

# LIFE TOGETHER

A LENTEN COMPANION TO  
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S  
"LIFE TOGETHER"



# WEEK 1: COMMUNITY

*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 daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.*  
(pg.21)

## THE MAIN IDEAS:

- The visible, face-to-face living together of Christians is a grace from God. The companionship of Christians is the physical sign of the presence of Christ.
- Christians need one another. We seek and find God's living Word only in the witness of another. The goal of all Christian community is this: To meet one another as witnesses to Christ.
- In Christ, Christians belong to one another. This is a divine reality and not dependent upon experience. We are bound to one another because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, not because of shared interests or like-mindedness or common experiences.
- Christian community is not some extraordinary social experience, some ideal religious fellowship. It is a call.
- Christian community is not an ideal which we must work to realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we are created to participate.
- Relationships within the Christian community involve setting the other free from my control, free to be what they are in Christ. Not the image I would desire for them but the true image they bear as Christ's own.

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# WEEK 1: COMMUNITY

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**The first chapter begins by pointing to the gift of living in visible fellowship with each other.**

- a. Would you agree that “the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer”? If so, what makes it so? If not, why not? Give an example.
- b. Does it change the meaning of Christian community if we define it as a gift from God?

**Bonhoeffer describes his vision of Christian community in this chapter. It is a community “through and in Jesus Christ.” Apart from Christ, it does not exist.**

- a. Why do Christians need one another?
- b. What is the goal of all Christian community?
- c. From your reading, what are we saying when we say we belong to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ?

**Bonhoeffer stays “close to the ground” in his description of the “life together” of a congregation or community of faith. He knew very well how difficult it is to maintain community life in a congregation.**

- a. Recall a time of disillusionment in the life of your church. What happened? What were the effects?
- b. Drawing upon Bonhoeffer’s thinking, how might an experience of disillusionment with the Christian community actually be an important and needed crisis?
- c. How can it be true that daily thankfulness for Christian fellowship – even where there is no great experience – is actually the means by which the fellowship grows?
- d. How can Christian community become a central part of your life? What needs to change to make this a reality?

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# WEEK 2: THE DAY WITH OTHERS

*The table fellowship of Christians implies obligation. It is our daily bread that we eat, not my own. We share our bread. Thus we are firmly bound to one another not only in the Spirit but in our whole physical being. (pg. 68)*

## THE MAIN IDEAS:

- The case for morning devotions lies in this assertion: The first thought and the first word of the day belong to God.
- Holy Scripture is more than a watchword, more than “light for today”; it is God’s word for all people for all times. What is missing in the church is an understanding of the whole of Scripture. Sound bites and the reading of isolated texts are not enough. Instead, the practice of “consecutive reading” allows the listening community to discover the whole story and to enter into it as its own.
- Song – praise, thanksgiving, and prayer – is the voice of the church. In practice, it is a unique voice in that it joins individual voices together to speak and pray the same Word at the same time.
- Common prayer involves praying as a fellowship and in our own words. It is important for common prayer to reflect the real cares, needs, joys, thanksgivings, petitions, and hopes of the community.
- Jesus keeps three kinds of table fellowship with us: daily fellowship at meals, table fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, and the final table fellowship in the Kingdom of God. Every one of these meals fills Christians with gratitude for the living and present Lord. It is never “my” daily bread, it is always “our” daily bread. Thus, it is not our prerogative to keep either our bread or our table for ourselves only.
- The entire day belongs to God. Within it there is a time for prayer and a time for work. “Work,” which takes up the bulk of the day, is given a sense of meaning and unity when it is done “in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

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# WEEK 2: THE DAY WITH OTHERS

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**This chapter describes the entire day with God and with others of the Christian community, beginning with rising in the morning and turning to God, to praying the Psalms, reading Scripture, singing, saying prayers together, table fellowship, daily work, and evening prayer.**

- a. What practices of devotion and prayer did you find new or entirely unfamiliar?
- b. What practices described here are part of the ongoing life of your congregation?
- c. Which practices are particularly difficult? Why is that so?
- d. How does table fellowship bind Christians to their Lord and to one another? Share an example or story.
- e. What is the obligation that is implied by the table fellowship of Christians?

**Bonhoeffer recognized biblical illiteracy as a problem in the church of his time and place. This is why he stresses the importance of discovering the Scripture as a whole through the practice of consecutive reading.**

- a. To what extent do you think biblical illiteracy is a problem for Christians?
- b. Do you ever wish you had a better grasp or knowledge of scripture?



# WEEK 3: THE DAY ALONE

*Blessed is he who is alone in the strength of the fellowship and blessed is he who keeps the fellowship in the strength of aloneness. (p. 89)*

## THE MAIN IDEAS:

- Living in community with others and being alone are parts of a whole cloth. Only as we are within the fellowship can we be alone, and only he that is alone can live in the fellowship. (p.77). There are practical pitfalls to wanting fellowship without the capacity for being alone, and in thinking that solitude can be fruitful without participating in the fellowship.
- The Christian needs a fixed time when he or she can be alone during the day for Scripture meditation, prayer, and intercession.
- Christian prayer is response to God's Word and promise. It is not prayer in general. It is the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, to accept it in personal situations, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations.
- The real test of the integrity of our personal devotion is if it makes any difference in daily life – if it is so unrelated to the real workaday world, or if it leads to a real contact with God from which one emerges strengthened and purified. The test is in the day.
- Intercession is a matter of holding before God definite persons, definite difficulties, and therefore definite petitions. It is not general and vague. It is time-consuming. A congregation lives by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses.
- There is a close, reciprocal relationship between the Christian's time alone and in community. Neither exists with any integrity without the other.



