

**The Life and Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer**  
**Lesson One: What is the Church**  
**February 5, 2025**

**Opening Prayer**

**Brief Introductions**

**Introduction to the Class**

**Watch the Video: What is the Church?**

What are your initial thoughts about the film? What impacted you? Questions? Concerns? Insights?

**Rome:** Age 18, Universalism of the Church

- What had been Bonhoeffer's experience of church until now?
- Why does it matter that the church is universal?

Compare African Church to Our Church. There is more than one way to worship, more than one way to fellowship, but there is only one Jesus.

**Barcelona:** Age 22, saw how inept the clergy were intellectually and the people were just going through the motions.

- Do we just “go through the motions”?
- Are our clergy well trained?
- Are we challenged by the church in how we live our everyday lives?

Bonhoeffer failed to see Jesus in the church. Just the traditions and rituals. No effect on everyday life.

**New York:** Age 24, An academic church.

- What was Bonhoeffer's main problem with liberalism in the church?
- Where did Bonhoeffer find Jesus in worship? Why?

Bonhoeffer saw Jesus in the African American Church because they were an oppressed people who turned to Jesus message for comfort.

**Theological Liberalism**

- **Higher Criticism:** This approach analyzed the Bible through historical and literary lenses, often questioning traditional doctrines like the inerrancy of Scripture.
- **Modern Knowledge:** Liberal theologians emphasized reason, science, and contemporary ethics over doctrinal authority. Began after the enlightenment and Darwin.

- **Social Gospel:** Many liberal Christians were involved in social reform movements, applying Christian ethics to societal issues.
- **Conformity to Nazi Ideology:** In Germany, some liberal churches conformed to Nazi ideology, leading to movements like the *Deutsche Christen*, which sought to align Christianity with Aryan supremacy.
- **Bonhoeffer:** He felt that the liberals had lost sight of Jesus in their theology. Instead, they were at the whims of society using theology to try to justify new areas of thought. The exclusivity of the Nazi ideology ran opposite Bonhoeffer's belief in the universal church. The liberals had lost sight of the Bible as authoritarian.

### Traditionalism

- **Adherence to Doctrine:** Traditionalists maintained a steadfast commitment to orthodox Christian doctrines and the inerrancy of Scripture.
- **Resistance to Modernism:** They resisted the influence of higher criticism and modernist interpretations of the Bible.
- **Evangelical and Confessional Churches:** These churches often stood in opposition to the liberal trends and maintained traditional beliefs.
- **Bonhoeffer:** Traditionalists fail to see the needs of their neighbor. They are focused on conversion and not service. They do not listen to Jesus call to "love your neighbor".

In his theology, Bonhoeffer finds a middle ground.

- Scripture was not inerrant but was the one true source of authority in the life of a Christian and the church.
- Jesus was a savior for all people.
- Jesus requires action as he taught us to love our neighbors, so issues of justice were important because they show love to our neighbors.

### Questioning Authority and God

- How did Bonhoeffer's Father teach him and his brothers and sisters to think?
- How do you think this influenced Bonhoeffer in his theology?

Bonhoeffer was not afraid to question authority. He always considered both sides. He left emotion out of his thinking. He thought things through to the end. He was committed to a pure search for the truth.

- What does this mean for us today? Do we search for truth or just follow?
- Are we able to ask questions about faith? Do we challenge authority in the church?
- What happens if we stop questioning and seeking the truth? What if we just want someone to tell us what to think about God and theology?

## **German Nationalism and the Church**

- What are the dangers of the church being closely associated with nationality?

Christian nationalism is a term used to describe a political and cultural ideology that combines Christian beliefs and symbols with a strong sense of national identity and patriotism. Christian nationalists believe that their country has a special relationship with God and that the government should promote and defend Christian values and beliefs. In 1930's Germany, the church sided with Naziism and Arianism which included the persecution and eventual execution of the Jews. Bonhoeffer could not side with the hatred and violence he saw from Hitler. Germany was an aggressor. After the war the church never regained its pre-war relevance in German society.

- What was God's idea of Germany and the church according to the 1930's German religious leaders?
  - Why do you think the church leaders conformed to the beliefs of the Nazis?
- What was God's idea of Germany and the church according to Bonhoeffer?

## **American Nationalism and the Church**

In the United States, Christian nationalism has been associated with conservative political movements, particularly those that seek to resist the separation of church and state and to promote traditional Christian values in public life like displaying the Ten Commandment in courts of law or advocating for school prayer. Christian nationalists often advocate for policies that align with their religious beliefs, such as restrictions on abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and immigration. Critics of Christian nationalism argue that it can lead to the erosion of religious freedom and the marginalization of those who are not Christian (Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish...) or do not adhere to their theology (progressive Christians, Catholics and non-believers) This can lead to a dangerous form of nationalism that is exclusionary and intolerant of diversity and even lead to violence against these people.

- What are the dangers of Christian Nationalism? What are the benefits?
- What is God's idea of America and the church today?

## **Life among the Believers**

- How would you define a church? What is the church to you?
  - The church is...
  - The church is not...
- What are some of your positive memories of the church?
- What about negative memories?
- How have these positive and negative experiences helped shape your ideas about what it means to be church?
- Will having theological differences put you outside of your church? Why or why not?

## Acts 2:42-47: The Early Church

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home<sup>[b]</sup> and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

First Century Church is: Teaching, Fellowship, Lord's Supper, Generosity, Service, Welcome...

- How does your definition of church compare with this first century description of the "church"?
- What are the similarities?
- What are the differences?
- What about this first century church do you find compelling and would like to see the more of in the twenty-first century church?

## Bonhoeffer and the church:

Bonhoeffer believed that **the church exists for others**. In his view, the church should not be focused on self-preservation or recognition but should be dedicated to serving and reconciling the world. Bonhoeffer emphasized that **the church is the body of Christ**, and therefore, it should follow Christ's example of self-sacrifice and love for others.

- Church exists for only for others.
  - Agree or disagree? Why?
- Church is Jesus' presence on earth (the body of Christ).
  - Agree or disagree? Why?
- With this definition of church, why do you think Bonhoeffer was so opposed to the Nazis and the state church that condone the actions of the Nazis?

## Closing:

The Narrow Way: *The Cost of Discipleship*

## Lord's Prayer