

Ministering in the Community: Bonhoeffer Style

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The only profitable relationship to others- and especially to our weaker brethren - is one of love, and that means the will to hold fellowship with them...In bearing with men God maintained fellowship with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the Cross. And Christians must share in this law. They must suffer their brethren, but, what is more important, now that the law of Christ has been fulfilled, they can bear with their brethren (Bonhoeffer 100-102).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an early 20th century theologian, wrote a variety of books, essays and letters. Within these works scholars have discerned five main ideas (Cheap Grace vs. Costly Grace, Ethics as a Formation, Stellvertretung, Christ Existing as a Community and Religionless Christianity). The idea which I shall examine closer is Christ Existing as Community.

One of the most communal experiences that Bonhoeffer had was at the Finkenwalde seminary in Germany. After the Lutheran church adopted the Aryan Paragraph in 1934 the Confessing church was formed. In 1935, the church appointed Bonhoeffer as director over an outpost resistance seminary. After his two years there Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together*. It is a small book of five chapters discussing both the practice of community living and its necessity for Christian life. In the fourth chapter, entitled "Ministry", he discusses a number of ways that Christians minister to one another. One of those ideas was "The Ministry of Bearing". Within the realm of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of Christ Existing as Community, is the need for Christians to participate in the Ministry of Bearing. To further understand the idea of The Ministry of Bearing we must first discuss how we exist in our relationships with others, where Christ exists within those relationships. The necessity of such a ministry and how Christ has enabled us to do so. In synopsis, we will examine what The Ministry of Bearing truly is.

"What does it mean to be human? For Bonhoeffer, the answer is clear. Human beings exist only in relationship to, and responsibility for, other human beings" (Hale 52). In both the Bonhoeffer and Kantian realm there is an I and an Other. The I is referring to the you as a person. The other is referring to all of those who are not you. Where the two differ is that Kant believes, "the I experiences another person only as an other I" (56). For Bonhoeffer, though, the other is one "Who places before me an ethical decision" (52). Also for Bonhoeffer "The relationship between I and You... is not a direct relationship, but one mediated by the divine you" (56). For Bonhoeffer, Christ comes into the picture; in *Life Together*, he believes first "that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to the other only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity." "We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly and for all eternity" (Bonhoeffer 21). The Ministry of Bearing must be executed under Bonhoeffer's idea of the I, the other and Christ. Because Bonhoeffer believes that relationships are not only

critical, but essential, in fact it is very existence to serve and be served by one another. All three, the I, the other, and Christ are interconnected on every level. From passing by one another on the street or conversing before the gates of heaven.

But where is it that we should focus our minds, the streets of Earth or the road to Heaven? This question postulates the quandary of the two kingdoms. Martin Luther presented this idea of two separate realms, the Earthly Kingdom and the Heavenly Kingdom. The foremost Reformer had meant for people to live in both kingdoms. However, as time passed, people used the idea to separate the church from anything and everything, including politics and the suffering of the innocent brought on by such institutions. Bonhoeffer had serious problems with this ethical independence. In a letter written to his brother after ten years under Hitler's regime, Bonhoeffer says,

There are some people who regard it as frivolous, and some Christians think it impious for anyone to hope and prepare for a better EARTHLY future. They think that the meaning of present events is chaos, disorder, and catastrophe; and in resignation or pious escapism they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for future generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before. (Kelly 509)

Bonhoeffer writes that "We are called to live in the world... Etsi Deus non daretur- as if there were no God" (Hale 78). What Bonhoeffer is trying to say is that people should not look to God as Deus Ex Machina; God as the machine, a god who will sweep down from the clouds and fix everything in the blink of an eye when chaos has crippled humanity. Nonetheless, he is not trying to glorify humanity or reduce our dependency on Christ either. He is rather trying to impress upon us that Christ is the enabler:

We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer. Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. (Bonhoeffer 508)

The Ministry of Bearing is one that takes place on earth. It is not, watching from the sidelines as others suffer hoping that God will swoop in and save them but recognizing that we are Christ on earth and so able to help those who suffer here.

