

Growing Edges

January 1999

Reading Richard's *Streams of Living Water* has reminded me of the importance of all the traditions for our personal and corporate spiritual lives. Contemplative: The Prayer-Filled Life. Holiness: The Virtuous Life. Charismatic: The Spirit-Empowered Life. Social Justice: The Compassionate Life. Evangelical: The Word-Centered Life. Incarnational: The Sacramental Life. In the first chapter of *Streams*, "Imitatio: The Divine Paradigm," Richard shows us that Jesus intentionally sought his Father's nurture in all these areas of the spiritual life. We are challenged to do the same.

A Twentieth-Century Model

While Jesus is our "divine paradigm," other lives can be important examples as we mature into Christlikeness. Though certainly less than perfect, these saints—past and present—can motivate and teach us in our apprenticeship to Jesus Christ.

Clearly, in our century, one of the champions of the Way is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the focus of this *Perspective*. Bonhoeffer's life was filled with practices designed to develop within and without the fruits of the traditions of Christian life and faith we emphasize at RENOVARÉ. One of the most striking things about Bonhoeffer is how he was challenged in all six streams, leading to a balance of strength and sensitivity, earthiness and eternity reminiscent of Jesus.

For those less familiar with Bonhoeffer's story, his career as a theologian developed under the gloomy and deceptive cloud of Adolf Hitler and Germany's Third Reich. Born in Breslau to German parents in 1906, Bonhoeffer spent less than four years outside his native country during his short life. Though tempted, along with all Germans, to complacency and capitulation during the Nazi regime, by 1933 Bonhoeffer clearly saw that the direction the German State Church (of which he was an ordained pastor) was heading had little to do with Christ crucified.

As a part of the Confessing Church—a group of German Lutheran pastors that withheld their support of Hitler—Bonhoeffer proclaimed publicly his distrust of the Nazis and concern over deteriorating conditions for Jewish people in Germany. Stripped of his pastoral authority by the state, in 1939 Bonhoeffer joined with dissenting members of the German military intelligence who were attempting to subvert the Führer and his Nazi government. Their activities included smuggling Jewish persons to Allied and neutral countries and plotting to assassinate Hitler. After discovery of their anti-Nazi activities in 1943, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually hung as a traitor, just weeks before the Allied victory.

Faithful and True

Though it is difficult to fully appreciate the context of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life, his prophetic example stands as a reminder that sometimes we must make difficult choices. God's kingdom is an all-inclusive community of loving persons, but we live during a period when God's reign is not realized in all people. And so, given the difficulties of our everyday life circumstances, we can begin to comprehend the incredible strength Bonhoeffer must have been given to remain true to God's vision and hope in the midst of such acquiescence by his people and church. It was a gift of God given to Bonhoeffer, one that we also receive as we are nurtured and mature in the life of apprenticeship to Jesus, our everliving Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend.

Shalom,
Lyle SmithGraybeal



Growing Together

The following spiritual exercises are inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life. Do not feel compelled to practice these simultaneously, but use them, say, over the next few weeks as an aid to developing a more balanced spiritual life. Viel Glück!

Contemplative: The Prayer-Filled Life

Prayer was at the center of Bonhoeffer's understanding of Jesus. It is said that he paused for prayer just before ascending the steps of the gallows to be hanged, making prayer his final, freely chosen act in this life. The Psalms were a significant part of Bonhoeffer's prayer experience, so much so that his talks have been collected in a book titled *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*. This week, take Psalm 19 and spend a half hour or so praying through it. If you are musically inclined, you may want to insert or apply a tune and sing aloud.

Holiness: The Virtuous Life

As a life-long student, filling his mind with good, helpful, and substantial ideas was a regular practice for Bonhoeffer. He wrote, "We need all along the line to recover [a] lost sense of quality and a social order based on quality . . . Culturally [this] means a return from the newspaper and the radio to the book, from feverish activity to unhurried leisure, from dispersion to concentration, from sensationalism to reflection, from virtuosity to art, from snobbery to modesty, from extravagance to moderation" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 13). For one week consider limiting or eliminating your radio listening, newspaper reading, and television watching and instead use the time gained to read a good book, perhaps one of Bonhoeffer's.

