

# Editor's Introduction to the Reader's Edition of *Life Together*

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From his earliest days at Humboldt University in Berlin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer desired to shape and live in a Christian faith community. He was intrigued by the mystery of how God in Jesus becomes present among those who profess their faith together and celebrate their oneness with the Lord through the nurturing words of the gospel and their common worship. He was already exploring such possibilities with his Berlin University students in 1931.

The intellectual underpinnings of Bonhoeffer's convictions on life in a Christian faith community can be traced to his early works *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, which undergirded his interpretation of the church as a primary form of God's self-revelation. In both works Bonhoeffer contended that communities of faith in Christ must assume concrete form in the world in order to radiate the presence of God credibly and effectively, and to live in service to those in need. The will of God is expressed through

the words spoken to human beings and their communities of faith. Bonhoeffer insisted that Christian communities could not allow God's will to be merely an abstract idea or smothered in institutional, dogmatic, or biblical reductionism. His spiritual classics *Discipleship* and *Life Together* were thus given a realistic embodiment in their most tangible form, the Christian community.

Bonhoeffer sought to explain these theological insights and his commitment to church ministry and its sacramental embodiment in clear language that reflected the lived reality of people who were drawn together through the faith they shared. In his foundational study of church, *Sanctorum Communio*, he sought to integrate the confession of faith in the presence of Jesus Christ with the community's structuring of that presence. Bonhoeffer described the church with the memorable phrase, "Christ existing as the church community."<sup>1</sup>

*Life Together* deals with the nature of this Christ-centered community: the life of Christians living together, united in service to and for one another through prayer, the practice of confession, and partaking of the Lord's Supper. It presupposes the Christo-ecclesiological foundation of *Sanctorum Communio*. In *Life Together*, Christians in Christ are moved to do what they would be unable to accomplish without Jesus: to live together and offer one another their self-giving love in a prayerful, compassionate, and caring community. Christ is proclaimed present in this community as the Word, gracing Christians to go beyond the superficial, often self-centered relationships of their everyday associations and to move toward a more intimate sense of what it means to be Christ to others, and to love others as Christ as loved them.

1. See *Sanctorum Communio* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 1), 121 and 198.

*Life Together* was not simply a devotional text, however; it was Bonhoeffer's own reflection on his attempt to create such a community with his seminarians in Finkenwalde from 1935 to 1937. Finkenwalde was one of five Confessing Church seminaries that emerged after the pro-Nazi Reich bishop, Ludwig Müller, ordered the closing of preachers' seminaries in the Old Prussian Union church in March 1934. Determined to continue training seminarians, Confessing Church leaders in Prussia invited Bonhoeffer in July 1934 to direct a seminary in Brandenburg. At the Dahlem Synod of October 1934 the radical wing of the Confessing Church declared its independence from the official church. In Bonhoeffer's eyes, the official church—led by openly pro-Nazi church leaders like Müller and by overly cautious bishops who opted for compromise with these officials—had abandoned all pretense of being a true Christian church. The break at Dahlem meant that seminarians who were committed to the Confessing Church were “illegal” in the eyes of the official church, barred from ordination and the ministry, and thus had to be trained for the ministry at privately established seminaries by Confessing pastors and theologians.

Even before the Dahlem Synod, Bonhoeffer had been thinking of a different model for theological education. While still in London he wrote his Swiss friend, Erwin Sutz, that the training of young seminarians belonged not in the university, but “entirely in church monastic schools, where the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship are taken seriously—which for all three of these things is simply not the case at the university and under the present circumstances is impossible.”<sup>2</sup> While in England, he visited several Anglican communities and monasteries to become acquainted with

2. Letter from London, September 11, 1934, in *London: 1933-1935* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 13, p. 217).

their methods and routines. Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in April 1935 and took up his new duties in June.

