish, but freedom to act on behalf of others, freedom for others. Or, as put in his lectures on Genesis 1-3, "**being free means 'being-free-for-the-other'**" (DBWE 3: 63).

Slides 7 and 8

In his **Ethics**, Bonhoeffer rejects the idea that ethics can be universally valid (good in all times and in all places) or derived from general principles. Rather, he advances a Christological understanding of **responsibility** that is tied to concrete reality and reiterates his idea that one is called to respond to another in need: "**Christ was not concerned with whether 'the maxim of an action' could become 'a principle of universal law,' but whether my action now helps my neighbor...**" (DBWE 6:98-99). He returns to the theological idea of **vicarious representative action** (from his dissertation) and adds an ethical component. This idea forms the basis of his idea of **ethics as formation**. Christians should conform themselves to Christ and turn "**toward a concrete ethic. We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about how Christ may take form among us today and here**" (DBWE 6:99). This idea reminds us of those early ideas of the sociality of theology and "**Christ exists as community**."

In the section of **Ethics** titled, "Ethics as Formation" (DBWE 6: 76-102), Bonhoeffer wrote, the "first concern [of the church] is not with the so-called religious functions of human beings, but with the existence in the world of whole human beings in all their relationships. **The church's concern is not religion, but the form of Christ and its taking form among a band of people**" (DBWE 6: 97).

What does ethics as formation, or responsibility, look like, then?

Still, Christ is not a principle according to which the whole world must be formed. Christ does not proclaim a system of that which would be good today, here, and at all times. Christ does not teach an abstract ethic that must be carried out, come what may. Christ was not essentially a teacher, a lawgiver, but human being, a real human being like us. Accordingly, Christ does not want to us to be first of all pupils, representatives and advocates of a particular doctrine, but human beings, real human beings before God. Christ did not, like an ethicist, love a theory about the good; **he loved real people**. Christ was not interested like a philosopher, in what is 'generally valid,' but in that which serves real concrete human beings. Christ was not concerned with whether "the maxim of an action" could become "a principle of universal law," but whether my action now helps my neighbor to be a human being before God. God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, or a universally valid belief, or a law. **God became human** (DBWE 6:98).

"Thereby," he continued, "**we are turned away from any abstract ethic and toward a concrete ethic**" (DBWE 6:99).

Slide 9

It is no surprise, then, that in a **letter of support to his co-conspirators**, written at the turn of the year from 1942 to 1943, he asserted the importance of seeing world events from the **view from below**. "It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, **from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering**" (DBWE 8:52).

Slide 10

This slide is the same slide as 9, but shows the dates - and shows, more clearly, the development of his thinking over time.

Slide 11

In **Letters and Papers from Prison**, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend and theological confidante, Eberhard Bethge, on April 30th, 1944: "What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or **who is Christ actually for us today?**" (DBWE 8: 362). His key responses are indicated on the slide and build on the continuity of his thinking introduced today.

We'll return to those questions in the weeks to come.

DISCUSSION:

Today, we are going to review the four key themes in Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics through his focus on and his expansive view of the neighbor. Use the "It's About the Neighbor: Eight Ethical and Theological Claims about the Neighbor in the Work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" hand-out for small and/or large group discussion.

HANDOUT

EIGHT ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CLAIMS ABOUT THE NEIGHBOR IN THE WORK OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

| | Date | Source | Theological or Ethical Claim |
|---|------|---|--|
| 1 | 1930 | <p style="text-align: center;">DBWE, Volume 1: <i>Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Dissertation</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">“[Christian love] <i>loves the real neighbor.</i>” DBWE 1:169</p> <p>“This being-for-each-other must now be actualized through acts of love. <i>Three great, positive possibilities of acting for each other</i> in the community of saints present themselves: <i>self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor; intercessory prayer; and, finally, the mutual forgiveness of sins</i> in God’s name. All of these involve giving up the self ‘for’ my neighbor’s benefit, with the readiness to do and bear everything in the neighbor’s place, indeed, if necessary, to sacrifice myself, standing as a <i>substitute</i> for my neighbor. Even if purely vicarious action is rarely actualized, it is intended in every genuine act of love.” DBWE 1:184 (or TBR 51)</p> |
| 2 | 1931 | <p style="text-align: center;">DBWE, Volume 11: Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932 “Draft of a Catechism: As You Believe, So You Receive”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Catechism</p> | <p>“How then should the Christian behave politically? As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, nonetheless, even here the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for his neighbor.” DBWE 11:263 (or TBR 326)</p> |
| 3 | 1934 | <p style="text-align: center;">DBWE, Volume 13: London: 1933-1935 “Sermon for Evening Worship Service on 2 Corinthians 12:9” in London</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sermon</p> | <p>“Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak.” DBWE 13:402</p> |
| 4 | 1940 | <p style="text-align: center;">DBWE, Volume 6: Ethics “Ethics as Formation”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ethics</p> | <p>“Christ was not concerned with whether “the maxim of an action” could become “a principle of universal law”, but whether my action now helps my neighbor to be a human being before God.” DBWE 6:98-99</p> |

