

The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Meet the Writer

Boyd Lien, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. Boyd has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; and Augusta, Georgia. As a church educator, he has pursued his passion to share the good news by creating and publishing a wide variety of educational resources through Abingdon Press, the Logos Program, and the Kerygma Program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently, he is the author of the revised resource book and leader's guide for Kerygma's *Discovering the Bible: A New Generation*.

Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

The Way of Jesus Christ

Scripture

Colossians 3:16; Psalm 119:1–19

Main Idea

After having lived through four decades of intense cataclysmic events, Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced a major transformation when he heard himself addressed by God in the Bible. The words of Scripture led Bonhoeffer to commit himself to become a servant of Jesus Christ and to serve Christ through his church.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Be introduced to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by reviewing seventeen significant years.
2. Create verses praising God's word using the format of Psalm 119.
3. Reflect on a significant year in their life, a year of change and transformation.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

3" x 5" self-adhesive notes, each bearing a significant date in Bonhoeffer's life

Blank 3" x 5" self-adhesive notes

Christ candle, matches

Hymnal with the hymn sung in worship

Leader Prep

This session introduces class members to basic information about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the world in which he grew up. The three parts of the session frame major turning points in his life: his decision to become a theologian, his decision to give his life to the church, and his decision to remain in Germany to work for the overthrow of Hitler.

Challenge class members to think about God's providence, that is, how God is guiding both our individual lives and world history, even though we often see just confusion and conflict. As Christians, we try to live with the assurance that God bears us up. Bonhoeffer's example can strengthen us.

A major source of strength in Bonhoeffer's spiritual life came through singing, reading, praying, and preaching the psalms. In Psalm 119:19, in fact, he heard himself addressed by God, and he quoted the psalm frequently. His meditation on Psalm 119:19 is found in a collection of his works, *Meditating on the Word*. Therefore, each of the sessions will begin with a psalm, one that can be sung, read, prayed, and preached.

In Gather, the format builds on the daily spiritual disciplines that Bonhoeffer followed in the Finkenwalde community. Place a Christ candle on a table in the center of your teaching space. Each session begins by lighting the candle, reading a psalm together, and uniting in the prayer of Dr. Burgess or a prayer of your own. Enlist members of the group to share in leading the reading and also in lighting the Christ candle. Psalm 119:1–19 has been chosen because Bonhoeffer quoted this psalm extensively in his writings. The Scripture used for the lighting of the Christ candle in each of the sessions is from an earlier letter from prison by the apostle Paul. If you wish to display photographs of Bonhoeffer and his times during the sessions, many can be found on the Internet through Wikipedia Commons, Google Images, and Yahoo Images.

For Head, you will need to prepare 3" x 5" self-adhesive notes with the following dates: 1906, 1912, 1914, 1918, 1919, 1923, 1927 (dissertation), 1929, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1937, 1939, 1943, and 1945. The notes make it easy to attach the dates to a wall or divider in the teaching space.

In Depart, it may be that the participants would respond positively to sharing a few words about the significance of the date as they post it on the wall. But be aware of the downside. They need to be concise in their remarks so that everyone has a chance

to contribute. Provide the actual hymnal or copies of the text of the hymn sung in worship. You may wish to recruit an accompanist for the hymn.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Light the Christ candle with the words of Paul the apostle: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Colossians 3:16).
- Welcome the community with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*: “Common devotions in the morning should include Scripture reading, song, and prayer.”¹
- Read Psalm 119:1–19.
- Pray the prayer in the participant’s book.
- Introduce the scope of the course by previewing the themes of the six sessions in the participant’s book.

Head

- In his introduction, Dr. Burgess writes, “Bonhoeffer once asserted that the central question for the church is ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’ The answer that came to Bonhoeffer whenever he tried to make sense of his life was that Jesus is the living Lord who bears each of us up, freeing us to act more responsibly in a broken, sinful world.”
- Distribute seventeen 3" x 5" self-adhesive notes to tell the story of Bonhoeffer’s life. Direct the group to refer to the participant’s book to discover what happened in that year. Invite the participant with 1906 to add the note to the wall and tell about the significance of the date. Proceed through to 1945, pausing along the way for questions.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 44.

