

Review of *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
Rodney L. Smith  
April 11, 2012

I. Bibliographic Data

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers. 1954.

Available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) for \$7.29.

II. Purpose of the author

Bonhoeffer's stated purpose in writing is to present several guidelines which the Bible provides for the Christian community's "life together under the Word" (17).

III. Highlights

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores both the biblical importance and the intrinsic human necessity of the church's life in community as the people of God. He demonstrates biblically God's desire to gather together his people unto himself and then identifies the Christian community as "a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer" (19). Then he examines some of the important practices of community such as being with others, solitude, service to one another, and confession of sins.

In chapter one, Bonhoeffer asserts that the basis of Christian is Jesus Christ, both through him and in him. First, Christians need community because of Jesus Christ, that is each member of the Christian church lives wholly dependant upon the saving Word of God which first pronounces them guilty of sin and then pronounces them righteous with an "alien righteousness" (22) that comes only from being in Jesus. Second, Christians can come together only through Jesus Christ because he is the only way to peace with God and others. Third, God has set the example for how Christians are to meet one in other, according to his divine plan, by sending his Son in the flesh in order to meet us with his infinite mercy and receive us to himself.

Next, Bonhoeffer explains that such community is not an ideal to be realized by human wishing, dreaming, and effort, but it is a divinely appointed, spiritual reality. All human effort to build Christian community will fail. Christians are not to make themselves the judges of what Christian community should be, for doing so makes them accusers of God's people. Rather, they should thankfully count it a privilege to already be included in the community which has God created. This spiritual community of God which is only to be found in Christ is distinguishable from purely human

community. In the Spirit of God, spiritual community is based on truth and is light, but human community bases itself on desire and is darkness. The former practices loving service, the latter selfish pursuit.

In chapters two and three, Bonhoeffer illustrates what life in community both with others and alone should look like. A day of worship with other Christians should begin at the beginning of the day. The morning time belongs to the church and therefore should begin with the communal worship of families giving thanks to God, reading the Scriptures, praying, and singing hymns. The Psalms should be prayed to God together by the community because they are the prayers of Jesus Christ which serve as the Christian's guide to the proper purpose and conducting of prayer. The Scriptures should be read together as a whole unit rather than merely as the "guiding thought of the day" (50), lying aside the neglect of the Word of God in order to experience God's mighty works throughout salvation history and becoming acquainted again with our scriptural history as the people of God. Next should come the singing of hymns, followed by corporate and common prayers.

In addition to morning worship, community is also expressed and experienced both at the table and at work. Being in Christ is the basis for table fellowship since he is the bread of life. There are three types of fellowship at the table which are Christ's and which Christians should enjoy by acknowledging and inviting the presence of Jesus Christ in the fellowship meal. They are daily table fellowship, the Lord's Supper fellowship, and "the final table fellowship in the Kingdom of God" (66) with corresponding prayers that should be prayed at each one.

After Christian worship and fellowship has been enjoyed in the morning, the majority of the day until evening should be dedicated to work that should neither be hindered by nor hinders prayer. When distinguishing between times dedicated to work and to prayer respectively, the realization of their oneness becomes apparent. God has ordained work for humankind, and that work liberates us from our own self-centeredness. Acknowledging and seeking to honor God through work is the meaning of "praying without ceasing" (71). Community prayer and fellowship should be revisited at noon and in the evening.

Participating in community is not meant to provide an alternative to being alone. Instead, solitude should be practiced. The two should not exclude one another, but one without the other becomes dangerous and useless. It is vital for Christians to enter into their Heavenly Father's presence in reverent silence. It is during the silence of solitude and while meditating on the Scriptures that the Word of God can both speak and be heard on a personal level. Following meditation on Scripture should be prayer and intercession for others. This private prayer is a time for prayers which cannot be made known

to the community of Christians, and intercession is a time to pray on behalf of others.

In the fourth chapter, Bonhoeffer explores the role of ministers in the Christian community. A person's natural attitude often seeks self-justification by dominating and controlling who can be dominated and controlled. This tendency must be overcome by spirit of grace, enabling a person to not say much of what comes to mind, not speaking covertly about others. God created us in his image and we must not seek to conform others to our image. True ministers seek to serve others and not exalt themselves above others but be willing to be humbled to the farthest depths of human existence which is precisely the place where God found him. Humility and meekness are needed to accomplish this. The honor of another must be counted more important than self. One should consider himself, as did Paul, the chief of sinners.