Charismatic: The Spirit-Empowered Life

Two of Bonhoeffer's trips outside Germany were to the United States; one as a student and the other as a professor. Originally planned to last a year or more, the second trip ended abruptly after only six weeks. Reflecting on his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr, "I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people" (*The Shame and the Sacrifice*, p. 123). Under the Spirit's guidance and power, Bonhoeffer felt compelled to return to his homeland. This week, take an hour or so to reflect on the direction of your life. Do you feel good about where you are heading, or do you need to make a course correction?

Social Justice: The Compassionate Life

Some scholars have debated Bonhoeffer's support of the conspiracy to kill Hitler. After much internal struggle over his personal response to the oppressive Nazi state, Bonhoeffer explained his participation in subversive activity by using the illustration of a murderous madman driving a car into a crowd of innocent people. Can a follower of Christ, if he knows the madman's purposes, in good conscience let the people be hit, and see it as his role merely to bind up the wounded after the damage has been done? Or should the Christian be compelled to wrest the steering wheel from the madman's control? Sometime during the month, reflect on the social systems of our day: economic, political, religious. What systemic evils should you address through your personal decisions and advocacy efforts?

Evangelical: The Word-Centered Life

Bonhoeffer was a person formed by Jesus Christ as presented in the Bible. He wrote, "As a whole the Scriptures are God's revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationship, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness of Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived" (*Life Together*, p. 48). The Sermon on the Mount was, arguably, the most formative passage of Scripture for Bonhoeffer. Consider reading through the Sermon—Matthew 4, 5, and 6—in one sitting this week. As you read, think of this being presented as a whole sermon, like a minister delivers a message on Sunday morning. Do you sense a discernable flow to the teaching? What one or two specific attitudes or actions are you being drawn toward as a result of your reading?

Incarnational: The Sacramental Life

During his time as director of an underground seminary for the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer taught the importance of participation in corporate worship. One specific instruction he gave was for the congregation to sing in unison to stress that the gathered community "is bound wholly to the Word" (*Life Together*, p. 59). While this instruction may seem a bit restrictive, this week during spoken or sung worship, remain quiet and sing or speak softly enough so that you are especially attentive to the worship around you. You may soon become aware that you are in the presence of worship that involves more than just those assembled in the room.

Lyle SmithGraybeal

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The following is a biographic sketch of Dietrich Bonhoeffer excerpted from *Streams of Living Water* by Richard J. Foster (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Bonhoeffer is included in *Streams* as an example of the Holiness Tradition, but note the balance in his spiritual life and how many of the six RENOVARÉ Traditions are represented.

The Road to Freedom

On the day Dietrich Bonhoeffer heard that the 20 July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler had failed—the day he knew that his own fate and the fate of his friends was sealed—he wrote an account of his life in a poem entitled “Stations on the Road to Freedom.” Brooding in his Tegel prison cell, he set forth the four great dimensions of a spiritual life that lead to freedom in all its facets—freedom from ingrained habits of sin, freedom from cowering inaction and irresponsibility, freedom from fear of a monstrously demonic and immensely powerful nation-state. Listen carefully and prayerfully to his words, for they speak of the holiness of life:

DISCIPLINE

If you set out to seek freedom, then learn above all discipline of soul and senses, so that your passions and your limbs might not lead you confusedly hither and yon.

Chaste be your spirit and body, subject to your own will, and obedient to seek out the goal that they have been given.

No one discovers the secret of freedom but through self-control.

ACTION

Dare to do what is just, not what fancy may call for; Lose no time with what may be, but boldly grasp what is real.

The world of thought is escape; freedom comes only through action.

Step out beyond anxious waiting and into the storm of events, carried only by God’s command and by your own faith; then will freedom exultantly cry out to welcome your spirit.

SUFFERING

Wondrous transformation! Your strong and active hands are tied now. Powerless, alone, you see the end of your action.

Still, you take a deep breath and lay your struggle for justice,

quietly and in faith, into a mightier hand.

Just for one blissful moment, you tasted the sweetness of freedom,

then you handed it over to God, that he might make it whole.

DEATH

Come now, highest moment on the road to freedom eternal,

Death, put down the ponderous chains and demolish the walls

of our mortal bodies, the walls of our blinded souls, that we might finally see what mortals have kept us from seeing.

