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# The Cloister and the Barracks: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Formation of Christian Community

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## **Cloister and Barracks: Bonhoeffer's Protestant Monasticism**

Amid the rising tide of National Socialism in 1930s Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to study monastic communities and other forms of disciplined communal life. He believed the immense power of the Nazi regime could be resisted only through the cultivation of small, faithful, highly disciplined Christian communities.

While other Christian leaders in Germany were embroiled in church politics and in complex negotiations concerning the place of church institutions in the new German Reich, Bonhoeffer was planning a trip to India to become a member of Gandhi's ashram. He was convinced that the church in Germany had forfeited its spiritual integrity and moral authority. The German church had not followed the way of Christ. Instead of being a believers' community, it had become a counterfeit community whose ultimate loyalty lay not with Christ but with the German Führer. By contrast, Gandhi had taken seriously the teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, and had cultivated a form of community that looked more authentically

'Christian' — more Christlike — than anything in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Though Gandhi was a Hindu and not a Christian, Bonhoeffer planned to spend six months as his disciple, learning from him about communal discipline, the practice of non-violent resistance, and the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

But shortly before leaving for India, Bonhoeffer was called on by the Confessing Church to become director of one of its five illegal seminaries. These seminaries would train a new generation of resisting pastors — pastors who would receive no salaries, no state support, and no official recognition from the state church, but who would be committed to preserving a faithful Christian witness at any cost. Bonhoeffer accepted the call and began to make preparations for establishing a new seminary community. The most important part of his preparation was a tour of monastic communities in England as a way of observing communal discipline, even though he would no longer have the opportunity to experience such communal practices for himself in Gandhi's ashram.

After visiting a number of English monasteries he returned to Germany and became director of the illegal seminary in the small town of Finkenwalde. The seminary comprised a community of young men living together in an old, run-down manor house. Initially the students addressed Bonhoeffer as 'Herr Director' but, after the first few days, he told them to call him 'Brother Dietrich' — a mark of the kind of fraternal community that he wanted to cultivate. Under Bonhoeffer's leadership, the community adopted a rigorous regime of discipline, including daily psalm singing and Bible reading, periods of work and study, regular rhythms of prayer, meditation, fasting, solitude and mutual confession of sins. And Bonhoeffer's teaching — again in imitation of Gandhi — was devoted primarily to the Sermon on the Mount. Students were encouraged to regulate the whole of their lives according to Christ's teaching. As Bonhoeffer saw it, Christ's commandments are not merely (as the Lutheran tradition had argued) lofty moral ideals that are impossible to put into practice. They are teachings that are meant to be obeyed:

*From the human point of view there are countless possibilities of understanding and interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows only one possibility: simply go and obey. Do not interpret or apply, but do it and obey. That is the only way Jesus' word is really heard.<sup>2</sup>*

Thus ascetic teaching and ascetic practices pervaded every aspect of the community's life in Finkenwalde. Adopting Gandhi's emphasis on fasting, for instance, Bonhoeffer told his students: 'Jesus takes it for granted that disciples will keep the pious practice or exercise of fasting. The life of a disciple requires

the strict practice of austerity.’<sup>3</sup> Yet there was, by all accounts, plenty of leisure at Finkenwalde too, particularly in the form of music. Bonhoeffer was fond of playing his African American Spiritual records which he had brought back from New York. But even such recreational time was carefully scheduled and adapted to the spiritual rationale of the community. Nothing was haphazard or frivolous; everything was accommodated to the wider spiritual architecture of monastic discipline. Indeed Bonhoeffer argued that asceticism is important precisely because it makes believers ‘more joyous’ in their daily lives.<sup>4</sup>

It is striking to reflect that such communal discipline was Bonhoeffer’s considered response to the vast and powerful machinery of the Nazi Reich. In the context of an increasingly militarised society, Bonhoeffer deployed a familiar vocabulary of discipline, obedience and loyalty — but while such terms were used in Germany with reference to the Führer, Bonhoeffer used this language to describe the community’s relationship with Jesus Christ. The Finkenwalde seminary was a form of alternative barracks, a training ground for addressing society with an alternative message of grace and salvation.