There are five ministries essential to Christian ministry. First, if we truly love the brethren we will learn to listen to them. Unfortunately, the many who simply need someone to listen to them do not find it in Christians because Christians are always talking. Not listening to others eventually translates into not listening to God. The non-listening Christian leader is full of empty words disguised with piety. Listening must be full listening.

Second, Christians must take time to help others, letting God control their schedules.

Third, they must bear and sustain one another. Christians are burdens to their brothers and sisters simply by being Christians. Only when one Christian is a burden to another is the other actually a brother or a sister. Christians imitate Jesus Christ by bearing one another's burdens. Thus, everyone is borne.

Fourth is the ministry of proclamation, which is not from the pulpit but from person to person accompanied by listening in a spirit of bearing. The one who has truly listened to and borne another usually remains silent in potentially climactic situations. Church discipline must take place between brethren, which must rebuke and reprove another while never exalting oneself above another. (James 5:20)

Finally, the ministry of authority is not self-seeking for the sake of greatness (Mark 10:43). Instead, authority depends upon brotherly service. Emphasizing the talents and abilities of a leader is of the world and has no place in the church. The New Testament description of a bishop is a faithful man who serves God faithfully in every arena of life. The man himself is nothing. Genuine authority can only exist in God citing who is the supreme authority (Matt 23:8).

Finally, chapter five deals with the confession of sins. According to James 5:16, Christians are to confess their sins to one another. Jesus himself gave this commission to his disciples, commanding them to forgive one another's sins. Therefore, a Christian who has sinned must confess his or her sin to another member of the church. In coming to another brother or sister, the repentant Christian is coming to God. Confession of sins breaks the power of secrecy by which sin overtakes a person and brings the sinner humbly under the atoning sacrifice of the cross. Through such confession, God provides a certainty of forgiveness to the repentant person which cannot come by quietly confessing to God. Confessing sins should be practiced between two individuals and not before the entire congregation. The one to whom the confessant confesses must be humble and one who also practices confession. The confessant must come to confession solely for the purpose of attaining forgiveness. Confession should be practiced especially in preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper.

#### IV. Critical commentary

In the first chapter of *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer provides both a reason and a means for the existence of Christian community. His argument has strength in claiming that Christians belong to one another only because of Jesus Christ and what he has done. He points out both that we are brought together because of a mutual need for Christ and that we have each received an "alien righteousness" (22) from Christ which is not our own. The premise that Christian brethren come together only through Jesus Christ because he is the only way to peace with God and others is a valid one. It is supported by maintaining that Jesus mediates our reconciliation with God. However, little argument for the fact that Jesus also brings peace to broken humanity and human relationships is included. This latter point would have been particularly relevant in Bonhoeffer's book about the community of Christian human beings.

In Chapters two and three, Bonhoeffer provides a strong recipe for both spiritual community and personal spiritual wellbeing. The method offered in these chapters, worship gatherings in the morning, praying the Psalms, reading Scripture, partaking of the Lord's Supper, and lifting up everything that is done as a prayer to God, are excellent spiritual disciplines. Bonhoeffer's assertion that these should be practiced during a day with others is a valid one.

Especially strong is his call for Christians to become acquainted with the Scriptures once again. Scripture reading should never be reduced to merely reading "the verse of the day" but must be both viewed and treated as a whole, each passage being read, heard, and studied in its appropriate context. Particularly weak was his claim that "praying without ceasing" (71) refers to the unity between prayer and work which is realized by seeing God in work. It

is more likely that Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 means to pray constantly whenever possible, including during work. I do not agree with the author's seemingly contradictory statement that, although work can be viewed as prayer (70-71), the two should be kept separate (69). I do agree that prayer and work should not hinder one another, but it does not follow that the two are mutually exclusive and cannot be done harmoniously.

Bonhoeffer laid out the importance of solitude very nicely by demonstrating that it is only in the security of community that one can be truly alone. Too often people find it hard to be alone or to enjoy quietness. This should not be the case for the Christian because we possess a wondrous fellowship with God and with one another. Therefore, when we take time to be alone, as Bonhoeffer excellently pointed out, we should intentionally concentrate on God and our service to him by meditating on Scripture, praying, and interceding on behalf of others.