Heart

- Dr. Burgess writes about one of those years, 1932, in the section “Bonhoeffer’s Way to the Church.” Read the portion that begins, “As mysteriously as he had been drawn . . .” and concludes, “. . . but it was above all the Bible to which he now turned.”
- Ask: *What might have Bonhoeffer meant by “I discovered the Bible”? What might have caused him to confess, “I had not yet become a Christian”? How would you answer the question Bonhoeffer posed to the church: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”*
- Dr. Burgess writes, “Bonhoeffer teaches us that Christian spirituality will always be grounded in the way of Jesus Christ. We must listen ever again for Jesus’ voice and discover the strength that he gives us to act faithfully, even in the midst of tragic uncertainties and failures.” Ask: *How have you come to learn the way of Jesus Christ? Where are you listening for Jesus’ voice?*

Hands

- Gather in small groups. Remind the participants of Bonhoeffer’s love of the Bible. His life reached a turning point when he discovered Scripture to be more than an academic resource for theologians. He expressed this love in his reflection on Psalm 119, an acrostic with repetitious variations on the love of God’s word. Psalm 119 contains 176 verses, eight verses for each of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. What’s more, all eight verses begin with that letter, and every verse contains a synonym for the law! Bonhoeffer encouraged the reader to make “a rather slow, quiet, patient movement from word to word, from sentence to sentence.”²
- Bonhoeffer writes that using words to confess “the love of God’s word” will never end. Choose one of the letters of our alphabet and compose four to eight verses on God’s word beginning with that letter.
- Gather together and share the verses the groups have written.

2. Bonhoeffer. *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 165.

Depart

- Give each participant a 3" x 5" card or self-adhesive note. Invite them to imagine reviewing a similar time line but to imagine this time of *their* lives. Ask them to write a year on the card—without any explanation—that reflects when something happened that changed and transformed their lives. Invite them to attach theirs alongside the posted dates.
- Embrace your connection with the larger community of faith by singing one of the hymns sung in worship on the previous Sunday.
- Join together in a prayer expressing gratitude, joys, and concerns.
- Extinguish the Christ candle.

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The Way of Jesus Christ

Scripture

Ephesians 3:16–19 This passage assures us that God strengthens us to know Christ and to follow him faithfully.

Prayer

Lord, you have called us to follow you, but we confess that we do not see clearly where you lead. Often we are confused; sometimes we are afraid and even want to run away. Bear us up, and assure us that in life and in death we belong to you through your Son, Jesus Christ. Strengthen us through the example of those who have walked the way of discipleship before us, including your servant Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We thank you for his witness that nothing in heaven or on earth can ultimately separate us from you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

This session introduces readers to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), the German Protestant theologian who was hanged by the Nazis at the end of World War II and who is honored by many Christians today as a twentieth-century martyr. Bonhoeffer's life story is filled with drama and intrigue. He was a larger-than-life personality who immediately impressed others not only with his brilliant intellect but also with his deep spirituality.

As Bonhoeffer was led to execution, he fell on his knees in fervent prayer. Witnesses later reported that he submitted peacefully to what he believed was God's will. But during his lifetime, Bonhoeffer also went through periods of deep anguish and doubt. He wanted more than anything to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, yet he was not always sure what faithfulness to Jesus required. Again and again he had to discover that what sustained him was not his own sense of holiness or peace but rather the crucified Christ, who was always beside him and who carried him, despite his weak faith.

Bonhoeffer once asserted that the central question for the church is "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" The answer that came to

Bonhoeffer whenever he tried to make sense of his life was that Jesus is the living Lord who bears each of us up, freeing us to act more responsibly in a broken, sinful world. Bonhoeffer had a profound sense of God's guidance in his life, beginning with his decision to become a theologian, then his decision to give his life to the church, and finally his decision to return to Germany from the United States to participate in a conspiracy against Hitler, which led to his arrest and death.