Freedom, how long we have sought you through discipline, action, and suffering.

Dying, now we behold your face in the countenance of God.¹

“Costly Grace”

The outline of Bonhoeffer’s story is well known. In 1927 he was a *student* earning a doctorate in theology from Berlin University at the age of twenty-one. In 1930 he was a *debater* crossing theological swords with the liberal establishment at Union Theological Seminary, New York. In 1931 he was a *teacher* exegeting issues of Christian ethics and the nature of the Church at Berlin University. Bonhoeffer, it seemed, was destined for the life of an academic. But the ominous storm clouds of the Third Reich changed everything.

By 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an *activist* attacking the idolatrous “Aryan Clause,” which excluded Jews from civil service. By 1934 he was a *leader* in the newly formed “Confessing Church,” prophetically denouncing the heretical defections of the “German Christians.”^{*} By 1935 he was a *professor* establishing a clandestine seminary at Finkenwalde—an institution where “pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship can be taken seriously.”² By 1937 he was an *author* attacking “cheap grace”—that is, “grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”³

By 1939 he was a *double agent* seeking the defeat of his own nation and deeply involved in the conspiracy to assassinate the Führer. By 1943 he was a *prisoner* living out the days of misfortune “equably, smilingly, proudly, / like one accustomed to win,” and at the same time feeling “restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage.”⁴ By 1944 he was a *theologian* from a prison cell, searching, ever searching, for a “religionless Christianity” in which “man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world.”⁵ And finally, in the gray dawn of Sunday, 8 April 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a *martyr*, whispering to his fellow prisoners as he left his cell to be hanged on the Flossenbürg gallows, “This is the end—for me, the beginning of life.”⁶

^{*} “German Christians” was the term used for Protestants who supported Hitler. The “Confessing Church,” of which Bonhoeffer was a key figure, arose as a witness to Christian faithfulness and became the chief opposition to the German Christians.

“Christ the Center”

Bonhoeffer's life as a churchman in Germany and in broader ecumenical circles is a model of courage and compassion. His work in the resistance movement is endlessly fascinating. His death is moving beyond words. But why would I consider him an example of the Holiness tradition? He was far from perfect. He made mistakes, some of them serious. What is it that makes me single him out as a model for the virtuous life? Six things. The first three are tied to his conviction that Christ is the absolute center of all things.

First, Bonhoeffer took Jesus seriously. It is hard to overestimate how fully the christological question affected everything for him. If Jesus truly lived, died, rose, and is among his people today, it makes all the difference in the world. We simply cannot consider the earth apart from Christ's footsteps imprinted upon it. “Christ's manger stands on the earth, his cross is rammed into the earth, his grave is dug into the earth.”⁷ This being so, the community of faith must come to recognize Christ's personal presence in the world today and set out to follow him in all things.

Second, Bonhoeffer took Jesus' call to discipleship seriously. He felt this call most powerfully compressed in Jesus' robust and prophetic Sermon on the Mount. Throughout his life he stoutly refused to do what is so common today—namely, to see Jesus' Sermon as an “impossible ideal,” or merely as nice words that are not meant to be obeyed, or perhaps as instructions for some future dispensation. No, he understood the Sermon on the Mount to be Jesus' universal call to obedience—a call issued to all peoples, at all times, in all places. In a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich he wrote, “I have begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. That is the only source of power capable of blowing up the whole phantasmagoria* once and for all.”⁸

Third, Bonhoeffer took spiritual discipline seriously. It is no accident that his lectures often returned to the *disciplina pietatis*. He was training for a life in which the powers of body and soul are placed entirely in the service of Christ. His life was built on a “new kind of monasticism . . . a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ.”⁹

Action in the World

The remaining three reasons for holding Bonhoeffer up as a model of the virtuous life are tied to his conviction that Christian faith must, of necessity, result in action in the milieu of contemporary society.