Bonhoeffer's model for the Christian minister in chapter four is my favorite part of the book. He dealt well with those who would and those who are now taking advantage of other brothers and sisters in Christ in order to fulfill their own selfish agendas. Those who attempt to control others are themselves weak and insecure because they crave the power and security of controlling and manipulating others. Bonhoeffer's description of and warning against this most unfortunate human tendency is right on. Next, his survey of the qualities of a true Christian minister, and ministry, are appropriate, practical, and useful in the kingdom of God.

In the final chapter of the book, Bonhoeffer lays out a good case for the importance of the confession of sins before other Christians rather than keeping them to the individual's self. He correctly points out that sin is most dangerous when kept secret and that forgiveness is experienced more richly in the company of Christian community. However, although his citation of James 5:16 correctly supports his teaching about confession, in his quotation of John 20:23 Bonhoeffer seems unaware that this verse does not refer to confession but to Christian conversion at baptism. He apparently commits the error of accepting the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation of John 20:23 which has no basis in the surrounding context of the verse. Roman Catholics have traditionally linked John 20:23 with James 5:16, reading the Gospel of John horizontally in light of the Book of James. This interpretation of Jesus' words in this verse is anachronistic and cannot be supported. Rather, it is merely assumed that Jesus refers here to the confession of sins to another believer or Christian leader. Bonhoeffer would have done well to have read this Gospel horizontally with other Gospel accounts before cross-referencing it with the Epistle of James.

The context here is Jesus' appearance to his disciples after he had risen from the dead. The Lord's greeting to the disciples in John 20:19, "Peace be

with you” connects it with Luke’s account of the resurrection appearance in Luke 24:36-49, and the content of Jesus’ commission to forgive sins, as Bonhoeffer himself calls it, John 20:23 directly parallels the content of the Great Commission accounts in each of the other three Gospels. There is a final commissioning and sending of the apostles recorded in Matthew (28:19-20), Mark (16:15-18), Luke (24:46-49), and John (20:21-23). In Matthew and Mark, Jesus merely uses the word, “Go,” commanding them to, “Go into all the world” and “teach all nations” (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15), while in Luke’s Gospel he affirms to them, “You are my witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:48).

In John’s Gospel Jesus tells his followers that he is sending them just as he had been sent by the Father (John 20:21). In the next verse, Jesus, breathing on his disciples, commands them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (23). There is mention of Christ’s enduring presence through the Holy Spirit in each of the four Great Commission accounts. Similarly, there is mention of the forgiveness of sins in all four accounts. Whereas in both Luke and John Jesus explicitly commissions the disciples to preach the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47) and forgive the sins of others (John 20:23), the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark speak of making new disciples by baptizing them unto the salvation of their souls (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). Therefore, the context of John 20:23 is a commissioning and sending of Jesus’ disciples into the world to preach “repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name” (Luke 24:47). This is the only way in which Jesus gave authority to his followers to forgive sins, not the sins of fellow believers but the sins of unconverted sinners who come to them in repentance and faith toward God.

James does not tell his readers to confess their sins to one another and forgive the sins of one another. However, when confessing sins to other believers, what this Scripture commands is to “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16, NIV).

#### V. Notable quotations

1. “We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what he does give us daily.” (28)
2. “A psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that here Someone else is praying, not we; that the One who is here protesting his innocence, who is invoking God’s judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself.” (45)
3. “Brief verses cannot and should not take the place reading the Scripture as a whole.” (50)
4. “Holy Scripture does not consist of individual passages; it is a unit and is intended to be used as such.” (51)

5. "But, of course, we must admit that the Scriptures are still largely unknown to us. Can the realization of our fault, our ignorance of the Word of God, have any other consequence than that we should earnestly and faithfully retrieve what has been neglected? And should not ministers be the very first to get to work at this point?" (52)
6. "Let him who cannot be alone beware of being in community." (77)
7. "Let him who is not in community beware of being alone." (77)
8. "Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live rightly in the fellowship." (77-78)
9. "How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own?" (96-97)
10. "It is God's love for us that He not only gives us his Word, but also lends us his ear." (97)
11. "Listening can be a greater service than speaking." (97)
12. "We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God." (99)
13. "It is only when he is a burden that another person is really a brother..." (100)
14. "He who is bearing others knows that he himself is being borne, and only in this strength can he go on bearing." (103)
15. "The practice of discipline in the congregation begins in the smallest circles." (107)
16. "Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing and proclaiming is carried out." (108)
17. "Every cult of personality that emphasizes the distinguished qualities, virtues, and talents of another person, even though these be of an altogether spiritual nature, is worldly and has no place in the Christian community; indeed, it poisons the Christian community." (108)