Bonhoeffer teaches us that Christian spirituality will always be grounded in the way of Jesus Christ. We must listen ever again for Jesus' voice and discover the strength that he gives us to act faithfully, even in the midst of tragic uncertainties and failures.

Bonhoeffer's Way to Theology

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now in Poland). His father, Karl, was one of Germany's leading psychiatrists and neurologists. In 1912, the family moved to Berlin, where Bonhoeffer's father assumed a teaching post at the University of Berlin, one of Germany's most prestigious academic institutions.

Bonhoeffer's family valued education and the fine arts but not religious faith. Officially, his parents belonged to the Protestant church (primarily Lutheran in theology), but they never attended church, even on big holidays. For them, as for many upper-middle-class Germans of that era, membership in the church was simply part of one's civic identity. Respectable Germans were married in the church, had their children baptized and confirmed, and received a church burial. The nation guaranteed the church had money and social prestige, and in turn the church supported the nation and its political interests.

Most German theologians and church leaders accepted the entry of Germany into war against France and Britain in 1914. German soldiers even wore belt buckles emblazoned with the words "Gott mit uns" (God with us). Germans were confident they would achieve a quick victory. Similar enthusiasm for war broke out among the other European nations, but what began as a regional conflict between Serbia and the Austrian-Hungarian empire soon engulfed the continent. War dragged on. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers dug into trenches along long battle lines; one side would push forward a few hundred feet only to be pushed back again.

What would later be called World War I, or even "the war to end all wars," deeply shook the middle-class, intellectual world in

which Bonhoeffer was growing up. Before the war, Germans could assert that they stood at the forefront of world civilization. They saw themselves as a cultured, refined people who were making the world a better, more comfortable place. They took pride in having the world's greatest composers, philosophers, and scientists. The war, however, confronted them with their capacity for brutality and evil. Historians estimate that 20 percent or more of a generation of young men were casualties of the war, either killed or maimed. Bonhoeffer himself lost an older brother. Europe, and especially Germany, would never be the same.

When the war finally ended in 1918, Germany was on the losing side. The Treaty of Versailles stripped it of its military machine and some of its territory, and it demanded that Germany make huge financial reparations. In 1919, Germany established for the first time in its history a democratic, constitutional government, but these years of the Weimar Republic were marred by runaway inflation and political and social chaos.

This was the world into which Bonhoeffer's parents, true to German tradition, sent their fourteen-year-old son to confirmation classes. To their surprise, he soon decided that when he grew up, he wanted to become a theologian. He had found something in the church's heritage and language they had not, or perhaps he did not yet know what.

To his parents' surprise, Bonhoeffer soon decided that when he grew up, he wanted to become a theologian. He had found something in the church's heritage and language they had not, or perhaps he did not yet know what.

Bonhoeffer's Way to the Church

In 1923, at age seventeen, Bonhoeffer began his university studies in theology. He proved to be a brilliant student. Normally, students needed five years just to complete the basic degree in theology, but within four years Bonhoeffer had completed not only the equivalent of a bachelor's degree but also a master's degree and a doctorate.

Bonhoeffer's dissertation was based on a phrase from the Apostles' Creed, "the communion of saints" (*Sanctorum Communio*). It was a topic that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He wanted to know what it meant for the church truly to be the church—not just a social institution, not just a protector of national values, but also the abiding presence of Jesus Christ on earth.

After completing a required church internship in 1929 (at a

German Protestant church in sunny Barcelona, Spain), Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin. Despite all his accomplishments, the German church would not ordain him. He was only twenty-three years old, and the church required ministers to be at least twenty-five. Instead, he became a lecturer at the university, completed a postdoctoral dissertation (later published as *Act and Being*), and traveled to New York City to study at Union Theological Seminary and observe American church life. He later wrote that he had been especially impressed by the vitality of the African American churches in Harlem.