| | Date | Source | Theological or Ethical Claim |
|---|------|--|---|
| 5 | 1942 | DBWE, Volume 6: Ethics "Ethics as Formation" Ethics | "The attention of responsible people is directed to concrete neighbors in their concrete reality." DBWE 6:261 (or TBR 639) |
| 6 | 1942 | DBWE, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943" Christmas Essay | "The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living." DBWE 8:42 (or TBR 766) |
| 7 | 1942 | DBWE, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943" Christmas Essay | "It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering." DBWE 8:52 (or TBR 775) |
| 8 | 1944 | DBWE, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison "Outline of a Book" Prison Theology | "[O]ur relationship to God is a new life in 'being there for others,' through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbor within reach in any given situation. God in human form!" DBWE 8:501 (or TBR 813) |

Discussion Questions:

- Who is your neighbor? Who are your neighbors?
- How broadly are you willing to define the category?
- Who is not your neighbor? Anyone? Why?
- What are the outcomes of defining the category of neighbor broadly?
- What are the outcomes or consequences of defining the category of neighbor narrowly?

LESSON 3

FAITH IS WORLDLY: BONHOEFFER AND “THIS-WORLDLINESS”

“ONE ONLY LEARNS TO HAVE FAITH BY LIVING IN THE FULL THIS-WORLDLINESS OF LIFE... LIVING FULLY IN THE MIDST OF LIFE’S TASKS, QUESTIONS, SUCCESSES AND FAILURES, EXPERIENCES, AND PERPLEXITIES - THEN ONE TAKES SERIOUSLY NO LONGER ONE’S OWN SUFFERINGS BUT RATHER THE SUFFERING OF GOD IN THE WORLD.”

LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (DBWE, VOLUME 8: 486)

Objectives:

- Review Bonhoeffer’s key theological and ethical themes in light of his key turning points.
- Revisit and underscore Bonhoeffer’s humanity.
- Discuss the meaning of the term “justice.”
- Explore Bonhoeffer’s understanding of what it means to be Christian (hint: justice is important).

Outcomes:

By attending this session, participants will continue to consider Bonhoeffer’s theological and ethical themes, but now in light of his thinking about justice. They will continue to think about the relevance of Bonhoeffer’s thought for our politically fraught and divisive times.

Materials Provided:

Script

Slide Deck

Activity Hand-Outs

Timeline (~50 minutes)

5 minutes: Welcome and Check-In

5-10 minutes: Review of Weeks 1 and 2

5 minutes: Bonhoeffer’s Humanity
-Use **script** and **slides** provided.

10-15 minutes: Activity: What is justice?
-Use **script** and **hand-out** provided

10-15 minutes: Table Conversations
-Use **hand-out** provided.

5 minutes: Discussion and Q&A

FACILITATOR'S SCRIPT

FAITH IS WORLDLY: BONHOEFFER & THIS-WORLDLINESS

Slide 2

If you were here Weeks 1 and 2, you know we first talked about Bonhoeffer's life in ten key turning points, noting the importance of his family, his education, his friendships, and his historical context.

Slide 3

Then, we reviewed his key theological and ethical themes, and the continuity of his thinking from his earliest work to his latest.

Note: The hand-outs from week 1 (ten key turning points) and week 2 (overview Bonhoeffer's major works and themes and/or eight ethical and theological claims about the neighbor) can be thought of as layers, like those old anatomy books with transparent pages showing the bones, then muscles, then major organs, laid on top of one another to show their relationships. If you want, you can consider teasing out the relationships between Bonhoeffer's life/historical events and the development of his theology. Those relationships are pretty clear.

Slide 4

For a brief look at this interplay, take a look at Slide 4. Click through the animations.

Themes

Themes with years

Walter's Death (1918)

Union Seminary in NYC (1930)

Hitler (1933)

Finkenwalde (1935)

Krystallnacht (1938)

Abwehr (1940)

Ongoing Atrocities (1942...)

Imprisoned at Tegel (1943)

This-Worldly Christianity (1944)

Slide 5

"One only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life... **living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities** - then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the **suffering of God in the world.**"

Bonhoeffer wrote about this-worldly Christianity (which he also writes about as religionless Christianity) on July 21st, 1944 in a letter to Eberhard Bethge. It was the day after the infamous failed attempt on Hitler's life (the July 20th plot) and is the event that would, it turns out, seal Bonhoeffer's fate and send him to his death.

But his thoughts about living fully in the this-worldliness of life is precisely why we need to remember Bonhoeffer's humanity, and his own questions, successes, failures, and perplexities; ones that are very much like our own. Earlier in that same month, July of 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote a poem titled, "Who am I?"

