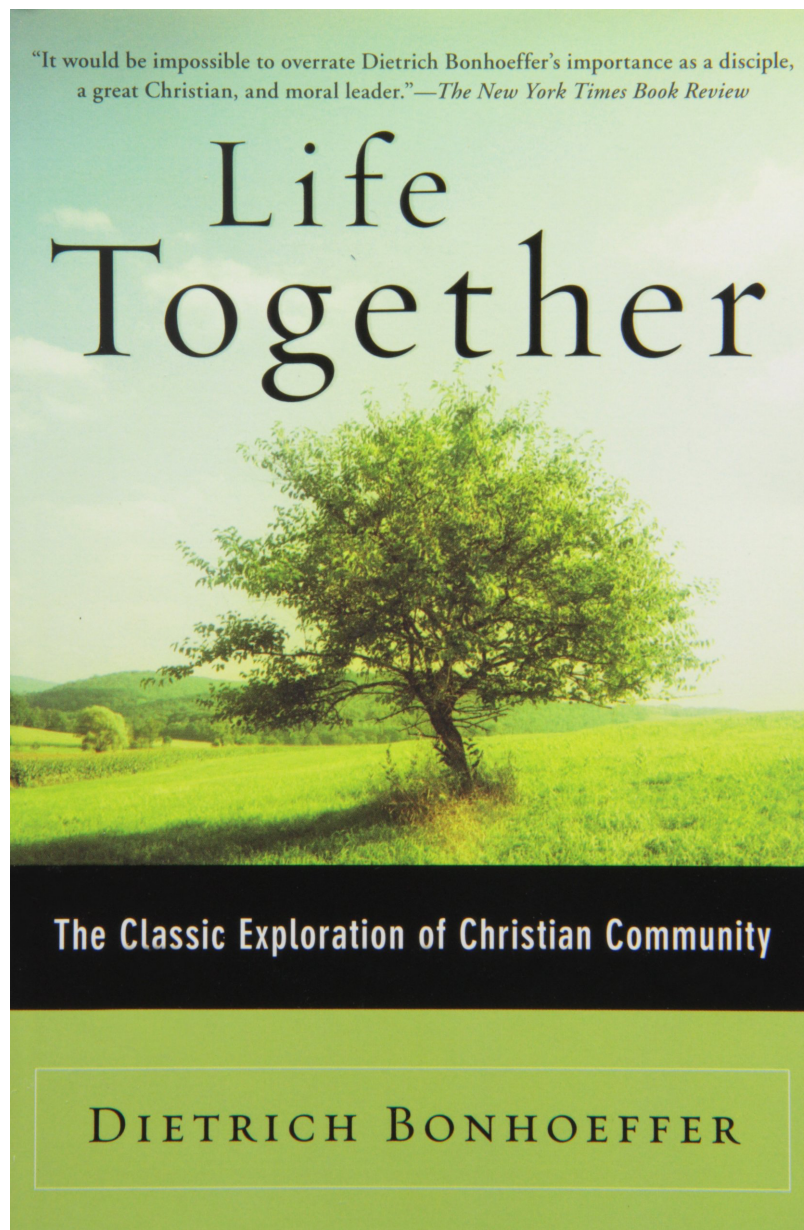




Growth Group Study Guide

based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's
*Life Together: The Classic Exploration
of Christian Community*



Introduction

As a church, we want to take the initiative in getting good resources into the hands of our people. And as a result, we are regularly recommending books for our Growth Groups to study. We have had a number of Growth Group leaders who have been helped in the past by our providing a discussion guide to help walk through the books that we have recommended. As a result, we have sought to provide more study guides for a few more of the books that we recommend and think would be beneficial for Growth Groups to study.

Why this book? There is perhaps no more important book (outside the Bible, of course) on the topic of Christian community than Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. Many of the principles and practices that we have sought to implement in our Growth Groups and our life as a church body as a whole were learned through Bonhoeffer's classic book. Bonhoeffer instructs us on the importance of putting Christ at the center of our community, not community at the center, for he knows that if we aim at community, we'll mess the whole thing up. But if we aim at Christ and come to one another through him, community comes as a natural byproduct of our mutual pursuit of him. *Life Together* is a sort of handbook for how we should seek to carry out our duties to one another in Christian community. We hope that this study deepens the ties of community in your Growth Group, and helps to show you how you can actually do that in a Biblical way.