We are able to live on earth and to try to make earth a more heavenly place because Christ has allowed us that freedom. Before Christ's death, actions were measured against other actions. Every good deed was payment for a bad one. Humans served others because they had to, because it was necessary for forgiveness and salvation in Heaven:

When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced sinful deeds, resulting in death. But now we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power. Now we can really serve God, not in

the old way by obeying the letter of the law but in the new way, by the spirit.
(Romans 7: 5-6)

Bonhoeffer puts it in different terms:

When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren... Thus God himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ. 'Wherefore receive ye one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God' [Romans 15:7] (Bonhoeffer, 24-25).

It is not a requirement to serve humanity in earthly deeds: It is not a stipulation but a privilege. Still, at the very beginning of *Life Together* Bonhoeffer states:

It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. 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.
(Bonhoeffer 17)

Because Jesus died for us, releasing the stipulation of sacrifices and compensation, we are freed to minister to others by bearing their burdens.

Thus, we arrive at the Ministry of Bearing: Bonhoeffer summarizes the idea concisely:

'Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ' [Gal. 6:2] Thus the law of Christ is a law of bearing. Bearing means forbearing and sustaining. The brother is a burden to the Christian, precisely because he is a Christian. For the pagan the other person never becomes a burden at all. He simply sidesteps every burden that others may impose upon him. The Christian, however, must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother. It is only when he is a burden that another person is really a brother and not merely an object to be manipulated. The burden of Men was so heavy for God-Self that He had to endure the Cross. God verily bore the burden of men in the body of Jesus Christ. In bearing with men, God maintained fellowship with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the Cross and Christians must share in this law. They must suffer their brethren, but, what is more important, now that the law of Christ has been fulfilled. They can bear with their brethren (Bonhoeffer 100).

We live in relation to one another. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not their creed or their clothing; rather it is that the Christian is freed to serve. They are released from a selfish desire for repayment or glory, and thus able to serve one another selflessly and fully. Beyond the ability to do so, the Christian may evolve in these relationships, no matter how painful. We are assured the promise that we can suffer in empathy with one another because Christ has suffered it first. We are not to live in the world always day-dreaming away about a heaven where there is no pain or expecting an angel to swoop down and do our work for us. The Christian is able

to make earth a more heavenly place by bearing the burdens of others. Practically bearing another's burdens is not confined to certain areas of life or projects. Elsewhere in *Life Together* Bonhoeffer discusses The Ministries of Helping, Hearing, and Proclaiming the Word of God. He also talks about confessing to one another and communion. There are also aspects of worship, prayer, and scripture reading both with others and in solitude included in *Christ Existing As A Community*. According to Bonhoeffer, these facets are essential to the Christian life, not as strict rules and observances but to enhance the communal experience. We are freed to love as Christ first loved us, to seek out the meek and the broken, the orphan, the widow, the hungry, the hurt, the lost lambs. We find those people, those lost lambs, and we exist in community with them, a community of pain because it is something we all understand. It is something we all have felt and know.

Intricate to Bonhoeffer's idea of Christ Existing as a Community is The Ministry of Bearing. We exist in relationship to one another but more importantly we exist with Christ mediating those relationships and thus we are placed at ethical decisions. The decisions must not be decided based the idea of a god who swoops down from the sky to fix the world but rather one that has enabled us to act justly without the need for selfish motivation. A Christian therefore is able to Minister to anyone, whether he be a fellow Christian or, as Bonhoeffer puts it, a "Pagan," by; "forbearing and sustaining.... suffering and enduring the brother" (Bonhoeffer 100). Finkenwalde Seminary was shut down after only two short years of ministry. However, Bonhoeffer used what he learned through the experience to stress how much Christ exists as community; and how the Ministry of Bearing is intricate to that. It is in this way that Christians are able to live in a community and truly share life together.

Works Cited

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