Fourth, Bonhoeffer took free, responsible, obedient action seriously. He rejected all legalistic systems for defining moral norms. He refused to reduce Christ and Scripture to ethical principles and rules. Instead, he stressed the ongoing, relational dialectic of encountering

God's will, often against our will, and, in Christ, receiving the freedom to act responsibly in any given situation. When the center is clear, the boundaries of responsible action can be open to meet the demands of the present moment. “It is therefore impossible,” he wrote from prison, “to define the boundary between resistance and submission on abstract principles: but both of them must exist, and both must be practised. Faith demands this elasticity of behaviour.”¹⁰

Fifth, Bonhoeffer took the purity of the Church seriously. Consistently he called the Church to *be* the Church. His was a purifying voice warning the Church against violating the First Commandment to “have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Two days after Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address in which he warned against the possibility of Germany slipping into an idolatrous cult of the *Führer* (leader), who might very well turn out to be a *Verführer* (misleader) mocking God himself.¹¹

Sixth, Bonhoeffer took the world seriously. What he saw so clearly was the need for righteousness in action in the midst of a secular and secularizing world. The reality that gripped him so totally was that we must live in “existence for others.” “Jesus,” he wrote, “is there only for others. . . . Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship . . . but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others,’ through participation in the being of Jesus. . . . The church is the church only when it exists for others.”¹²

Richard J. Foster

¹Translated from *Widerstand und Ergebung*, pp. 403-4, as cited in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), pp. 542-43.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften, I*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1958-74) as cited in *A Testament to Freedom*, p. 25.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 47.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1953), p. 173.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. R. H. Fuller, John Bowden, et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 361-62.

⁶Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 11.

⁷Albrecht Schoenherr, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Message of a Life,” *Christian Century* (27 Nov. 1985), p. 1091.

⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften, III*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1965-69), pp. 24f., as cited in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 155.

⁹Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften, III*, p. 25, as cited in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 380.

¹⁰Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Paper from Prison*, enlarged ed., pp. 217-18.

¹¹At this point in the talk Bonhoeffer was cut off the air in what may have been the Third Reich's first governmental action against free speech (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 193-94).

¹²Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed., pp. 380-83.

* Translator's note: “i.e., Hitler and his rule.”

Going Deeper

In keeping with our emphasis upon the spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we are offering four items that will help you explore his life and its historical setting.

A Testament to Freedom

This magnificent volume takes readers on a historical and biographical journey that follows Bonhoeffer through the various stages of his life—as teacher, pastor, ecumenist, preacher, seminary director, prophet in the Nazi era and, finally, martyr in pursuit of peace and justice. It includes previously untranslated writings and excerpts from major books, sermons, and selected letters spanning his career. If you want a compilation of Bonhoeffer’s most relevant writings, this is the book to purchase.

Bonhoeffer: The Cost of Freedom

This outstanding radio dramatization of Bonhoeffer’s life on three compact discs takes you back in time: back to the sounds of German militarism, back to the debate over the proper response of Christians to the oppression of the Jews, back to the ambiguity over giving allegiance to a repressive regime. Though the creators left out many people and specific details, their consolidated characters and events tell the essence of Bonhoeffer’s story in a compelling and understandable way. This “dramatic representation” accurately captures his personality, views, and spirituality as they were played out against the dark, demonic regime of Nazism.

Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship

This story of community life in the underground Preachers’ Seminary was written by Bonhoeffer in a single stretch of four weeks after the seminary was shut down by the Gestapo in 1937 and the seminarians dispersed. At Finkenwald the seminarians’ practiced structured daily

prayer, meditation, mutual support, a common theological training, personal confession, and the renunciation of clerical privileges. *Life Together* spells out their “life together.”

Yet *Life Together* is not only an exposition of the seminary’s communal life, but also an apologetic for why this approach could be effective in achieving strength in Christian

solidarity and in becoming a center of service in oppressive countries. Though many of us have no calling to live in intentional communities, *Life Together* does give practical advice on how community life in Christ can be sustained in families. In simple language, Bonhoeffer writes about the role of personal prayer, worship in common, everyday work, and Christian service in the midst of ordinary life.

Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible

Dietrich Bonhoeffer here gives one of his secrets behind the powerful witness of his own life. He had learned to pray the Psalms and from them drew on the power of God in his years of imprisonment. In this introduction, Bonhoeffer discusses the types of Psalms and how they can be used to enrich our prayer life.

Lynda L. Graybeal



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