## **Alien Righteousness: the Nature of Christian Community**

But what, in practical terms, was Bonhoeffer hoping to achieve with these measures? The short answer is: not much. Again and again, Bonhoeffer’s writings and letters caution against false ideals of success: ‘The form of the crucified disarms all thinking aimed at success ... Only in the cross of Christ ... does humanity take on its true form.’<sup>5</sup> The Christian community’s aim was not to fight against worldly power on its own terms. Its aim was not to exert influence in any ordinary way. Nor was its aim to achieve numerical success — as if the problems in Germany could be solved simply by recruiting more people to the Christian cause. As Bonhoeffer saw it, the church’s problem in Germany was that it was too big. Virtually all German citizens had been baptised as infants and automatically considered themselves Christian. The Christian institution had become all but indistinguishable from German cultural ideology. The great need, Bonhoeffer believed, was for a *smaller* church — a small community of faithful, disciplined believers who could recover an authentic witness to the person of Jesus Christ. Ultimately what mattered was this witness itself, not the size of the witnessing community. As Bonhoeffer would later write in his drafted work, *Ethics*:

*The church of Jesus Christ is the place ... in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed. This space of the church does not, therefore, exist just for itself, but its existence is already always something that reaches far beyond it. This is because it is not the space of a cult that would have to fight for its own existence in the world. Rather, the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, that God so loved the world that God gave his Son for it. The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God. It is not true that the church intends to or must spread its space out over the space of the world. It desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ ... Otherwise the church becomes a 'religious society' that fights in its own interest and thus has ceased to be the church of God in the world.<sup>6</sup>*

Bonhoeffer understands 'the world' not as a single entity but as a complex system of overlapping communities including marriage, family, work and government.<sup>7</sup> The Christian community is not absolutely distinct from these other communities. It intersects with them. It partially overlaps with all the other communal structures that make up 'the world'. The Christian community is not one additional form of social belonging alongside all the others. It is not primarily an institution with its own separate role and position in society. Rather the Christian community is a microcosm of the whole world. God's grace towards every kind of human community becomes visible in the communal life of the church. When a Christian community lives by grace alone, the true foundations of all human community are laid bare. In this way the Christian community does not seek anything for itself, but exists solely to serve the world by showing the world that it is loved by God and reconciled to God in Christ.

Grace, therefore, is the whole *raison d'être* of Christian community. Here, in a striking piece of theological improvisation, Bonhoeffer translates the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith into a doctrine of community:

*Christians no longer live by their own resources, by accusing themselves and justifying themselves, but by God's accusation and God's justification. They live entirely by God's Word pronounced on them ... The Reformers expressed this by calling our righteousness an 'alien righteousness', a righteousness that comes from outside of us (extra nos).<sup>8</sup>*

Each member of the community lives by the same grace. Moreover, all members are signs of grace to one another: 'Christ made the other Christian to be grace for us.'<sup>9</sup> By trusting one another with our frailties and vulnerabilities, we learn how to live in trust with God. By confessing our faults to one another and depending on one another for forgiveness, we learn how to live in openness to God's gift of forgiveness. In this way each member of the community receives Christ from all the others. The whole community learns how to live not by its own internal resources, but by the 'alien righteousness' of Jesus Christ. 'The Christ in [our] own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians.'<sup>10</sup>

For the same reason, Bonhoeffer places special emphasis on the role of weak and vulnerable members within the community. At a time when the whole of German society was swept up in the adulation of health, strength and physical perfection — leading, for instance, to policies concerning the sterilisation of the disabled — Bonhoeffer insists that the weakest members of the community are potentially the most significant since it is in relation to them that the community's real source of life becomes most apparent. 'The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door.'<sup>11</sup> Again, it is clear that Bonhoeffer's interest is not in strong or successful communities, but simply faithful communities in which human beings learn how to live together through a grace that each freely receives yet none possesses. Only in this way does the world have the opportunity to see what it really means to be the world — a world loved by God and sustained by God's own inexhaustible resources.