*Life Together* is a studious exposition of the Christian community of seminarians whom he trained in Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer instructed them about ministry, prayer life, the spiritual love and the brotherhood that they should extend to one another, unselfish service to those in need, the need for meditation on the Word of God and common worship. It is a detailed account of how Bonhoeffer and his seminarians became a community of brothers bonded through their common faith and mutual service in preparation for their ministry. Bonhoeffer adamantly contended that the strength and objectivity to preach the Word of the Gospels came from the common life of the seminarians, as opposed to pastoral actions as isolated individuals, and he argued that Christian life and the faith can never be lived in the abstract. In his view, the very nature of the church community demanded renunciation of clerical privileges and full availability for service to the people entrusted to their care. Finally, he envisaged that in their daily routine the seminarians would enjoy a simple common life in a schedule of daily prayer and meditation, theological studies, mutual service to one another, and worship. During the period of their life together, they would have to learn “how to lead a community life in daily and strict obedience to the will of Christ Jesus, in the practice of the humblest and noblest service one Christian brother can perform for another. They must learn to recognize the strength and liberation to be found in their brotherly service and their life together in a Christian community. Second, they have to learn to serve the truth alone in their study of the Bible and its interpretation in their sermons and instruction.”<sup>3</sup>

3. Letter of June 27, 1936, to Wolfgang Staemmler, director of the Saxon preachers' seminary in Frankfurt, in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 14, p. 196).

Jesus's self-sacrificing love and daring actions on behalf of his followers, as portrayed in Bonhoeffer's earliest writings, were the Christocentric foundations for the ecclesiology of *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer's entire approach to the community life portrayed in *Life Together* was centered on how Jesus Christ continues to be present in the world through his followers, graced by the Holy Spirit to continue what he began during his incarnational presence among them. At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer and the seminarians he directed came to depend on this sense of Jesus' continuing presence among them, nurtured by their strong faith in Jesus Christ, manifest in the biblical word on which they meditated daily and their common worship. Their relationship to each other was augmented through their intercessory prayers for one another and for those in need beyond the seminary walls. As Bonhoeffer had stressed in *Sanctorum Communio*, in their compassion and care for each other the seminarians came to be not only *with* one another, but more especially to live *for* one another.<sup>4</sup> Being *for* one another leads to an attitude that is more clearly Christ-like: "Whoever lives in love is Christ in relation to the neighbor." For Bonhoeffer this meant that "Christians can and ought to act like Christ, they ought to bear the burdens and sufferings of the neighbor." Citing Luther, he wrote: "You must open your heart to the weaknesses and needs of others as if they were your own, and offer your means as if they were theirs, just as Christ does for you in the sacrament."<sup>5</sup>

One reason that readers of *Life Together* find it so compelling is its portrayal of the inner strength and intensity of Bonhoeffer's relationship with Jesus Christ as developed in the practical everyday

4. *Sanctorum Communio* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 1), 88. Bonhoeffer makes this distinction to illustrate the differences that can exist in social forms in communities; italics mine.

5. *Ibid.*, 178. Bonhoeffer uses this distinction to show the extent to which being for one another in community is more demanding and closer to the example of Jesus Christ.

life of the Christian community he directed. Bonhoeffer's account of the community-sustained spiritual life at Finkenwalde was not a mere reminiscence about an agreeable, idyllic experience of a like-minded group of young seminarians; he intended to share the experience with others as a model for creating forms of church community in a Germany torn apart during the destructive years of the Hitler dictatorship. With vivid memories of how he and his seminarians were able to form a supportive community in Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer wrote that what they accomplished could become a possibility for the church as a whole—in fact such communities could become a genuine mission for the church at large.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, it was the Gestapo that made this remarkable book possible. On September 28, 1937, the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde after an order by Heinrich Himmler that declared all the Confessing Church seminaries illegal. Bonhoeffer continued to train and mentor his seminarians in “underground pastorates” scattered throughout the provinces around Berlin. These “underground pastorates” were essentially small churches aligned with the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer stayed in regular contact with the seminarians through circular letters and visitations. Despite these efforts, their period of “life together” had ended.

### **The Writing of *Life Together***

Bonhoeffer had been reluctant to publicize the Finkenwalde “experiment,” feeling that the time was not ripe. With the closing of the seminary at Finkenwalde and the dispersal of his seminarians, however, Bonhoeffer felt compelled not only to record for posterity the daily regimen and its rationale, but also to express his conviction

6. See Bonhoeffer's Preface to this volume, 000.

that the worldwide church itself needed to promote a sense of community if it was to have new life.

Bonhoeffer and his closest friend, Eberhard Bethge, who had been an active part of the Finkenwalde community, journeyed to Göttingen in late September 1938 to the empty home of Bonhoeffer's twin sister, Sabine, and her husband Gerhard Leibholz, a professor of law at the university and a baptized Christian of Jewish descent who had been dismissed from his professorship. Bonhoeffer and Bethge had helped the Leibholz family escape from Germany to Switzerland. Now Bonhoeffer sat at Leibholz's desk and worked on the manuscript almost nonstop with only a few breaks.