Slides 6-9

Bonhoeffer's "Who am I?" poem. Read it aloud.

Slide 10

Here are some photos of Bonhoeffer, humanized, this-worldly.

Bonhoeffer playing guitar.

Bonhoeffer on piano; Eberhard Bethge on flute.

Bonhoeffer smoking a cigarette.

They stand in sharp contrast to these images -

Slide 11

Bonhoeffer, the martyr and saint.

Maybe our view of Bonhoeffer does not have to be an either/or, but it must, I contend, be a both/and. It does not serve us or our reading of his work well if the stained glass windows or the statue at Westminster Abbey are the only view we hold.

Slide 12: What is Justice?

Use the Week 3.3 Activity **Hand-Out: "What is Justice?"** to explore the idea of justice with your participants. (You can also just have participants make notes on a piece of paper or index card.) The hand-out offers instructions. Allow a few minutes for participants to write down four words they associate with the concept "justice." Ask them to join a nearby partner and agree to four words from their original lists. If you have time, ask pairs to talk with another pair and repeat the process. (Spend about 5 minutes total on this activity.)

Ask individuals or groups to share their words. You can jot them down on paper or write them on a white/chalkboard or poster paper. If you have lots of time, you can ask the groups to write their agreed upon words for everyone to see. Most likely, they will group into words like fairness, equity, equality, on one hand, and punishment, retribution, revenge, on the other. Say some things about what you notice about the variety of words and ideas that everyone has about this one word. You might also note that the reason some conversations about justice go awry is because the participants in the discussion are not using the word in the same way!

Slide 13: Types of Justice

Briefly, review the five types of justice on this slide.

Slide 14: Bonhoeffer on Justice

Bonhoeffer's best friend, Eberhard Bethge, married his niece, Renate Schleicher (the daughter of Bonhoeffer's sister, Ursula and her husband, Rüdiger Schleicher). Their first born son – Dietrich Bonhoeffer's godson – was born while Bonhoeffer was in prison in Berlin. In May of 1944, he wrote, "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge." The long essay includes this passage: "Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and doing justice among human beings" (DBWE 8: 389).

The justice he is talking about here carries connotations of fairness and equity, the kind of justice described on the last slide as **social justice**.

Slide 15

Gerechten

Slide 16

Use the Week 3.4 **Hand-Out**: This-Worldly Christianity: Three Examples of Bonhoeffer on "Doing Justice Among Humans" for discussion.

The first example is a longer selection from the baptismal essay, ending with the passage from Slide 14.

The second example includes two passages from fiction that Bonhoeffer wrote in Tegel prison.

The third example comes from a sermon preached in London in 1934. It also includes secondary source commentary and a connection to his ideas of religionless Christianity, explored in prison writings from 1944.

Note: You can decide if you want to walk all your participants through each example or give them some time in small groups to discuss. It may depend on your room arrangement, number of participants, and time-frame. A minute or two of free-writing at the end of this discussion could make for a more robust discussion.

HANDOUT

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

WRITE DOWN FOUR WORDS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH "JUSTICE."

WITH A PARTNER, AGREE ON FOUR WORDS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH "JUSTICE."

IN GROUPS OF FOUR, AGREE ON FOUR WORDS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH "JUSTICE."

HANDOUT

THIS-WORLDLY CHRISTIANITY: THREE EXAMPLES OF BONHOEFFER ON “DOING JUSTICE AMONG HUMANS”

| | Source | Doing Justice |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | <p>DBWE, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison May 1944 – Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge* Written in Tegel Prison in Berlin</p> <p>*Son of Eberhard Bethge and Renate Schliecher Bethge (Dietrich’s niece); Godson of Dietrich Bonhoeffer</p> | <p>“You are being baptized today as a Christian. All those great and ancient words of the Christian proclamation will be pronounced over you, and the command of Jesus Christ to baptize will be carried out, without your understanding any of it. But we too are being thrown back all the way to the beginnings of our understanding. What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and the Holy Spirit, love for one’s enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something new and revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. <i>Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself.</i> It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and <i>we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and doing justice among human beings</i>” (DBWE 8:389, emphasis added).</p> |
| 2 | <p>DBWE, Volume 7: Fiction from Tegel Prison Summer 1943 – “Speech of the Major” from fragments of a novel drafted in prison Written in Tegel Prison in Berlin.</p> | <p>“For me, the main issue for individuals and for peoples is whether or not they have learned to live with other human beings and peoples. That’s more important to me than all their ideas, thoughts, and convictions” (DBWE 7:167).</p> <p>“I look only at people and their task of living with other people, and I view succeeding at this very task as the fulfillment of human life and history” (DBWE 7:168).</p> |

