

Life Together | Book Club

Context

It is in **September 1938** that Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes his little book “*Life Together*” or “*Gemeinsames Leben*” in the short space of 4 weeks.

Earlier in the same year, Bonhoeffer, who was at that time in charge of Finkelwalde seminary, one of the few seminaries organized by the Confessing Church of Germany, saw his little **community of seminarians dispersed by the Gestapo**. The Nazis authority had made their mission to eliminate the Confessing Church and their resistance to their galvanization by the Reich.

He doesn't write his book to simply keep a record of what he experienced, **he writes with the conviction that the present context demands a new life for the Church as a whole and that it is necessary to start by retrieving a deeper sense of community** (p. 3-4).

It is important to mention that he writes in a pre-war context, but it was becoming clearer and clearer that things were heading South. During that same month, **Hitler annexed the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia**, and the reality of war was taking shape more and more clearly.

It is in this very non-ideal context that Bonhoeffer decide to write “Life Together” and it was for him a way to prepare himself and the Church for the times that were to come. **He sees in this project an attempt to answer the challenges of a time marked by dark forces threatening the reality of the Church** (p. 6).

The theological roots of “Life Together”

Bonhoeffer’s conception of Christian life together, doesn’t suddenly appear during the crisis of the late 30’s in Nazi Germany but is the product of a long theological reflection that he started as a young adult.

If we had to summarize Bonhoeffer’s questioning, we could sum it up that way: **What does it mean to say that the Church is the body of Christ? And how does this body take shape in the world?**

In Finkelwalde, Bonhoeffer gets the opportunity to put the answers that he developed during his academic years to the test. His earliest works, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* were deeply marked by a single Christological statement: **God’s word is present in the human Jesus and in the community that Christ recognizes** (p. 8). **And it is really this statement that is put to the test in his experience in Finkelwalde.**

It is important to note that Bonhoeffer was never a utopian. When it comes to his understanding of the Church, **he was at the same time a serious critic of God’s people in its social and historical reality and a passionate advocate of the Church as God’s reality**, in which his children are called to take part.

The beginnings of *Life Together*

After having received his habilitation, **Bonhoeffer became a teacher at the University of Berlin in 1931**, at the age of 25. It was a time during which Bonhoeffer was really questioning the future of the Church in the West and particularly in Germany. **Bonhoeffer was deeply discouraged by what he was observing in the German Church.**

Bonhoeffer was thirsting to see Christian communities born from an obedience to God's Word and filled with Christ's courage, **so that Christians could, and here I quote Geoffrey B. Kelly, "live out the gospel more intensely, and thus courageously cope with the crises facing the German nation (...)" (p. 10).**

For him, it was essential to insist on the Church as being in the world, to insist on the "incarnated" reality of the Church. The Church is called by God to take shape in this world, it is called to a mission that brings the Church into a struggle with evil (p. 11). **His understanding of the Church doesn't allow to think of it as the institution of the privileged ones or an institution diluted into secularism; the Church is Jesus Christ in the world, it is free from the world so that it can fight secular idolatries and be courageous in its service to the other (p. 11).**

It is with these thoughts in mind that Bonhoeffer starts his role as the head of the seminary in Finkelwalde.

The Community of Finkelwalde

In its struggle with the Nazis regime, the Confessing Church decided to open their own seminaries to keep control of the ordination process. At that point, in 1935, Bonhoeffer has just returned from a long trip in the UK where he met George Bell, the Dean of Canterbury. He is really interested by Anglican monasticism and their seminaries.

It is after this journey that he decides to come back to lead one of the newly founded confessing seminary. He opens it in April, and he will later describe this following semester as the fullest time of his life. In a sense, for Bonhoeffer, it is years of meditation and theological development coming to life. More than that, he experiences the dream of a lifetime, a deep brotherhood centered around the gospel, preparing young confessing seminarians to follow Christ in an age of great evil.

But the Nazi state is still planning to get rid of the confessing church and preparing new legislations to bring it to the ground. Legislations that will, in due time, see the seminary in Finkelwalde shut down.

Chapter 1: Community

Structure of the first chapter:

- I. The Reality of Christian Community: a scattered people (p. 27-31)
- II. But what is Christian community? (p. 31-35)
- III. Spiritual Love as the Heart of Christian Community (p. 35-44)
- IV. Conclusion: the distinction between human ideal and God's reality as the edge of the sword of the Christian Community (p. 45-47)

I. The Reality of Christian Community: a scattered people

For Bonhoeffer, the life of the Christian community is “life together under the Word (p. 7). And this life under the Word is not a life that is to be seen as separated from the world, but very much in the midst of the world from which the community has been formed:

“According to God’s will Christendom is a scattered people, scattered like seed ‘into all the kingdoms of the earth’ (Deut 28.25). That is its curse and its promise. God’s people must dwell in far countries among the unbelievers, but it will be the seed of the Kingdom of God in all the world” (p. 28).

The experienced oneness and togetherness that the Christians long for is eschatological. The dispersion, the scattered nature of the Church throughout the world is to be until Christ coming:

“Until then, God’s people remain scattered, held together solely in Jesus Christ, having become one in the fact that, dispersed among unbelievers, they remember *him* in the far countries” (p. 28).

There is also a missional movement for the people who lives in the time between “the death of Christ” and “the day of judgement”, that is implied in these first few pages.