In 1931, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin, once again offered lectures at the University of Berlin, was ordained, and became chaplain to students at the technical university. He was already winning a reputation as an outstanding, creative theologian and impressed even the great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who at that time was teaching in Germany and was already on his way to becoming the most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century.

As mysteriously as he had been drawn into the world of theology, Bonhoeffer suddenly found himself drawn not only to think about but also to give his life to the church. He would later say,

Then [in 1932] something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible. . . . I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it—but I had not yet become a Christian. . . . It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church.¹

Bonhoeffer had a conversion experience. He would continue to read widely in literature, philosophy, and theology, but it was above all the Bible to which he now turned. From this time on, his life would belong to the church, and he would serve wherever the church called him. Little could he yet know where that road would take him.

It was above all the Bible to which he now turned. From this time on, his life would belong to the church, and he would serve wherever the church called him.

1. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 205.

Bonhoeffer's Way to the Cross

On January 30, 1933, Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Bonhoeffer was one of the few church leaders who immediately expressed concern and publicly criticized the government when it passed laws discriminating against Jews.

At the same time, Bonhoeffer became so discouraged about the new developments in Germany that he left the country to become pastor of two German-speaking congregations in London. There he made ecumenical contacts with Protestant church leaders in other parts of Europe. Even though he had helped to found the Confessing Church (those German pastors and congregations that were resisting Hitler's efforts to control the church), he was not present at the synod of May 29–31, 1934, at which Karl Barth took the lead in drafting the Theological Declaration of Barmen.

In 1935, leaders of the Confessing Church asked Bonhoeffer to return to Germany to direct a preachers' seminary. These seminaries were a second level of theological education, under church control, for students who had completed university studies and fieldwork in a church. Because the theological faculties at the state universities were increasingly aligned with the so-called German Christians (that part of the church that actively supported Hitler and Nazi ideology), the Confessing Church founded several of its own preachers' seminaries in an effort to train and protect its candidates for ministry.

Bonhoeffer had to organize almost everything from the ground up, including room and board. The seminary was briefly located in a hut along the Baltic Sea before it was moved to an abandoned schoolhouse in the village of Finkenwalde. Each group of students, approximately twenty young men at a time (women were not yet being ordained), lived together for six months and practiced daily prayer, theological reflection on ministry (led by Bonhoeffer), and life in Christian community.

In 1937, the Gestapo closed the seminary. From that time on, Bonhoeffer was a man on the run. He “never again had a permanent residence.”² He wrote his books *Discipleship* (also called *The Cost of Discipleship*) and *Life Together* and tried to apprentice candidates for ministry in their fieldwork churches since he could no longer gather them at the seminary. Finally, as it became clear that Hitler was preparing for war, Bonhoeffer traveled to England and the United States, uncertain what to do next.

2. Ibid., 594.

Friends at Union Seminary pleaded with him to remain and continue his theological work. He finally chose to return home, later writing to American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany.”³

In 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Less than a year later, France had surrendered as well. Bonhoeffer threw in his lot with a group of military officers plotting to overthrow Hitler. In 1943, he was arrested, although his connection to the conspirators was not yet clear. Only after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, did the plot unravel. On April 9, 1945, less than one month before the German capitulation, Bonhoeffer was hanged.

God had called Bonhoeffer to become a theologian and to give his life to the church. In prison, he wondered again, “Who am I?” Despite his doubts and fears, he could nevertheless confess, “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”⁴ He knew that he belonged to Christ.

*God had called Bonhoeffer
to become a theologian and
to give his life to the church.*

Spiritual Practice

Part of the life of prayer is practicing regular self-examination and asking whether we are being faithful to God’s call. Take some minutes today to remember how God has guided you in the past, and ask God to guide you into the future, no matter what problems you face.

Questions for Reflection

What is the difference between reading the Bible for information and experiencing it as God’s living Word?

What does it mean to you to give your life to the church?

What do you see to be the most important influences on Bonhoeffer’s life and theology?

3. Ibid., 655.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enl. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 348.