| | Source | Doing Justice |
|---|---|--|
| 3 | <p>DBWE, Volume 13: London, 1933-1935 1934 - Sermon for Evening Worship Service on 2 Corinthians 12:9 Delivered in London</p> | <p>“Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak” (DBWE 13:402).</p> <p>This sermon is included in Isabel Best’s 2012 volume of <i>The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer</i>, which only includes 31 texts. Best offers some context; she notes that some of Bonhoeffer’s work with the Emergency Pastors’ League had taken place at Bethel, a care facility in Bielefeld, Germany for persons with mental and physical disabilities. He had been struck by their vulnerability – especially in the Nazi context – and what he imagined to be their “better insight into certain realities of human existence” (Best 167).</p> <p>In July of 1934, Bonhoeffer arranged for his congregations in London to send donations to Bethel. His concerns for these people – lingering nearly a year after he met them – are resonant with his early understanding that the “Other” places an ethical demand on me, calling me to respond.</p> <p>Moreover, his concerns for these folks, and others on the margins, continue to shape his theological thinking until his last days, when he writes about the importance of seeing the events of the world from the “view from below” (DBWE 8: 52) and, later, from Tegel prison that “human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, [toward the false concept of] God as deus ex machina. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help” (DBWE 8:479). This shift in perspective, he goes on to say, will be the starting point for his “worldly interpretation” of (Christian) faith (DBWE 8:480).</p> |

LESSON 4

TAKING A STAND:

“IS THIS A BONHOEFFER MOMENT?” IS THE WRONG QUESTION

“THE ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE QUESTION IS NOT HOW I EXTRICATE MYSELF HEROICALLY FROM A SITUATION BUT [HOW] A COMING GENERATION IS TO GO ON LIVING.”

LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (DBWE, VOLUME 8: 42)

Objectives:

- Consider six lessons from the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
- Explore the relevance of these lessons for our politically fraught times.
- Ask the right Bonhoeffer question(s).

Outcomes:

By attending this session, participants will consider lessons from Bonhoeffer formed by paying attention to the intersections of his biography, theology, and ethics. They will continue to think about the relevance of Bonhoeffer’s thought for our politically fraught and divisive times, and consider what responsible action looks like in their own lives.

Materials Provided:

Script
Slide Deck
Activity Hand-Outs

Timeline (~50 minutes)

5 minutes: Welcome and Check-In

5-10 minutes: Review of Weeks 2 and 3
-Use **script and slides** provided.

15 minutes: Lessons from Bonhoeffer
-Use **script and hand-out** provided

10-15 minutes: Table Conversations
-Use **activity hand-out** provided.

5-10 minutes: Discussion and Q&A

FACILITATOR'S SCRIPT

TAKING A STAND: "IS THIS A BONHOEFFER MOMENT?" IS THE WRONG QUESTION

Slide 1: Title Slide

Slide 2

This slide is the last slide from Week 2, the exploration of Bonhoeffer's key theological and ethical themes. Recall the important question he sent his friend, Eberhard Bethge in April of 1944 from prison: "**who is Christ for us today?**" Earlier, in his Ethics, he said that Christians should conform themselves to Christ and "turn toward a concrete ethic. We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about how Christ may take form among us today and here" (DBWE 6:99). It is both a conviction and a question that emanates from each of the four primary themes: other or neighbor, community, grace, and responsibility.

Slide 3

When reviewing the overlay of Bonhoeffer's theology with his biography (like last week)... [click through the slide] ... adding the experiences and historical events that shaped his thinking, it makes sense that the center of his thought is populated by justice and identified as Christ-centered. **Slide 4** for emphasis.

Slide 5: Lessons from Bonhoeffer

Here they are – six lessons from Bonhoeffer that seem, at first glance, a bit pedestrian, even cliché: ask questions, challenge assumptions, make friends, care for others, stand up for justice, and take responsibility. Or, boiled down to three lessons: pay attention, it's about the neighbor, and it's about the coming generations. [Click through the slide to add the three.]

Slide 6

But let's think again about his life, theology, and ethics and what these lessons look like in context. [Note: click through and talk through this slowly – or it will be too overwhelming. The information you need here is on the slide and connects back to Week 1. It could also be an interactive discussion – allowing participants to help make the connections or note additional examples of how Bonhoeffer's life gives rise to those six lessons.]

Slide 7

"The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living."

Use the hand-out and activity hand-out – for the next 15 minutes.

Slide 8

"Is this a Bonhoeffer Moment?" is the wrong question. Bonhoeffer never asks that question. He asks, "Who is Christ for us today?" Bonhoeffer's neighbor love and neighbor ethic, coming from a deeply Christ-centered theology, is not momentary. It is a sustained, this-worldly, faith aimed at making this world a better place for the coming generations.

