

Clear Thinking in a Time of Fear
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How does someone *both* grow up in the mainstream, dominant culture *and* possess the ability to recognize when the mainstream is veering off course? And then how does that person manage to stay engaged in the fray the whole time, rather than flee or grow cynical?

That's the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His name might be altogether new to you, or be one you've encountered only in a sermon or study. **BONHOEFFER** is a vivid, engaging entry point for discovery and conversation about faithful action. In the film you will see the influences, both ordinary and extraordinary, upon his life. And you will recognize themes and issues which resound in our time. I would like to highlight three.

Community. Is faith a solo affair, between God and you? Is church anything more than a collection of individuals with a similar philosophy? Bonhoeffer's early experience of church supported such an impression, but his encounter with theologian Karl Barth dramatically changed his view. The Bonhoeffer family was Christian but rarely attended church. Sustained as it was by the government, church seemed mainly to be a civic symbol of morality. Barth gave a scathing critique of such culture-centered religion. He called for a radical refocus on the revelation of Christ in all matters of the church's belief and practice. Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation showed this influence. He argued that the church is not simply an amassing of individuals who worship Christ: rather, the church *is* the presence of Christ in the world. "Christ is really present only in the community. The Church is the presence of Christ, just as Christ is the presence of God."

Action. If Christ is really present only in the community, how should that community, the church, behave? Do we focus on end-times or dig into these times—or both? Do we stay in the sanctuary or go out into the streets? Equipped with his new theology of community, Bonhoeffer was ready to embrace new experiences of Christian community. He found them especially through fellow students in his study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. One friend introduced him to the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he saw the passionate African American tradition of worship and social engagement. Another friend introduced him to Christian pacifism. He persuaded Bonhoeffer to view the Sermon on the Mount not simply as an unattainable goal which convicts us of our sin, but as an ethic to be lived. Back in Europe, not so unlike the United States, religion had become "a very individualistic thing," as one scholar states, "a thing between you and God, something you kept separate from politics." Bonhoeffer returned to Germany ready to advocate a much more engaged, mutually accountable practice of faith. "Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. Christians are called to compassion and action."

Church and State. Is it possible or proper to separate religion from politics? When “God and country” are often lumped together as our highest loyalties, how do we cope with contradictions between them? How can we love our country and at the same time unmask idolatries where we see them? As the Nazi government unleashed persecution against its Jewish citizens, as they imposed oaths of allegiance from its churches, Bonhoeffer did not shrink from the discomfort of asking these questions. He noticed how the government co-opted the language of faith and shaped it into the politics of fear. He also noticed how the German church co-opted the language of patriotism, hoping to survive or even thrive under the new regime. He also had rare access to factual knowledge about Nazi atrocities. He did not shrink from these trends and this truth. He managed to think clearly in a time of fear.

This may be Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s enduring gift: he is a model of clear thinking in a time of fear, a model of courageous integrity in a time of chaotic reactivity. His thought and integrity were rigorously formed by the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through this lens, he could see the idolatry of the state, the temptations facing the church, and the suffering inflicted upon Jews and other victims. Through this lens, he knew how to respond. “I discovered later, and am still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By this-worldliness, I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes, failures. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own suffering but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What would you answer to the author’s question, “How does someone grow up in the mainstream, dominant culture and possess the ability to recognize when the mainstream is veering off course?”
2. How do you understand Bonhoeffer’s idea that “Christ is really present only in the community?”
3. Is there a tendency within yourself or people you know to make religion “a thing between you and God, something you keep separate from politics”?
4. The author asks “when God and country are often lumped together as our highest loyalties, how do we cope with contradictions between them?” How would you answer?
5. Toward the end of his life, Bonhoeffer said “The will of God may lie deeply concealed beneath a great number of possibilities.” Have you ever felt that way?

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