

2021 Lenten Study – Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* (Apart)

Week 5 – Confession & Communion

Welcome to the fifth and final session in our Lenten Book Study. We are looking at Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, *Life Together*, which contains his thoughts about, and guidance for, Christians living in community. We’ll see what this small but powerful volume might have to teach us after almost a year living more or less separated. What does Christian community look like when we’re all quarantined and can’t gather together? And how can Bonhoeffer’s experiences and teachings guide us when we finally do get to come back together once more?

Hopefully you can find access to a copy of this book. It is available for purchase online through a variety of retailers and booksellers, and it is probably also available through your local public libraries, or as an e-book. All citations below come from the Harper San Francisco edition, copyright 1954. Page numbers are cited in parentheses. Some of the discussion questions are adapted from a study guide by Rev. Dr. Craig Nesson from Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

We begin by sharing the fifth verse of a hymn written by Bonhoeffer, “By Gracious Powers,” (ELW #626), as our opening prayer:

Yet when again in this same world you give us
the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,
we shall remember all the days we lived through
and our whole life shall then be yours alone.

Over the course of our study and reflection on this book, we’ve seen how Bonhoeffer talks about the Christian community being in Christ and through Christ. He talks about the day together and the day alone, outlining practices of community worship and individual devotion to keep us grounded in Christ and guide our daily work and living and interactions. Last week we discussed “Ministry,” that is, various practices – like listening, helpfulness, and bearing – to keep members of the community humble and in service towards one another. As the members proclaim God’s comfort and/or God’s admonition to one another, they base their speech on this truth: “We speak to one another on the basis of the help we both need.”

The final chapter is called “Confession and Communion,” and it centers in on the trait that separates a *Christian* community from other groups that share fellowship and do good works, like Rotary or Kiwanis or Elks, or a business that adopts a section of highway. The thing that truly makes a Christian community Christian is forgiveness, and in the community forgiveness is preceded by confession.

“It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the

fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we *are* sinners!

“But it is the grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that it confronts us with the truth and says: You are a sinner, a great desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work; He wants you alone...The mask you wear before men will do you no good before Him. He wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner.” (110-111)

- To what degree do you feel you need to “keep up appearances” at church? Without even talking about confession sins to each other, do you feel like you have to maintain a certain standard of how you dress/look? Do you share health issues and needs, or keep them private? Do you share family issues with one another, or put up a “happy” front?

“All sham was ended in the presence of Christ. The misery of the sinner and the mercy of God – this was the truth of the Gospel in Jesus Christ. It was in this truth that his Church was to live. Therefore, he gave his followers the authority to hear the confession of sin and to forgive sin in his name...Now our brother stands in Christ’s stead...He hears the confession of our sins in Christ’s stead and he forgives our sins in Christ’s name.” (111-112)

- What makes a Christian want to hide their sinfulness from other sinful Christians?
- Did you know that there *is* a rite for individual confession in the Lutheran hymnal? We’ll close our discussion today with a slightly modified example.
- Have you ever experienced Christ in the midst of the corporate confession we usually do at the beginning of a worship service? If not, are we missing something? Have you experienced other types of confession in other worship or church settings?

The next chapter heads are all about breaking through to the truest sense of community. I will confess to all of you, dear readers, that I struggle with this chapter. Not because I disagree with it; but because I feel convicted by it, because I’m not sure if it’s possible, and because it clashes with the way the world works. But maybe this is so counter-cultural that it might actually be the so many are looking for: radical honesty and vulnerable confession of sin. But let’s face it: vulnerability is hard, and it goes against our instincts.

“In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person...

“The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin...Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brothers. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession and handed it over to God...Now he stands in the fellowship of

sinner who live by the grace of God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Now he can be a sinner and still enjoy the grace of God. He can confess his sins and in this very act find fellowship for the first time. The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ.” (112-113)

- To what degree has this past year’s isolation and separation allowed the poisonous “darkness of the unexpressed”? Individually/congregationally/as a country? Has it made folks less likely to be open and vulnerable, or more likely to seek true community?
- I’ve never been a part of a community with *this* kind of confession as a central act of fellowship. Have you? (Keep in mind that the confession isn’t in front of the *whole* community; as Bonhoeffer advises later in the chapter, it’s better to have just one or two trusted folks to engage in this with.)
- Have you ever experienced Christ in the act of confessing sins to someone and receiving forgiveness, whether in a church setting or somewhere else?

The next two sections, “Breaking Through to the Cross” and “Breaking Through to New Life,” go hand in hand. Bonhoeffer starts with his summary of sin: pride. “The mind and flesh of man are set on fire by pride; for it is precisely in his wickedness that man wants to be as God. Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are so blinded that they no longer see the promise and the glory in such abasement.” (114)

- Are we afraid that by confessing our sins to others, they will hold it over us?

“It was none other than Jesus Christ himself who suffered the scandalous, public death of a sinner in our stead. He was not ashamed to be crucified for us as an evildoer...The Cross of Jesus Christ destroys all pride. We cannot find the Cross of Jesus if we shrink from going to the place where it is to be found, namely, the public death of the sinner. And we refuse to bear the Cross when we are ashamed to take upon ourselves the shameful death of the sinner in confession...In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother – which means, before God – we experience the Cross of Jesus as our rescue and salvation.” (114)

- Have you ever thought of confession as the death of the sinner?