There are a couple of important notes to all readers of this book, points that you may want to share with your group at the outset. This book was written in Germany in the late 1930s. The World War II context will bring out some important insights. But it must also be noted that, due to his historical context, Bonhoeffer will refer to other Christians in almost exclusively masculine terms (i.e., brothers in Christ, the brethren, etc.). Of course, those truths spill over and apply to both brothers and sisters in Christ. So if you happen to have someone in your group who is particularly sensitive to what seems to be cultural insensitivities on the author's part, do your best to speak in terms of both brothers and sisters in the church, even where the author does not.

In addition, there will be words and phrases that Bonhoeffer uses that might seem strange to us. At times, you might hear him say something that, taken at face value, sounds theologically inaccurate. However, again due to his writing in a different cultural and temporal context, some of the words and phrases that he uses do not carry the meaning that we might read into it from our cultural and temporal moment. As a result, we encourage you not to let folks make a mountain out of a mole hill while parsing some theological distinctives. Instead, give the author the benefit of the doubt that he is not spewing heresy, but simply that we might be misunderstanding his precise point due to what may have gotten lost in translation across culture and time, or in the simple fact that he may use words differently than we do.

Now, onto some notes about this discussion guide and your discussion times. The reading assignment for some sessions is longer than others. The reason for that is the hope of grouping the main ideas together for sessions. As a result, some weeks will only involve reading one half of a chapter, while others have you reading one whole chapter. Of course, you can augment the schedule how you like. But with the nature of your regular Growth Group rhythm (study-prayer-study-fellowship), we recommend trying not to extend the study too much longer than 7 or 8 sessions, so as to keep you from reading the same book for 6 months.

For each session, there are included some important ideas highlighted from the reading. Sometimes they are simply sentences. Sometimes they are paragraphs. These are some of the main truths that we hope to stick in a reader's mind. As John Piper has said, "Books don't change peoples lives. Sentences do." As a result, the hope is to reinforce these important ideas in your discussion. So feel free to bat those thoughts around before jumping right into the questions. Or, you might choose to jump right into the questions and reference the main ideas as you go.

Of course, your discussion times need not be constrained to the content of these discussion guides. The questions are simply there to help you highlight some of the more important ideas and themes from the book. I always recommend asking the open-ended question at the end of the session, "Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful that we have not yet discussed?" Your group may bring much better thoughts into the discussion that this guide ever could. That's great, even ideal. So use this as a resource, as a template, but also take your own insights and insights from your group members and run with those. Also, in addition to the questions listed in every session, you may want to make use of the Supplementary Application Questions given on page 5 of this document.

Recommended Schedule

Session 1 – Chapter 1, “Community” (pp. 17-26)

Session 2 – Chapter 1, “Community” (pp. 26-39)

Session 3 – Chapter 2, “The Day with Others” (pp. 40-75)

Session 4 – Chapter 3, “The Day Alone” (pp. 76-89)

Session 5 – Chapter 4, “Ministry” (pp. 90-109)

Session 6 – Chapter 5, “Confession & Communion” (pp. 110-122)

Supplementary Application Questions¹

In addition to the questions listed in each session, these broad questions may be of use to you. Particularly if a person brings up a truth from the book that is not highlighted in the discussion guide, you might use these questions to further drive discussion into application.

- How can I apply this?
- Why have I not applied this better in the past?
- If I were to apply this, what changes would it require in my attitude or behavior?
- What aspect of God's character requires that I apply this truth to my life?
- What would be the long-term and far-reaching effects of applying this truth to my life?
- Can you think of an example from Jesus' life of how He applied this truth?
- Who do you know that applies this truth consistently?

¹ These questions are taken from Bob McNabb's book *Spiritual Multiplication in the Real World*. See Appendix 2, "Questions to Aid in Meditation" on page 225 of that book.

Session 1 - Chapter 1, "Community" (pp. 17-26)

Important Idea: "The physical presence of Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer." (19)

Important Idea: "Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren." (20)

Important Idea: "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." (21)

Important Idea: "One who wants more than Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere; he is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood. Just at this point Christian brotherhood is threatened most often at the very start by the greatest danger of all, the danger of being poisoned at its root, the danger of confusing Christian brotherhood with some wishful idea of religious fellowship, of confounding the natural desire of the devout heart for community with the spiritual reality of Christian brotherhood." (26)

Questions for Discussion

- As we think about the topic of community, what words would you use to describe the nature of the community that is found at Christ Fellowship Church?