The work was overshadowed by Bonhoeffer's disappointment in the Confessing Church leadership, his growing awareness that war was imminent, and his first encounters with resistance figures through his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi. The oath of personal allegiance to Hitler taken by a majority of the Confessing Church pastors filled Bonhoeffer with frustration and added to his urgency to complete the book. Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland, the official order in November that Bonhoeffer register for the military, and the November "Kristallnacht" pogroms amplified his sense that he was working against the clock.

The political-religious situation was reflected in several comments in the first section of the book, such as Bonhoeffer's remark that "the Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians," adding that Christians belong "in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work" (p. 000). If we can extrapolate from *Life Together*, that "mission" and "work" seemed to be the infusion of new life and a new sense of Christian community into a church grown cowardly and less than Christ-like under the spell of the Hitler dictatorship.

*Life Together* was published in 1939 as a theological monograph.<sup>7</sup> Within one year it went into its fourth printing. Since its first publication in English in 1954 by Harper and Row, the previous translation of *Life Together* has gone through twenty-three reprintings. The new Bonhoeffer Works translation published in this Reader's Edition has corrected the errors of the previous translations and follows Bonhoeffer's text more closely.

### **The Structure of *Life Together***

The structure of *Life Together* follows the daily schedule kept at Finkenwalde, with sections on "Community," "The Day Together," "The Day Alone," "Service," and "Confession and the Lord's Supper."

#### **Community**

Bonhoeffer began by quoting Psalm 133: "How very good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity," emphasizing the strength of the Christian community against those adversaries who would destroy them. Quoting Luther, he reminded his seminarians that their community life was set in the midst of vicious enemies bent on their destruction and that their protection and power would emanate from the "physical presence of other Christians." He analyzed the dangerous elements that eroded community life, warning the seminarians against the "wishful thinking so distant from the lived reality" (p. 000). The reality of their fidelity to Jesus Christ would give them courage to endure the many conflicts that could crop up in any community that sought to follow the path set by Jesus Christ.

7. It was published as part of *Theologische Existenz heute* (Theological existence today), Volume 61.

Bonhoeffer then wrote about the nature of the love that was the binding force in the Christian community, criticizing “purely emotional love,” which when unexamined vitiated the call of Christ to an agapeic love that was without preset conditions. Unlike calculating, manipulative, self-serving “emotional” love, the spiritual love Bonhoeffer advocated was deferential, humble, and unconditional. Spiritual love was agapeic, like the love that Jesus Christ extended to all. Christians should recognize the true image of the other person from the perspective of Christ himself, resisting all attempts to coerce and dominate others rather than loving them for who they are: as those for whom Christ became incarnate among his people and with whom Christ became bonded in their brotherly love. In Christian community there was “access to one another, joy in one another, community with one another through Christ alone” (p. 000; LT: 47).

### The Day Together

In the second section Bonhoeffer emphasized the need for daily structure. The day of shared faith began early, with communal worship in which they sang hymns, read the scriptures, and prayed aloud, often with one person taking the lead. Bonhoeffer wanted the seminarians to consider this time early in the morning as sacred, during which they could experience anew the mediation of Jesus Christ and the enlightenment of God’s Word. They prayed the Psalms together as the Prayer of Christ himself. The beginning of the day was not to be burdened by the concerns they would face during the busy day. The reading of the scriptures together and their singing, conjoined to their meditation and table fellowship, were moments that by their very routine contributed to their bonding in a Christ-centered love. As the day ended they gathered again for the

evening breaking of bread together and the final worship service, which included reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. “When could we ever have a deeper awareness of God’s power and working than in the hour when we lay aside our own work and entrust ourselves to God’s faithful hands?” (p. 000; LT, p. 79).

### The Day Alone

Bonhoeffer realized that many seek community because they fear loneliness, cannot endure being alone, cannot cope with life on their own, or have been scarred by bad experiences and seek help in the company of others. He believed that such persons are not called to live their faith in a Christian faith community, where the day together is marked by Christ’s call to be alone in meditative prayer. There is a reality to moments of solitude within the Christian community, often occurring in the realization that one will experience the importance of solitude in obeying God’s call, taking up Christ’s cross, being alone in prayer, and being alone in death in the Lord. From that solitude and the sense of being alone with Christ, Bonhoeffer believed Christians could find strength in complementary togetherness, living more alertly to the presence of Christ within a Christian community.