# WEEK 3: THE DAY ALONE

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- a. How does Bonhoeffer describe silence and solitude of the Christian life? Why is it important?
- b. How comfortable are you with solitude and silence? To what extent do you seek it? Or run from it?
- c. What is hard about it?
- d. What obstacles block the way for claiming time and space for Scripture meditation?

**Bonhoeffer does not make the distinction between gathered and scattered church. Instead he offers a holistic vision of being church together both when visibly present and apart from each other.**

- a. How do you understand our identity as belonging to one another, even when we are not together? How are we still community?
- b. How is such a community —good news for the world?



# WEEK 4: MINISTRY

*Then where the ministry of listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest service can also be rendered, namely, the ministry of the Word of God. (p.108)*

## THE MAIN IDEAS:

- Seeking, claiming, and defending one's role and identity in a group over and against others sows seeds of discord in the Christian community.
- Not self-justification, domination or force, but justification by grace and therefore service should govern the Christian community. Each person's role and identity in the group ultimately serves the same overall goal: service.
- The differences that exist among people within the Christian community are not incentives for talking, judging, and condemning others, but rather causes for rejoicing in and serving one another.
- The first service that one owes to others in the community of faith consists in patient, attentive listening to the other. This is the beginning of love in the community.
- The second service that each is to perform for the other in Christian community is that of active helpfulness – even in the simplest and smallest ways.
- The third service consists of bearing others – not sidestepping the burden that others may impose upon us in the community of faith. It is in such bearing that the Christian community shares in the fellowship of Christ's cross.

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# WEEK 4: MINISTRY

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- a. Why is it important that no member in the Christian community be "unemployed" in ministry as Bonhoeffer understands it?
- b. What is the case that Bonhoeffer is making about the essential importance of listening attentively and patiently to one another?
- c. A close connection is drawn between our capacity to listen to each other and our ability to listen to and hear God. What do you make of this? Is it true? If so, why?
- d. Where (if at all) does this statement hit home for you: "One who worries about the loss of time that petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of their own career too solemnly"(p. 99).

**Being able to be helpful to another may depend on one's life intersecting regularly with another's. The more our paths cross, the more we know what each is facing each day, bringing a greater possibility for being helpful.**

- a. How much do people's lives intersect regularly in your congregation? How well do people know what is going on in each other's lives?



# WEEK 5: CONFESSION AND COMMUNION

*So in the Christian community when the call to brotherly confession and forgiveness goes forth it is a call to the great grace of God in the Church. (p.112)*

## THE MAIN IDEAS:

- Faithful community is lacking when congregations have fellowship as devout people who worship together, but not as “everyday sinners” (fellowship outside the comfort and norms of the church building). Only when we are sinners can we be changed by the forgiveness that God offers in Jesus Christ.
- Jesus’ commission to offer forgiveness of sins is given to the whole congregation. When an individual exercises it, it is exercised on behalf of the whole.
- Where confession and forgiveness take place there is a breakthrough from isolation to community.
- Confession of sin challenges all self-justification, and is therefore a dying with Christ on the cross. This humiliation and death is the path of breakthrough to new life.
- We have certainty of our sins being forgiven when God’s word of forgiveness is heard on the lips of a fellow Christian in response to my confession. No kind of self-talk can compare to the real human words of forgiveness that come from another person’s lips.
- To go to the Lord’s Supper rightly prepared is first to go settle our wrongs committed against one another.
- The fellowship of the Lord’s Supper is the unmatched fulfillment of Christian community. Here the community has reached its goal – joyfully united in body and blood at the table of the Lord now and for all eternity.

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# WEEK 5: CONFESSION AND COMMUNION

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- a. What is the practice of confession and forgiveness like in the life of your congregation? Where and when does it occur? Who is involved?
- b. What do you think about the idea of church members confessing their sins to one another and offering forgiveness? Does it make you uncomfortable? If so, why? If not, are there limitations to mutual confession?

**Later, members of the Finkenwalde community discovered that their celebration of the Lord's supper was both more powerful and more joyful as a result of recovering the link between confession and communion.**

- a. How, in practice, does your congregation link confession and communion?
- b. How might confession and communion become more closely linked?

**Confessing sin to another seems to assume a closeness – folks would know enough about each other to be able to welcome, to understand the personal nature of what the other is confessing, and to forgive in Christ's name.**

- a. Where and in what contexts do such relationships exist in your congregation? What would need to change for this practice to grow?
- b. What difference do you see it making in your congregation when people come together to worship and celebrate communion?



# PERSONAL NOTES AND KEY IDEAS

**COMMUNITY:**

**THE DAY WITH OTHERS:**

Lent



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# PERSONAL NOTES AND KEY IDEAS

**THE DAY ALONE:**

**MINISTRY:**

Lent



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# PERSONAL NOTES AND KEY IDEAS

**CONFESSION AND COMMUNION:**

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