-Bonhoeffer writes this in the second sentence of this book: "In the following we shall consider a number of directions and precepts that the Scriptures provide us for our life together under the Word." (17)

-Is that phrase "life together under the Word" one you would use to describe the community found at CFC?

- In light of the Luther quote on pages 17-18 (see below), why must we be careful to strike a balance between living in community among fellow believers and living in the world ("with the bad people")?

- "So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work. [Luther says,] 'The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants

to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would have ever been spared?"

- Bonhoeffer states that it is by the grace of God that a Christian is privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians, and that not all Christians receive this blessing (see bottom of page 18). Do you take this for granted?

- Bonhoeffer speaks of the lonely Christian and the profound importance of an encounter with another Christian for him/her (pages 19-20). Have you considered that before? Have you considered how much of a blessing you (or your Growth Group) might be to a Christian who feels profound loneliness?

- What aspects of Christian community do you take for granted? Which ones do you neglect? Also, to use Bonhoeffer's language, what tokens of community could you make more use of to strengthen a brother or sister in Christian community? (things like a brief visit, a prayer together, a written letter, gathering for corporate worship)

- One of the important ideas we've chosen to highlight from this reading is the following: "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." (21)

-Bonhoeffer gives three things that this means. But in light of what you read and in your own words, What all does this mean? What does it not mean?

"...the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits them to meet together and gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this "alien righteousness." (23)

- What does Bonhoeffer have to say about the importance of the Word of God coming to us through the mouths of our brothers and sisters in Christ? (see the bottom of page 22 onto page 23) What did you take from this?

- Bonhoeffer writes, "Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man" (23). He goes on to say that Christ makes peace between us and God, as well as between us and each other.

-In light of this, what did you think about the statement that, apart from Christ, we cannot come to one another because "the way is blocked by our own ego"?

- "I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ, we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity. That dismisses once and for all every clamorous desire for something more. One who wants more than Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere; he is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood. Just at this point Christian brotherhood is threatened most often at the very start by the greatest danger of all, the danger of being poisoned at its root, the danger of confusing Christian brotherhood with some wishful idea of religious fellowship, of confounding the natural desire of the devout heart for community with the spiritual reality of Christian brotherhood." (25-26)

-This is a very important quote. In your own words, what is Bonhoeffer trying to communicate?

- If we bring anything else to the center of our community, or displace Christ and his gospel at the center of our community, how do we risk jeopardizing community?
- How were you pointed to the gospel in this section of reading? And then how were you instructed to translate that same gospel into your living in community with other believers in the church?
- Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful, challenging, or even wrong that we have not yet discussed?

Session 2 – Chapter 1, “Community” (pp. 26-39)

Important Idea: “He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.” (27)

Important Idea: “Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ’s sake.” (34)

Important Idea: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity’ -- this is the Scripture’s praise of life together under the Word. But now we can rightly interpret the words ‘in unity’ and say, ‘for brethren to dwell together *through Christ*.’ For Jesus Christ alone is our unity. ‘He is our peace’ [Ephesians 2:14]. Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another.” (39)

Questions for Discussion

- On of the main issues Bonhoeffer confronts in the first two pages of this chapter are what he calls the “wish dream” of community, or the dream world of community. What does he mean by this idea?

-Especially at a church the size that ours is currently, where people come to a place where they feel as if they can genuinely know other people and be known by them, how can our ideas and ideal visions of Christian community actually become an enemy to community?

- Bonhoeffer talks about the importance of disillusionment with others in Christian community and even disillusionment with ourselves actually serving to benefit Christian community.

-Why is it important that we come to grasp the sinfulness of ourselves and of the other people in our community in order to truly preserve and deepen community?

-What does this mean for confronting sin and other frustrations in one another? Why must we do it? How is deeper community short-changed when we gloss over or fail to confront issues of sin and disappointment in one another?

- “He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.” (27)

-How did this particular statement confront or challenge you?

-Why do you think our wish dream vision of community is a problem? (Bonhoeffer's answer: "The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself." 28).

-Do you see now how our wish dream is not Christlike, but can even be Satanic?

- How does coming to community with our vision and demands of it actually undermine the gospel (that is, the true grounds on which all community must be formed)?

- Have you ever considered that another brother or sister's sin in your community is actually an opportunity to be reminded of the gospel?

"Will not [a brother or sister's] sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ?" (28)

- What did you learn, or in what ways were you convicted about your own thankfulness? What about your thankfulness for your own Christian community?