HANDOUT

LESSONS FROM DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was a German pastor, theologian, ecumenist, and peace activist. He wrote profoundly about Christian faith, community, grace, and ethics, centered on the question, 'Who is Christ for us today?' The unspeakable human suffering resulting from the atrocities of the Nazi Regime compelled him first into church resistance and finally into political resistance culminating in a conspiracy against the Hitler regime aimed at installing a new government that would end the war and those atrocities. Imprisoned during the last two years of his life, Bonhoeffer was executed just weeks before the end of the war.

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Ask Questions</p> <hr/> <p>Challenge Assumptions</p> | <p>Pay Attention!</p> | <p>“What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” DBWE 8:362</p> |
| <p>Make friends</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/> <p>Care for others</p> | <p>It’s about the neighbor!</p> | <p>“The attention of responsible people is directed to concrete neighbors in their concrete reality.” DBWE 6:261</p> <p>“It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.” DBWE 8:52</p> |
| <p>Stand up for justice</p> <hr/> <p>Take Responsibility</p> | <p>It’s about the coming generations!</p> | <p>“The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living.” DBWE 8:42</p> |

HANDOUT

LESSONS FROM DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

| | |
|---|--|
| Pay Attention! | What questions will you ask? What assumptions will you interrogate? |
| Ask Questions Challenge Assumptions | |
| It's About the Neighbor! | Which of your friends help you challenge your assumptions? How? How will you care for Others? Neighbors? Strangers? |
| Make Friends Care for others | |
| It's About Coming Generations! | How will you stand up for justice? What are ways to take responsibility? |
| Stand up for Justice Take Responsibility | |

OPTIONAL LESSON 5

READING BONHOEFFER TODAY

READING BONHOEFFER AGAINST CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Note: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has a long history of standing against Christian Nationalism. For more resources on this and other topics of faithful civic engagement, please see the new draft social statement on *Civic Life and Faith*. This week is an intentionally optional lesson because we recognize not every congregation is able to have productive conversations around Christian Nationalism, due to the deep divides in our country and our congregations. LAMPa is here to walk with leaders, individuals, and communities as we navigate the ways in which we are called to show up for and with our neighbors, in fraught times and in disagreement, seeking justice for a world God loves.

Objectives:

- Review Weeks 1-4.
- Define Christian Nationalism.
- Understand how Bonhoeffer helps us stand up to Christian Nationalism.

Outcomes:

By attending this session, participants will consider lessons from Bonhoeffer in direct conversation with the threat of Christian Nationalism. They will continue to think about the relevance of Bonhoeffer's thought for our politically fraught and divisive times, and consider what responsible action looks like in their own lives.

Materials Provided:

Script
Slide Deck
Discussion Notes (in Script)
Optional Handout (only in Facilitator's Guide)

Timeline (~50 minutes)

5 minutes: Welcome and Check-In

5-10 minutes: Review of Weeks 1-4
-Use **slides** provided.

10 minutes: Define Christian Nationalism
-Use **script and slides** provided

15 minutes: How Bonhoeffer Helps
-Use **script and slides** provided.

10-15 minutes: Discussion and Q&A
-Optional **handout** provided

FACILITATOR'S SCRIPT

READING BONHOEFFER TODAY & READING BONHOEFFER AGAINST CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

General notes for the facilitator:

Bonhoeffer's life is not a template for ours; our concrete reality is not his concrete reality. In other words, one cannot simply look at Bonhoeffer's life and choices and find answers for how we should live or choices we should make. His life, as we have seen over and over, is an iterative process of paying attention and responding to needs.

Facile comparisons with Nazi Germany are unhelpful. Cheap comparisons of Donald Trump to Hitler or Joe Biden to Hitler or George W. Bush to Hitler or Barack Obama to Hitler (all those comparisons have been made) denigrate the memory and dignity of the victims of the Holocaust, it re-traumatizes the victims, their memories, their families. Germany embraces and cultivates a culture of remembrance; we ought to respect – and emulate – that difficult and meaningful work.

That said, respecting a culture of remembrance with regard to Holocaust victims does not mean that we should not speak out against authoritarian impulses that threaten an inclusive, pluralistic, and just community and country.

The first four weeks of this curriculum have given you and your participants tools to see how Bonhoeffer can help us think about our faith-based civic roles and ethical responsibilities today.

Today is about discovering the ways Bonhoeffer helps us stand up against Christian Nationalism.

Slide 1

Title Slide.

Slides 2, 3, & 4

Review Slides.

Slide 5

Why read Bonhoeffer now?

Here are three reasons why we might read Bonhoeffer today:

Bonhoeffer invites community and civic engagement through care for the neighbor. *(He rejects universal ethical principles for a concrete ethic; he calls us to act on behalf of those, specifically, who have been marginalized and overlooked.)*

Bonhoeffer imagines a future, and a theology (captured in his idea of religionless Christianity, or *this-worldly* Christianity), for the coming generations. (He rejects the fixed claims of religion for a dynamic faith lived out in midst of life's joys and sufferings.)