## Surprising the World: Community and Christian Ministry

In such communities, Bonhoeffer believes, the role of the pastor or leader will not be to cultivate an idealised ‘vision’,<sup>12</sup> nor to manage or influence the community through ‘psychological techniques and methods’.<sup>13</sup> The Christian leader is not permitted to relate to other human beings on the basis of what they *might* be, but only on the basis of what they *actually are*. ‘Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming.’<sup>14</sup> God brings us into community not so that we can achieve some higher purpose — as if human beings were a means to a higher end — but so that we can learn how to participate together in an environment of grace and joy. ‘Christian community is not an ideal we have to realise, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.’<sup>15</sup> Christians are to enter into life together ‘not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive.’<sup>16</sup> This prohibition against ‘making demands’ applies above all to the minister, or to any person who exercises leadership within the community.

While the leader with ‘vision’ wants the community to attain some higher standard or to succeed in fulfilling some higher aspiration, Bonhoeffer remained calmly uninterested in the usual markers of influence or success. The Christian community, he believed, exists solely in order to become a living testimony to the reality of grace in the world. Within such a community, the leader will be a servant of grace — not a triumphant figure, but a person who resembles Henri Nouwen’s model of a ‘wounded healer’.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, it is not the job of the Christian community to win. What Bonhoeffer called ‘the godlessness of the world’ is not a problem that the Christian community needs to overcome. ‘Godlessness’ is the place where God’s light shines whenever Christians show, by their lives together, that human community is really founded on Christ. As Bonhoeffer would later explain in one of his prison letters:

*Being a Christian does not mean being religious in a certain way, making oneself into something or other (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) according to some method or other. Instead it means being human, not a certain type of human being, but the human being Christ creates in us ... Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life ... One must speak in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not covered up in any way, but rather precisely to uncover it and surprise the world by letting light shine on it.*<sup>18</sup>

Here then is the rationale of Christian community: to ‘surprise the world’ with signs of genuine humanity; to present the world with the strange spectacle of fully human lives — lives that are individually frail and broken, yet collectively healed and forgiven within the setting of a community of grace.

And because Christ’s followers live by grace, their life together will be marked by a peculiar joy and freedom. Their vocation is to show the world what humanity really looks like. This occurs whenever Christians live together in unity, peace, penitence, encouragement and forgiveness. Compared to this, other ideal forms of humanity which a society might emulate — the hero, the warrior, the person of exceptional power or beauty — seem pale imitations, mere parodies of humanity.

Bonhoeffer’s lasting insight is that it is not our own individual resources that make us fully human. We become truly human, truly alive, only when we learn how to give and to receive in a community of vulnerability, generosity, trust and joy. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Julie Bonhoeffer, in London, 1933–1935, Hans Goedeking, Martin Heimbucher and Hans-Walter Schleicher (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 13, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2007, p. 152.
- 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (eds), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 4, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2001, p. 181. This book is based on Bonhoeffer’s lectures to the students at Finkenwalde.
- 3 Ibid., p. 158.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, Ilse Tödt, Heinz E. Tödt, Ernst Feil and Clifford Green (eds), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 6, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2005, pp. 90–91.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 63–64.
- 7 Bonhoeffer rejected the traditional Lutheran doctrine of autonomous ‘orders of creation’ and redefined these orders as ‘orders of preservation’ which serve the gospel of Jesus Christ. His attempt to respond to this Lutheran doctrine, and thus to provide a rival theological definition of ‘the world’ forms a major part of his Ethics and of his *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, John W. de Gruchy (ed), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 3, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1997.
- 8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, G. L. Müller and Albrecht Schönherr (eds), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 5, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 31.
- 9 Ibid., p. 109.
- 10 Ibid., p. 32.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 45–46.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 35–38.

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- 13 Ibid., p. 40.
- 14 Ibid., p. 36.
- 15 Ibid., p. 38.
- 16 Ibid., p. 37
- 17 Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, Image Books, New York, 1979.
- 18 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Eberhard Bethge, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, John W. de Gruchy (ed), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2009, pp. 480–82.