-What is Bonhoeffer saying is the relationship between thankfulness for your community and actual spiritual growth in your community? ("The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases." 30)

- Why is it important to understand and distinguish between what Bonhoeffer calls "human love" and "spiritual love"? How does one lead us to idolatry, while the other leads us to Christ?

"Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ's sake." (34)

-How is our wish dream of community motivated by human love, whereas God's vision of community is motivated by spiritual love?

- “Contrary to all my own opinions and convictions, Jesus Christ will tell me what love toward the brethren really is. Therefore, spiritual love is bound solely to the Word of Jesus Christ. Where Christ bids me to maintain fellowship for the sake of love, I will maintain it. Where his truth enjoins me to dissolve a fellowship for love’s sake, there I will dissolve it, despite all the protests of my human love.” (35)

-Under what circumstances could you understand Christ compelling you to dissolve Christian fellowship? Why is that hard, or how might your human love cause you to resist such change?

- How were you pointed to the gospel in this section of reading? And then how were you instructed to translate that same gospel into your living in community with other believers in the church?

- Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful, challenging, or even wrong that we have not yet discussed?

Session 3 – Chapter 2, “The Day with Others” (pp. 40-75)

Not all of Bonhoeffer’s thoughts in this chapter are directly translatable into the nature of the community found in our Growth Groups. For instance, we cannot expect to be able to spend every morning and evening together, or multiple meals a day together. Yet still, there are insights to be gleaned from this section that do apply to our Growth Groups. But there are also things that can be applied to our families or even to our own individual spiritual lives. While he covers a wide range of topics in this chapter, we’ll try to place our questions into five distinct categories, to help guide the discussion.

Questions for Discussion

1) The Bible

- How were you challenged by Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the Christians first actions in the morning? Were you convicted about any of your first-thing-in-the-morning actions?

“Therefore, at the beginning of the day, let all distraction and empty talk be silenced and let the first thought and the first word belong to him to whom our whole life belongs.” (43)

“Some rise early because of restlessness and worry; the Scriptures call this unprofitable: ‘It is vain for you to rise up early...to eat the bread of anxious toil’ (Ps. 127:2). But there is such a thing as rising early for the love of God. This was the practice of the men of the Bible.” (44)

- While it may not necessarily be practical for you to gather with other Christians (like your Growth Group) every morning for prayer, Word, and song, what things could you do on a morning by morning basis?
- In what ways were you challenged by Bonhoeffer’s call for Christians to know the Bible?

“We must learn to know the Scriptures again, as the Reformers and our fathers knew them. We must not grudge the time and the work that it takes. We must know the Scriptures first and foremost for the sake of our salvation. But besides this, there are ample reasons that make this requirement exceedingly urgent. How, for example, shall we ever attain certainty and confidence in our personal and church activity if we do not stand on solid Biblical ground? It is not our heart that determines our course, but God’s Word. But who in this day has any proper understanding of the need for scriptural proof? How often we hear innumerable arguments ‘from life’ and ‘from experience’ put forward as the basis for most crucial decisions, but the argument from Scripture is missing. And this authority would perhaps point in exactly the opposite direction. It is not surprising, of course, that the person who attempts to cast discredit upon their wisdom should be the one who himself does

not seriously read, know, and study the Scriptures. But one who will not learn to handle the Bible for himself is not an evangelical Christian." (54-55)

-How true are these words still today?

- Bonhoeffer also writes: "It might be asked further: How shall we ever help a Christian brother and set him straight in his difficulty and doubt, if not with God's Word? All our own words quickly fail."

-Do you expect to help counsel your brother and sister in Christ if you yourself do not know the Word?

2) Prayer

- Bonhoeffer advocates various kinds of prayers in this chapter: praying the Psalms (pp. 44-50), "free prayer" (pp. 62-66), intercessory prayer (which he suggests is best done in the evening, pp. 73-75).

-Which of these do you make the most use of?

-Which of these do you not make use of at all?

- How much use do you make of the Psalms in your private or family devotions? What were some of the biggest insights you gleaned from what Bonhoeffer had to say about the prayer and the Psalms?

-Has anyone made a practice of praying the Psalms? What did you find helpful? Fruitful? Challenging?