“In confession the break-through to new life occurs. Where sin is hated, admitted, and forgiven, there the break with the past is made...But where there is a break with sin, there is conversion. Confession is conversion...Christ has made a new beginning with us.

“As the first disciples left all and followed when Jesus called, so in confession the Christian gives up all and follows. Confession is discipleship...

“What happened to us in baptism is bestowed upon us anew in confession...Confession is the renewal of the joy of baptism.” (115)

- Have you ever thought of confession as discipleship? Or conversion? Or the renewal of the joy of baptism?

The next section gets at the difference between confession directly to God or confessing to a brother or sister in the community. There is some trickiness that our squirrely human brain tries to employ without the tangible, incarnate person next to us speaking on Christ’s behalf:

“Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother?...Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with out confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution...

“Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person...As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God.” (115-116)

Please note that Bonhoeffer is not advocating the system of private confession that might come to mind in the Catholic Church. This is not to a priest or pastor; it is to another member of the community, another sinner. This also isn’t the same system that Luther took issue with in his time. This is, according Bonhoeffer, the key to true Christian community – each individual acting as Christ to the other, in keeping with the Lutheran teaching of the “priesthood of all believers.” Bonhoeffer recommends only confessing concrete sins, using the Ten Commandments as a guide for what to confess. Here is an important distinction: “No, confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner.” (117)

The next section covers “To Whom Confess?” “It is not experience of life but experience of the Cross that makes one a worthy hearer of confessions.” (118)

- Have you ever felt “horrified by the dreadfulness of your own sin” (118)?
- Do folks still think about sin in the terms Luther used, or Bonhoeffer used?
- To be clear, when Bonhoeffer paints psychology in a bad light on page 119, it was a different field then than it is now. I know, and have been counseled by, Christian therapists.
- How would confessing your own sin make you more compassionate to the sins of others?

The next session lifts up two dangers: don’t just have one person be the only confessor for the whole community; and don’t turn confession into some kind of pious work. “Confession as a routine duty is spiritual death; confession in reliance upon the promise is life.” (120)

Bonhoeffer concludes the chapter with a discussion on “The Joyful Sacrament”: Holy Communion. Communion is the tangible presence of Christ. “The fellowship of the Lord’s Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship. As the members of the congregation are united in body and blood at the table for the Lord so will they be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and his community is complete. The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament.” (122)

- How might an incarnate Confession and Forgiveness with another member of the community flesh out the “for yous” of Communion?
- How does receiving Communion feel? What have you missed in this last year without it, or without its “usual” administration?

Some final questions:

- In Bonhoeffer’s assessment, how Christian is our community?
- What steps could we take to become more of a Christian community?

Finally, some homework:

- Make a plan: select a fellow Christian and ask them to try some confession and forgiveness with you. Confess some concrete sins, asking them for forgiveness on God’s behalf. Then switch roles. You could use the following modified individual confession and forgiveness from the hymnal, or use your own words.

ELW Individual Confession and Forgiveness

Introduction

Washed in water and marked with the cross, the baptized children of God are united with Christ and, through him, with other believers who together form a living community of faith. Although we are set free to live in love and faithfulness, we continue to turn away from God and from one another. Confessing our sin involves a continuing return to our baptism where our sinful self is drowned and dies; in the gift of forgiveness God raises us up again and again to new life in Jesus Christ.

Individual Confession and Forgiveness is a ministry of the church through which a person may confess sin and receive the assurance of God’s forgiveness. This order may be used by itself at times when a congregation offers opportunity or people request the opportunity for confession. It may also be used in conjunction with pastoral care, such as to conclude a counseling session. There is a confidential nature to this order, in keeping with the discipline and practice of the Lutheran church.

Confession

Person receiving confession:

In the name of the Father,
and of the † Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

You have come to make confession before God.

You are free to confess before me, a brother/sister in the church of Christ,

sins of which you are aware and which trouble you.

The penitent may use the following form or pray in her/his own words.

**Merciful God, I confess
that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed,
by what I have done and by what I have left undone.**

Here the penitent may confess sins that are known and that burden her/him.

**I repent of all my sins, known and unknown.
I am truly sorry, and I pray for forgiveness.
I firmly intend to amend my life,
and to seek help in mending what is broken.
I ask for strength to turn from sin
and to serve you in newness of life.**

Forgiveness

Addressing the penitent, the confessor may lay both hands on the penitent's head.

Cling to this promise: the word of forgiveness I speak to you comes from God.

Name,

in obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ,

I forgive you all your sins

in the name of the Father,

and of the ✝ Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,

keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

The confessor and the penitent may share the greeting of peace.

Thanks for pondering this book! Please take some time to ponder the discussion questions I've included and your own. If you have questions, insights, or responses of your own, please share!

Consider reading the "companion" to this book, *Discipleship* (also known as *The Cost of Discipleship*), which takes us from the internal workings of Christian community to the external mission of Christian love and service.

Peace be with you!