Bonhoeffer opposes Christian Nationalism. (He rejects the claims to absolute truth and power that define Christian Nationalism.)

Earlier sessions in this series have focused on Bonhoeffer's theology through care for the neighbor and Bonhoeffer's hope for a *this-worldly* Christianity. Today's session will highlight the ways in which Bonhoeffer helps us take a stand against Christian Nationalism.

So, what is Christian Nationalism?

Slide 6

Dr. Jemar Tisby, a public historian, author, and research consultant offers this working definition of Christian Nationalism: "Christian Nationalism is an ethno-cultural ideology that uses Christian symbolism to create a permission structure for the acquisition of political power and social control." <https://jemartisby.substack.com/p/is-white-christian-nationalism-christian>

Slide 7

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, in a November 2022 video statement, defined Christian Nationalism this way: "Christian Nationalism identifies a human-made government with God's will and seeks privilege specifically for Christians, and many times only white Christians." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yx_PR7ZKXO

She also endorsed, on behalf of the ELCA, the Christians against Christian Nationalism definition which puts it this way:

Slide 8

"Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation." wearechristiansagainstchristiannationalism.pdf

In 2023 the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) conducted a survey aimed at understanding the threat of white Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and culture.

They released the results (and hosted an expert panel discussion of those results in collaboration with the Brookings Institute – which you can watch on YouTube) in February of last year. They found that about 30% of the American population are what they call adherents or sympathizers to Christian Nationalism; that is, they agree completely or mostly with the following claims:

Slide 9

- The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation.
- U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.
- If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.
- Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.
- God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Slide 10

You can see those results here – in graph form.

Slide 11

“The survey also examines how Christian nationalist views intersect with white identity, anti-Black sentiment, support of patriarchy, antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-immigrant attitudes, authoritarianism, and support for violence.

Additionally, the survey explores the influence Christian nationalism has within our two primary political parties and major religious subgroups and what this reveals about the state of American democracy and the health of our society.”

<https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>

To spend more time digging into the survey results, you’ll need to read the report on the website or watch the video.

Slide 12

To be clear, Bishop Eaton both defines and rejects Christian Nationalism.

Her statement, in its entirety, is this one: “Christian Nationalism identifies a human-made government with God’s will and seeks privilege specifically for Christians, and many times only white Christians. Lutherans teach that government should be held accountable to God, but never dictated as God’s will. *We must remain committed to strengthening the public space as a just place for all who seek peaceful governance, regardless of religion or worldview, and we will defend the full participation of all in our religiously diverse society.*”

Slide 13

The same is true, as their name implies, for Christians against Christian Nationalism. Their statement continues: “Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation. *We reject this damaging political ideology and invite our Christian brothers and sisters to join us in opposing this threat to our faith and to our nation.*”

Slide 14

Let’s return to Dr. Jemar Tisby. Tisby, a public historian and author of *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Zondervan 2020), asserts, in his evaluation of the PRRI data,

“White Christian Nationalism is the greatest threat to democracy *and the witness of the church* in the United States today.”

Slide 15

Does this sound familiar?

Remember the baptism sermon from May 1944. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world” (DBWE 8: 389).

When the church is fighting for its self-preservation, it becomes incapable of bearing witness to the Gospel. When the church is interested in amassing power and asserting control, it becomes incapable of bearing witness. Christian Nationalism is not about Christianity, it is about power and control.

Slide 16

Recall the first definition from a few minutes ago: “Christian Nationalism is an ethno-cultural ideology that uses Christian symbolism to create a permission structure for the acquisition of political power and social control.” Or, put more simply, Christian Nationalism uses Christianity, including the symbols of Christianity to acquire and assert power and control.

If you are trying to think of examples – of what this might look like in practice – you can bring to mind some of the images and scenes from January 6th, 2021. There were Christian Nationalists among those gathered at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. on that day. Some were carrying crosses, some were waving flags proclaiming “Jesus Saves” and “Proud American Christian.” They are certainly among those identified by the PRRI survey who would count themselves as adherents or sympathizers to the basic premises of Christian Nationalism, and proudly so.

While such displays are troubling, and have been denounced as a perversion of the Gospel, they should not come, entirely, as a shock. White American Christianity is built on and rooted in a racist, empire-building project that aligns with the white European story of Christian conquest and colonization and genocide. And there is collective complicity in this long, sinful history.

[Note: If you want to unpack this idea in more detail with your participants, there are multiple resources available to do so. You could look at David P. Gushee's article in *Sojourners* (September/October 2020) titled, "White American Christianity is Rooted in Colonial Empire Building." Or, Robert P. Jones' essay in *The Atlantic* (July 28, 2020) titled, "White Christian America Needs a Moral Awakening." Jones also has a book, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).]

(For additional thoughts on this complicity, and the need for repentance, see Rev. Amy E. Reumann's reflection from January 13th, 2021, included as an optional handout.)