- "The prayer of the morning will determine the day. Wasted time, which we are ashamed of, temptations that beset us, weakness and listlessness in our work, disorder and indiscipline in our thinking and our relations with other people very frequently have their cause in neglect of the morning prayer. The organization and distribution of our time will be better for having been rooted in prayer" (71).

-Have you experienced this to be true in your own life?

-What Biblical examples might make you agree with Bonhoeffer here?

3) Singing

- Do Bonhoeffer's words make you want to include singing more into your daily life (not just something you do on Sundays)? How do the spiritual benefits outweigh the feared awkwardness of the practice?

-What would you think about incorporating it into our weekly Growth Group meetings?

-“The more we sing the more joy we will derive from it, but above all, the more devotions and discipline and joy we put into our singing, the richer will be the blessing that will come to the whole life of the fellowship from singing together.” (61)

4) Table Fellowship

- While daily table fellowship with other Christians may not always be a possibility (apart from your immediate family, where applicable), in what ways were you challenged to make this more of a practice in your own life?

- When you do share meals with other believers (or even on fellowship nights in your Growth Group) do the spiritual realities discussed on pages 66-69 come to mind at all? Or do you simply eat a meal and have regular conversation, without giving much thought to Christ?

-What practical things could you work on to change that?

5) Work

- “Without the burden and labor of the day, prayer is not prayer, and without prayer, work is not work” (70). What do you think he means by this?

- What is the importance of work, in Bonhoeffer's mind? And how is work enhanced by these other spiritual disciplines? And vice-versa?

- Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful, challenging, or even wrong that we have not yet discussed?

Session 4 – Chapter 3, “The Day Alone” (pp. 76-89)

Important Idea: “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.” (78)

Important Idea: “The day together will be unfruitful without the day alone, both for the fellowship and for the individual.” (78)

Important Idea: “The individual must realize that his hours of aloneness react upon the community. In his solitude he can sunder and besmirch [damage the reputation of] the fellowship, or he can strengthen and hallow it. Every act of self-control of the Christian is also a service to the fellowship. On the other hand, there is no sin in thought, word, or deed, no matter how personal or secret, that does not inflict injury upon the whole fellowship....We *are* members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the body, either to its health or to its destruction. This is no mere theory; it is a spiritual reality.” (88-89)

Questions for Discussion

- What are the dangers of seeking community simply as an antidote to our loneliness?

“Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people....The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion, no matter how spiritual this diversion may appear. He is really not seeking community at all, but only a distraction which will allow him to forget his loneliness for brief time.” (76)

- “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.” (77)

-Which one of these warnings do you personally need more at this stage in your life?

- What is the “essential relationship of silence to the Word?”

-Do you practice anything of this sort? Before or after you spend time in the Word, do you make space for silent reflection or meditation?

- For those who live with family or with roommates, how are solitude and silence hard to come by? What can you do to pursue it?

- What insights did you gain on the section of Meditation? What from this will help you practice this discipline?

- Bonhoeffer talks at the end of the section on Prayer on page 85 about how our thoughts can easily wander on us to various events or people in our lives. Did you find his advice on this subject helpful? Comforting?

- What did you find to be convicting or challenging in the section on Intercession (pg. 85-87)?

- Out of the recommended practices for the content of our Devotions or Quiet Times (Solitude & Silence, Meditation, Prayer, and Intercession), which ones do you struggle with the most?

-For those who are particularly faithful in some areas, share some things that have helped you be faithful in practicing it.

- In the section titled "The Test of Meditation," Bonhoeffer writes, "Furthermore, this is the place where we find out whether the Christian's mediation has led him to the unreal,...or whether it has led him into a real contact with God, from which he emerges strengthened and purified. Has it transported him for a moment into a spiritual ecstasy that vanishes when everyday life returns, or has it lodged the Word of God so securely and deeply in his heart that it holds and fortifies him, impelling him to active love, to obedience, to good works? Only the day can decide." (88)

-Have you had experiences with your daily Quiet Times (or devotions or whatever you want to call it) that have looked like both of these outcomes? What can we do to prevent the former?

- Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful, challenging, or even wrong that we have not yet discussed?

