

BONHOEFFER ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

By Scott Reid

Author Bio: Scott Redd is a philologist and is the president and associate professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. In the late nineties, he felt called to leave the business world to pursue a Master of Divinity at RTS in Orlando, Fla., and then went on to complete his doctoral dissertation in the Department of Semitic Language and Egyptian Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University of America. During his doctoral studies, he taught and ministered in two churches in two different Presbyterian denominations. He then returned to RTS Orlando, where he taught Old Testament and served as Dean of Students, before moving to Washington, D.C., in 2012. He has also taught at Catholic University of America, the Augustine Theological Institute in Malta, the International Training Institute in the Mediterranean basin, and for Third Millennium Ministries.



In his delightful and quirky meditation on Christian community entitled “Life Together”, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the grounds of Christian community in this way:

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Theology Text: comments in the margins are from the Theology Together team, and do not appear in the source material.

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

What does it look like to "belong to each other" in and through Jesus? How does this play out in everyday life?

What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.

Bonhoeffer is primarily known for his Karl Barth-tinged interpretation of the Scriptures and his tortured decision to oppose the Third Reich at a time when to do so was destructive to social standing and bodily health. I appreciate his definition of Christian unity, in part, because it springs from these hostile and desperate conditions.

From the very beginning, Bonhoeffer was interested in Christianity and becoming a pastor even when he belonged to a family that was thoroughly into science and logic as his father was a known neurologist in Berlin. When he communicated his thoughts about taking up theology in college and becoming a pastor, he was ridiculed that he would end up living a very poor and insignificant life. Bonhoeffer decided to change this perception and started studying liberal theology. His need to understand and eventually teach the placement of Christianity in the context of a liberal world took him to America where he experienced more spiritual side of the religion than just ideological. He came back to Germany and was ordained to be a pastor but by this time the Nazi movement was at its peak and Bonhoeffer was strongly against the idea of execution of Jews or oppression of any sort. He joined the secret German military intelligence and helped people to escape from Germany which led to his arrest and ultimate execution.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of scripture is developed out of struggle and suffering. His approach to unity comes from an understanding of brokenness. Invite one another to really hear his definition of unity as his view is supported by seeing the divisions in Nazi Germany in the 40's.

His threefold description of Christian unity, because of Christ, through Christ, and in Christ chosen for eternity, seems to me to echo the finale of the High Priestly Prayer found in John 17:20-26, a passage that highlights Christ's lordship, Spirit, and eternal election.

Read John 17:20-26. Do you see the themes the author is pointing out: Christ's lordship, Spirit, and eternal election?

Unity in Lordship

Bonhoeffer's first point is one of Lordship. As Christ's church, we are united because Jesus is our Lord. Our oneness springs from his lordship over us and our loyalty to him as king. We are one in our belief in him as lord and savior of our souls and of the whole world. The gospel that we accept requires that we

confess and worship one Lord Jesus Christ as our king, and we serve him above all others. No other loyalty can vie for our attention to him, and that alone is a great cause for unity.

What might loyalty have to do with being unified?

We show this loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ by seeking one another out, pursuing community, developing intimate relationships where we can know and be known. This means suffering together, sharing in Christ's suffering, as well as rejoicing together, in life, in worship, in small groups, wherever you find a gathering of believers.

How can we "rejoice" in the midst of our differences and diversity?

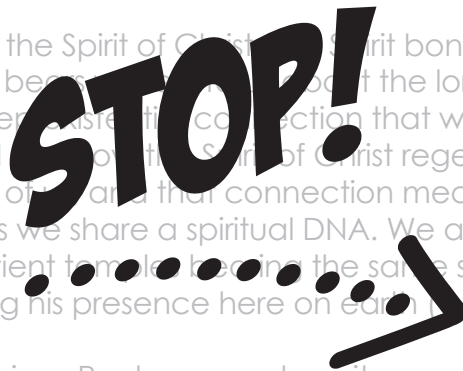
As the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Ephesus:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3)

Paul's comment also introduces the second way in which we are bound together.

Unity in Spirit

We are unified through the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit bonds each one of us together as it bears witness about the lordship of Jesus Christ. This is a deep, consistent connection that we have in common. We can all testify that the Spirit of Christ regenerates and indwells each one of us, and that connection means that in our deepest identities we share a spiritual DNA. We are of one species, as it were, sentient temple, bearing the same spirit of the Lord, and becoming his presence here on earth (1 Cor 6:19).



In his letter to the Ephesians Paul goes on to write,

There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:4-6)

We give expression to our unity in the Spirit by our participation in the sacraments. Baptism provides the sign and seal of our entry into the covenant family, and the Lord's Supper which

STOP! CHOOSE ONE BOX BELOW AND TAKE 3 MINUTES TO COMPLETE THE STATEMENT. BE READY TO SHARE!

<p>The author has said this that CONFUSES me . . . (and it confuses me because) . . .</p> <p>CONFUSED!</p> <p>ASK: Who can shed some light on this?</p>	<p>What I just read CONTRASTS with my experience of people, the world, or God in this way . . .</p> <p>MY EXPERIENCE!</p> <p>ASK: Who else has had this experience?</p>
<p>MY BELIEFS!</p> <p>Something the author seems to believe that I DON'T believe, or that I doubt . . . (and why?)</p> <p>ASK: Who else doesn't believe it? Who does?</p>	<p>In my own words, I think one BIG POINT the author is trying to make is . . .</p> <p>GRASP IT!</p> <p>ASK: Do others think that's the point?</p>

LEADERS: TAKE TIME FOR SHARING & THEN DISCUSSION USING THE 'ASK' QUESTIONS BEFORE CONTINUING WHAT'S OUR BIG TAKE AWAY FROM THIS READING?