We can break it down that way:

1. It is a privilege to live with other Christians
2. Christ lived amongst enemies
3. He did so to bring peace to God’s enemies
4. As such Christians also belong in the midst of enemies
5. There is their mission and work (p. 28) — Christians are called to be peace makers (Matt. 5).

Communion with other Christians is then a grace, it is not something self-evident in a world where many Christians experience the privation of any form of community. And Bonhoeffer shows, through the example of Paul and John, the place and right for the longing of the physical presence of our brothers and sisters.

- **Reading Community p. 29:**

“A human being is created as a body; the Son of God appeared on earth in the body for our sake and was raised in the body. In the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected community of God’s spiritual-physical creatures. Therefore, the believer praises the Creator, the Reconciler and the Redeemer, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of the other Christian. The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian living in the diaspora recognizes in the nearness of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the Triune God. In their loneliness, both the visitor and the one visited recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility and joy. They receive each other’s blessings as the blessings of the Lord Jesus-Christ” (p. 29).

Something is lost in the capacity of the Christian to be Christ for the other without a “real presence”. And this also is already presented in SC through the concept of the body of Christ as “Christ-existing-as community”. **In SC as in LT, the other Christian is really presented as a sacrament, he is “a sign of the gracious presence of the triune God” (p. 29).**

II. But what is Christian community?

- **Reading Community p. 31**

“Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this (p. 31). And Bonhoeffer unpacks this first thesis in three steps:

1. **“a Christian needs other for the sake of Jesus Christ”**
2. **“a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ”**
3. **“from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity” (p. 31)**

We love and welcome one another as God welcomed us in Christ. We are brothers and sisters through Christ only, it has nothing to do with our desire for community, as much earnest as it can be. Bonhoeffer insists that it is Christ who calls us and binds us together for eternity through his word to us. We are united together not because of our piety or “inwardness”, but only because of Christ.

It flows from this, that:

1. **“Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality”.**
2. **“Christian community is a spiritual [pneumatische] and not a psychic [psychische] reality (p. 35).**

- **Reading Community p. 35**

To synthesize what has been said so far, Christian community is God given reality in which we may participate and not something that is our responsibility to realize based on ideals. Its ground, strength and promise rest in Jesus Christ only. We can rest in this and calmly pray and hope for it (p.38)!

- **Reading Community p. 38**

We will now need to look more closely at the division between the notions of spiritual and psychic as understood by Bonhoeffer to understand the heart of the Christian community.

III. Spiritual Love as the Heart of Christian Community

The opposition between Pneumatische and Psychische

The spiritual community vs. the emotional community.

Pneumatische Gemeinschaft	Psychische Gemeinschaft
geistlich	seelisch
From the Spirit	emotional
based in the Word of God in Jesus Christ	natural urges / strengths and abilities of the human soul
truth	desire
light	darkness
agape	eros

Spiritual love:

- Is ordered by the truth
 - it creates freedom
 - it gives fruits
- } In short, spiritual love serves the other, it is for the other.

What is spiritual is “(...) what is created only by the Holy Spirit, who puts Jesus Christ into our hearts as lord and savior” (p. 39). **He defines the two types of community this way: “Spiritual community is the community of those who are called by Christ; emotional community is the community of pious souls” (p. 39).** Here we see in this contrasting of the spiritual community with the emotional community something that Bonhoeffer had already developed in SC, **the Church of Christ is not the Church of the enthusiasts or of the pious, but of the elects.**

- **Reading Community p. 43-47**

“Only Christ in his Word tell me what love is. Contrary to all my opinions and convictions, Jesus Christ will tell me what love for my brothers and sisters really look like. Therefore, spiritual love is bound to the word of Jesus Christ alone” (p. 45).

- **Question for us:** What kind of love do I have for the other? (Do I want him to enter my vision of the good life, to join me in my convictions? Or do I want him to flourish in his dependency to Christ alone?)

Following Bonhoeffer’s argument, it flows out that the most direct way to the other is prayer. As Christ stands between me and the other, **we should speak “to Christ about the other Christian more than to the other Christian about Christ”** (p. 44).

- **Question for us:** How does the reality of Christ standing between me, and my sister or brother affect the way that I experience my relationships with them?

IV. Conclusion: the distinction between human ideal and God's reality as the edge of the sword of the Christian Community

Bonhoeffer summarizes his whole development in this succinct sentence:

“The existence of any Christian community life essentially depends on whether or not it succeeds at the right time in promoting the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God's reality, between spiritual and emotional community” (p. 45).

“Life under the word”, as Bonhoeffer calls it, never turns into a movement, an order, a school of piety, a holy club; instead, **it is always a life that takes part to the life of the one, holy, catholic Church.** It participates to God's reality and, as such, cannot be a self-centered project which inevitably goes hand in hand with selectivity:

“The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community [Lebensgemeinschaft] may actually means the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door” (p. 45-46).

“It is not the experience of Christian community, but firm and certain faith within Christian community that holds us together. We hold fast in faith to God's greatest gift, that God has acted for us all and wants to act for us all. This makes us joyful and happy, but it also makes us ready to forgo all such experiences if at times God does not grant them. We are bound together by faith, not by experience” (p. 47).

And a little bit later: “For Jesus Christ alone is our unity. “He is our peace.”” (p. 47).

And so, Bonhoeffer finishes to present what the Christian community is, it is life under Christ's word, in Christ's love, through faith in Christ, and in his peace. It is not our making but a partaking in Christ's rule.