Session 5 – Chapter 4, “Ministry” (pp. 90-109)

Important Idea: “Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together.” (91)

Important Idea: “Strong and weak, wise and foolish, gifted or ungifted, pious or impious, the diverse individuals in the community are no longer incentives for talking and judging and condemning, and thus excuses for self-justification. They are rather cause for rejoicing in one another and serving one another. Each member of the community is given his particular place, but this is no longer the place in which he can most successfully assert himself, but the place where he can best perform his service.” (94)

Questions for Discussion

- Bonhoeffer begins with a lesson from Luke 9:46. He writes,

“‘There arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be the greatest’ (Luke 9:46). We know who it is that sows this thought in the Christian community. But perhaps we do not bear in mind enough that no Christian community ever comes together without this thought immediately emerging as a seed of discord. Thus at the very beginning of Christian fellowship there is engendered an invisible, often unconscious, life-and-death contest. ‘There arose a reasoning among them’: this is enough to destroy a fellowship. Hence it is vitally necessary that every Christian community from the very outset face this dangerous enemy squarely, and eradicate it. There is no time to lose here, for from the first moment when a man meets another person he is looking for a strategic position he can assume and hold over against that person. . . . All this can occur in the most polite or even pious environment. But the important thing is that a Christian community should know that somewhere in it there will certainly be a ‘reasoning among them, which of them should be the greatest.’ It is the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others. Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together.” (90-91)

-In your own words, what is Bonhoeffer saying is the danger that creeps into every Christian community, no matter how pious or well-intentioned it is?

-Have you seen this tendency that he speaks of in your own life? Do you find that you frequently size up other Christians (even the ones in our church) and seek to establish yourself in a position of strategic superiority over them (a way to understand yourself as better than the others)?

-If this is such a prominent problem in Christian community, what is the antidote? (the answer, of course, is the gospel of God’s justifying grace)

- Bonhoeffer arranges this chapter into the various ministries that we as believers are to carry out with one another. He lists the Ministry of Holding One's Tongue, the Ministry of Meekness, the Ministry of Listening, the Ministry of Helpfulness, the Ministry of Bearing, the Ministry of Proclaiming, and the Ministry of Authority. We have simply laid out the rest of the questions to ask broadly, "What struck you in this section?" Since so much of this chapter is so powerful, that question alone may generate a good deal of discussion. However, we have provided a few additional questions and points below each section.

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Holding One's Tongue?

- Read Ephesians 4:29 together and discuss its implications.

- How did Bonhoeffer's connection between learning to hold one's tongue and learning to appreciate the image of God in another human being (see page 93)? Had you ever thought of it in this way before?

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Meekness?

- What did you think of Bonhoeffer's following questions: "What does it matter if our own plans are frustrated? Is it not better to serve our neighbor than have our own way?" (95)

- "The desire for one's own honor hinders faith." (95)

- Read 1 Timothy 1:15 together. How should adopting this view of ourselves affect our meekness?

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Listening?

- Bonhoeffer says of those who are quick to speak, and think that their speaking is their most important contribution to a person, "They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking." (97) How guilty of this are you?

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Helpfulness?

- "We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God." (99) Does that describe you?

- "It is the part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service and that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God." (99)

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Bearing?

-“For the pagan the other person never becomes a burden at all. He simply sidesteps every burden that others may impose on him.” (100) So if you have no one else’s burdens involved in your life, what does that say about your faith?

-“The Bible speaks with remarkable frequency of ‘bearing.’ It is capable of expressing the whole work of Jesus Christ in one word. [see Isaiah 53:4-5]. Therefore, the Bible can also characterize the whole life of the Christian as bearing the Cross. It is the fellowship of the Cross to experience the suffering of the other.” (101)

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Proclaiming?

-“What we are concerned with here is the free communication of the Word from person to person, not by the ordained ministry.” (103) When you speak with one another, is God’s Word regularly the content of your speech? Or is that such an irregular occurrence that it feels strange or out of place when it does occur?

-“We speak [God’s Word] to one another on the basis of the help we both need. We admonish one another to go the way that Christ bids us to go. We warn one another against the disobedience that is our common destruction. We are gentle and we are severe with one another, for we know both God’s kindness and God’s severity. Why should we be afraid of one another, since both of us only have God to fear.” (106)

- What struck you in the section on the Ministry of Authority?

-“Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service.” (108)

-*Note that where Bonhoeffer uses the word ‘bishop’ (in accordance with 1 Timothy 3:1), we would use the word ‘elder.’ The same office is in view, just with different words used by he and us.

-“The Church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren.” (109) If you are honest, do you agree with this assessment of the church’s needs? Do we always act as if this is our greater need? Do our pursuits reveal that?

-What, then, ought we to look for in our pastors and elders? And what should we not look for?

- Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful, challenging, or even wrong that we have not yet discussed?