Bonhoeffer emphasized: “Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community” (p. 000; LT, p. 82). When persons in community live closely together in a confined space and cannot give each other the necessary quiet, the need arises for periods of quiet and silence. The solitude of such moments is a needed complement to the many moments in the daily routine when one longs for space and quiet. Three factors in a Christian faith community require solitude: meditation on the scriptures, prayer, and intercession. All three have their place in the daily period of meditation. Bonhoeffer viewed

intercessory prayer as an outcome of solitude but also as providing an amazing thrill, since through intercessory prayer, Christians bring one another into the presence of God. Bonhoeffer called intercessory prayer God's gift of grace for every Christian community. Realizing that the early morning hours were the best time for "being alone" in the solitude of meditation and intercessory prayer, he concluded that this solitude, together with the sharing in the love of Christ in the daily routine of being together, would prove a "daily source of new joy in God and in the Christian community" (p. 000; LT, 91).

### Service to One Another

The diversity of those who comprise the Christian faith community is an important aspect of God's blessings. The presence of Christians to one another is a visible way in which Christ is enfleshed anew. Everyone contributes to the dynamics of living together in harmony—the talented and the untalented, the devout and those less devout, the sociable and the loners. Since the inevitable judgments about character and classifications of people are dangerous to the soul of the community, Bonhoeffer counseled the brothers to rejoice in the opportunity this presented to strengthen their bonds with one another. The strength of their community lay in their concern and care for their weakest brothers.

Bonhoeffer hoped to integrate this diversity into a strengthened faithfulness to the presence of Jesus Christ among them through the daily schedule of service, common worship, scripture reading, and table fellowship, growing in their love for one another and into the image of Jesus Christ among them. Bonhoeffer focused on three particular kinds of service that promoted this growth. First came the service of listening to one another, especially when people crave nothing more than listening to their problems. If one can't listen to another in need, Bonhoeffer asked, how can he listen to God? The

second was active helpfulness: “Nobody is too good for the lowest service,” he wrote. “Those who worry about the loss of time entailed by such small external acts of helpfulness are usually taking their own work too seriously” (p. 000; LT, 99). Even the smallest task could remind the brothers that God’s ways were not always their ways. Finally, Bonhoeffer spoke of the service of forbearance, drawing from Paul’s advice: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Bonhoeffer understood that forbearance is how God draws Christians into a serving community marked by its very diversity. The strong should help the weak, the healthy help those who are ill, the talented help the untalented, the righteous help the sinner, always in a Christ-like manner. Service deepens the personal and spiritual relationships that are so integral to the common life of the Christian community.

### Confession and the Lord’s Supper

In the last segment of *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer emphasized the need for Christians to confess their sins to one another. The call to confession is essential to those living together that they might confront their sins directly, particularly sins that have a direct impact on community well-being. On the practical level Bonhoeffer saw this as an opportunity for Christians to drop their masks, pretenses, and denials, and to acknowledge who they are in God’s sight. In the act of confession, members of the community could become Christ for one another. The reconciliation that comes through having sins forgiven is the best preparation for those who desire to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ and, through the Lord’s Supper, to renew their commitment to one another. Reconciled in their hearts and with one another, the community received the gift of Jesus’ body and blood, receiving new life and salvation. “Here the community has reached

its goal. Here joy in Christ and Christ's community is complete. The life together of Christians under the Word has reached its fulfillment in the sacrament" (p. 000; LT, 118).

**Bonhoeffer's Hope for the Future of Christian Faith Communities  
in the Manner of *Life Together***

As Bonhoeffer wrote in his Preface to *Life Together*, he hoped that the Finkenwalde model of community could become a possibility for the church as a whole, a "mission entrusted to the Church" (p. 000; LT, 25). The Christian church, he believed, urgently needed to find different ways to be, to follow Christ along the lines of Jesus' gospel. Only thus could it resist the political ideology that had successfully gained the allegiance of most churchgoers in Nazi Germany.

While this book was a timely message to the churches of Germany during the turbulent 1930s, its lasting popularity illustrates the timelessness of Bonhoeffer's inspiring vision for a genuine Christian life together.