The question, then, is this one: **how does Dietrich Bonhoeffer help us?**

Slide 17

Remember Bonhoeffer's time at Union Theological Seminary in New York City? One of his classmates was Jean Lassere, a French pacifist, who challenged Bonhoeffer's reading of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Lassere confronted Bonhoeffer with new ideas about the relationship between the Biblical text, God's word, and living out that word as a citizen of the world. He called Bonhoeffer to take Jesus' peace commandment seriously.

By November of 1930, on Armistice Day, Bonhoeffer preached at a Methodist church in Yonkers, New York and began to articulate what would become his own ecumenical, peace ethic:

Slide 18

"I stand before you," he said, "not only as a Christian but also a German, who loves his home the best of all, who rejoices with his people and who suffers, when he sees his people suffering, who confesses gratefully, that he received from his people all that he has and is... [He went on]"

You have brothers and sisters in our people and in every people, do not forget that. Come what may, let us never more forget, that our Christian people is the people of God, that if we are in accord, no nationalism, no hate of races or classes can execute its designs, and then the world will have its peace for ever and ever" (DBWE 10:581, 584).

Lassere reasserted this sentiment in a book published eight years after Bonhoeffer's death when he wrote,

Slide 19

“Nothing in the Scriptures gives the Christian authority to tear apart the body of Christ for the State or anything else... one cannot be Christian and nationalist” (Bethge 154).

By the way, the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section Board of Directors released a statement in the days after the events of January 6th.

Slide 20

In some public discourse, the question “Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment?” gets thrown around, though poorly defined. Those who use it suggest that the stakes (regarding a particular issue or moment) have gotten so high that it is finally time to act. And, using Bonhoeffer’s life as a guide, forefront the possibility that violence might be required. Maybe some of those Christian Nationalists in D.C. thought it was their “Bonhoeffer Moment.”

But “Is this a Bonhoeffer Moment?” is the wrong question! [Click slide]

As you know from all the other lessons... [Click slide]

Bonhoeffer asks a different question.

Bonhoeffer’s question: “Who is Christ for us today?”

Slide 21

Bonhoeffer’s Christ-centered, justice-focused neighbor-ethic theology is clear. Who is Christ for us today? All the peoples. Even the outcasts. Even the suffering. Even the people who look or worship differently than we do.

Slide 22

“For me, the main issue for individuals and for peoples is whether or not they have learned to live with other human beings and peoples. That’s more important to me than all their ideas, thoughts, and convictions” (DBWE 7:167).

Slide 23

You have been attending the sessions in this series. You know Bonhoeffer. You know the “True – Often Told – Story of a Pretty Amazing, But Also Ordinary Guy.”

When you hear people saying things about Bonhoeffer that seem problematic – *and you will* – you are equipped to enter into conversation and share the rich version of his life and legacy that you have encountered through his biography, his theology and ethics, his commitment to neighbors, and his exhortation to doing justice among humans.

Note for the discussion:

The excerpt from Bonhoeffer's sermon on November 11th, 1930 (Slide 18) could be a great discussion starter for talking about ways to be a proud American and a Christian without being a Christian Nationalist.

The essay by Rev. Amy E. Reumann could be a great discussion starter for talking about the ways churches, especially white churches, need to repent for collective sin and complicity in systems of oppression and deep-rooted white supremacy. This is not included in the participant workbook, so you'll need to distribute copies.

HANDOUT

ACTUAL RENEWAL AND REPAIR AFTER CAPITOL BREACH

**ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED JANUARY 13, 2021
BY THE REV. AMY E. REUMANN, DIRECTOR OF ELCA ADVOCACY**

In the days since the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, the words of the 61st chapter of Isaiah have accompanied me as a prayer and as a promise. It is one of the texts I turned to as I fearfully watched the violent mob of President Trump's supporters, bent on overturning the election results, breach the doors on January 6 and overrun the seat of American democracy. I prayed the words as the fuller horror emerged, including the tragic death of a Capitol Police officer and of rioters, details about the imminent danger to people I care about and destruction in a place that I love. The prophet's words direct me now in pondering the role of the church in rebuilding, including telling the truth about the forces of racism and white supremacy that lie at the root of the insurrection and whose repudiation and dismantling in church and society are inseparable from our proclamation of the Gospel.

Need to look actually

After the attack I kept hearing the refrain "This is not who we are!" from mostly white Americans horrified by the violence that they saw. I understand that tempting assertion. These are not our nation's ideals or our national myth, and I don't want this to be who we are either. But nothing will change unless we acknowledge that last week's violence and ongoing threats are direct expressions of our nation's deep-rooted white supremacy intertwined with a resurgent Christian nationalism. Neither are new, but both have been given new sanction and virulent life by President Trump's rhetoric and policies. Saying "this is not who we are" is a lie that abdicates our individual and collective sin and complicity.