Session 6 – Chapter 5, “Confession & Communion” (pp. 110-122)

Important Idea: “He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone.” (110)

Important Idea: “Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned.” (112)

Important Idea: “Does all of this mean that confession to a brother is a divine law? No, confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner. . . . Who can refuse, without suffering loss, a help that God has deemed it necessary to offer?” (117-118)

Important Idea: “Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his own sin that nailed Jesus to the Cross will no longer be horrified by even the ranks sins of a brother.” (118)

Questions for Discussion

- Bonhoeffer writes in the opening of this chapter:

“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 breakthrough 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. Any Christians are unthinkable 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!” (110)

-How unhelpful is this kind of supposedly Christian environment?

-Does this describe any past experiences of Christian community that you have been apart of (previous churches, etc.)?

-More importantly, does this describe our Growth Group? Does this describe Christ Fellowship Church? That despite all of our consistency to gather for worship, for Growth Group meetings, and many other good things, we still have no space for the honest confession of our sins?

- Bonhoeffer talks about the difference between a person’s isolation in sin and the breakthrough into true community that comes through confession:

"In confession the breakthrough 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. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted." (112)

-In light of this quote, turn to Psalm 32:1-5 and read it together. Discuss what David is saying here about confession of sin. Discuss the results of not confessing sin. Take particular note of the use of the word "cover" in Verses 1 and 5.

- Why is true humility required for us to engage in the practice of confession of sin? And why is humility necessary if we are going to break through to the cross of Jesus Christ?

-While you might agree that this is truly important, why is it so hard to do? What steps might you take as a group (or simply as two individuals together) to make this a reality?

- In all the "Breakthrough" sections (Breakthrough to Community, to the Cross, to New life, and to Certainty), which one was the most instructive for you personally?

- Bonhoeffer writes on pages 115-116 about the tendency to "confess our sins to ourselves" rather than to God, and then to grant ourselves forgiveness, rather than be forgiven by God. He says that this "self-forgiveness" cannot lead us to ever really break from sin.

-Has this ever occurred to you? Might you be guilty of this practice? How is it that confessing of sin to a brother or sister in Christ can help us not to do this?

- Bonhoeffer talks about how people "usually are satisfied when they make a general confession" of sin. However, he suggests that we should take care to make confession of "concrete sins," that is specific sins. And he goes on to say, "Otherwise it might happen that one could still be a hypocrite even in confessing to a brother and thus miss the good of confession."

-Again, have you considered this? Why is it that one is easier to do than the other? But why is it that one is much more helpful than the other?

- Bonhoeffer asks the question, "To whom shall we confess sins?" And the foremost answer is another Christian who knows his/her sinfulness and need of God's forgiveness.

-But for you specifically, as you think about carrying out this practice, what specific person can you regularly practice the confession of sin with?

-As Bonhoeffer says, it need not be the whole congregation. It can be the men or the women in your Growth Group. Or it can be one individual specifically from your Growth Group. But it must be someone.

- Was there anything else from the reading that you found helpful, challenging, or even wrong that we have not yet discussed?

Conclusion

At Christ Fellowship Church, many people come to us because of a desire for community. This is a good desire. But if we are not careful, we can fuel that desire in an unhelpful way, in a way that seeks to meet the “wish dream” of community (as Bonhoeffer terms it) and not the true Biblical understanding of community under Christ. The hope of reading this book in your Growth Group is to spur you on to a more Biblical, Christ-centered community, rather than one that meets out perceived felt needs of and desires for community as we understand them. We hope that this study, in many ways, has helped you see your need for one another in Biblical community, as well as some of the Biblical prescriptions for what that Biblical community ought to look like.

One of the primary things that we hope this book shapes in the way in which your group handles the confession of personal sin. This is one need that we have perceived in our church, and it is a chief objective in having groups study this book. As a Growth Group leader, we would encourage you to press on in trying to make this a consistent, normal, and even anticipated aspect of your group’s life together. If you are looking for resources to help you in that practice, we have prayer guides to help you facilitate those times in a productive and Biblical way. Please ask Nick for those resources if you need them (nmurray@cfcbermingham.org).

Above all, let us remember the profound grace of God in our lives that we are able to live in authentic Biblical community with other brothers and sisters in Christ. Let this study lead you and your group to rejoice more consistently and thank God more regularly for the gift of Christian community, even in its messy parts. “Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.” (20)