Martin Luther said that a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is, in contrast to a theology of glory which calls evil good and good evil. ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod Bishop Yehiel Curry's blog post, "If It Was Us We Would've Been Shot," and Missouri's U.S. Rep. Cori Bush's op-ed, "This is the America that Black people know," are some of the voices calling issues by name, saying this IS who we are. They are calling out the disparate treatment of the largely white crowd that was allowed to converge on the Capitol despite weeks of threats and plans to violently overturn the election in President Trump's favor. They and many others are outraged but not surprised by white supremacy at work in the widely contrasting preparations and response to white supporters of the President, and in the privilege operating that could have allowed this insurgency to succeed.

We need to call what it actually is another thing: the fusion of Christian nationalism with violent insurrection. The cross, signs reading “Proud American Christian,” and banners bearing the name of Jesus were carried next to Confederate flags and among people outfitted for violence. Insurrectionists appealed to faith as a justification for their assault on the Capitol, including a “Jericho March” that would bring down the walls of the Capitol. I want to again say “this is not who we are,” but that too would be a lie. This is a face of Christianity in our nation, and although unrecognizable to me, these are our kin, and it is our responsibility to repent and denounce this perversion of the Gospel.

Much to do

Where do we go from here? There is much to do to tend to those traumatized by the event. We need to hold leaders, rioters and their supporters accountable and to ensure this never happens again. And for our ELCA, I suggest we go deep and learn from Isaiah about some first steps to address white supremacy and Christian nationalism.

Leading rebuilding

The prophet Isaiah’s 61st chapter announces to the returned exiles the anointing of God’s servant and the rebuilding the ruins of Jerusalem, her institutions and common life. This week I noted new learning from this text. Rebuilding will be led not by the elites but by those who have suffered most under the current order – the oppressed, the brokenhearted and the captives. The ones who know the weight of injustice, who have been on the receiving end of violence and whose hearts have been broken by the trauma of loss are charged with raising up the former devastations. They are the leaders for shaping a new and more just nation.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem in Isaiah’s account is informed by the voices of those who can call a thing what it is, informed by their suffering so that the new city will not replicate its former structures but imagine a new and more just design. So at this time, our overwhelmingly white church needs to listen to and follow the lead of those who know best the pain inflicted by white supremacy, those brokenhearted, imprisoned and oppressed by it – even when we want to cry out that “this isn’t us.” We need to hear the pain and follow this leadership on how to respond and raise up the former devastations. We need to learn to identify and preach and teach about the dangers of white Christian nationalism as heresy and violence.

Unleashing renewal and repair

The servant of Isaiah 61 came to preach good news to the poor. The servant’s job was proclamation of God’s word of healing and liberation, and then getting out of the way so that the oaks of righteousness could get to work, unleashing their energy and creativity into repairing their society. It is what Jesus did when he stood in the synagogue to read from this chapter. He announced his priorities with these words and then asked his followers to go and do likewise.

This is who we are – Jesus’ disciples who are broken but also blessed. Sinful but also forgiven. Fearful but also called to serve. Called and sent to renew and repair.

OPTIONAL SUPPLEMENT

LIFE TOGETHER: BUILDING COMMUNITY

Note: This supplement can be used either as a fifth or sixth week in the series, or as a shorter activity at any point. Additionally, if you wish to view the documentary *Bonhoeffer* (2003) by Martin Doblemeier, this could be used as a group activity in conjunction with a discussion on the movie.

Life Together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of the Finkenwalde experience, is full of practical recommendations for living in and sustaining community as the body of Christ. Life together, he thought, should include time together, time alone, service, confession, and the Lord's Supper.

Time together at the seminary was marked by morning and evening worship and praise, hymn singing, psalm reading, prayer, and an evening meal.

"Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate" (DBWE 5: 38).

To build community among the participants in this series on the life and legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, discuss the following questions in small groups:

1. What is your favorite hymn?
2. What is your favorite popular song?
3. Do you have a favorite psalm? What is it?
4. What is your favorite place to be still?
5. Would you rather retreat to the mountains or the ocean?
6. Would you rather do a silent retreat or challenging pilgrimage?
7. What is your favorite book?
8. What is your favorite place to read?
9. What is your favorite food or meal?
10. What is your favorite dessert?
11. Do you prefer home-cooked meals or going out to eat?
12. What is your favorite indoor game?
13. What is your favorite outdoor activity?
14. Do you practice any spiritual disciplines? Which one(s)?
15. In what ways do you serve others?
16. Add your own questions...

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

In August of 1944, when Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been in prison for nearly a year and a half, he wrote an "Outline for a Book," in which he wanted to take stock of Christianity. In his concluding thoughts, he wrote:

"The church is only the church when it is there for others" (DBWE 8: 503).

What does this statement mean to you?

Does a strong (church) community help live out this calling to be there for others? How so??

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