

# JOURNEYING WITH BONHOEFFER



## SIX STEPS *on the* PATH OF DISCIPLESHIP

KATHERINE FIRTH and ANDREAS LOEWE

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*Six Steps on the Path of Discipleship*

ANDREAS LOEWE and KATHERINE FIRTH



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This book is dedicated to some of our heroes  
in the faith.

To Liselotte Schmidt (1909-1998) for her role as a principled  
matriarch in the faith during  
the Second World War and beyond.

To Canon William Watkins (1936-2018) for his radical  
hospitality to so many young people  
and his life of unwavering moral conviction.

To Rev'd Len and Rev'd Dr Jill Firth for a childhood and  
the shelf of stories that prepared us for a life of mission and  
resistance.

*Wehret den Anfängen – Beware the Beginning*

### **Praise for the book**

“The studies create a wonderful interplay between  
Bonhoeffer and St Luke, drawing the reader into a profound  
and challenging sense of what it means to follow Jesus. The  
language has both beauty and simplicity, engaging the reader at  
every point.”

*Rev'd Canon Prof Dorothy A. Lee FAHA, Trinity College, University of Divinity*

“A powerful and moving meditation on the life and words of  
Bonhoeffer, and on the Holy Scriptures on which he meditated,  
which shaped his life and his death.”

*The Rev'd Canon Dr Peter Adam, OAM*



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## List of Abbreviations

KY	Kentucky
MN	Minnesota
MO	Missouri
NY	New York
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> , Nazi law enforcement agency
Gestapo	<i>Geheime Staatspolizei</i> , Secret State Police
Nazi	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> , the National Socialist German Workers’ Party

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# Introduction from the authors

## Suffering

Miraculous conversion. Your strong active hands are bound. Powerless and lonely, you see the end of your actions. Yes, you breathe out and, silently and confidently, lay the rightness into a stronger hand, and are satisfied.

Only for a moment do you touch the blessed freedom, Then hand it over to God, so that He may gloriously complete it.

From: *Stations on the Way to Freedom* (August 1944)

## Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of the leading theologians and martyrs of the twentieth century. In 2020, it will be the 75th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's martyrdom and the end of the Second World War.

*Journeying with Bonhoeffer* is designed as a six-week Lent or Bible study guide for small groups or individuals. The book introduces Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and setting. It then has six studies: each chapter includes a reflection on a section of Bonhoeffer's 1937 book *The Cost of Discipleship* in the context of a Gospel reading, a newly translated poem or prayer from Bonhoeffer's time in Tegel Prison, and some discussion questions.

The book ends with a meditation on the way forward beyond this book, for those who want to incorporate the challenge of Bonhoeffer into their life, or to shape the life of their faith community.

The book draws on German and English sources, and draws clear parallels between the challenges facing Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany, and Christians today in a time of increasing extremism.

In this series of reflections, we will be thinking about what it means to hear and respond to Jesus' call today. We will be looking at the demands made by Jesus on his followers – the things he tells us to do that are life-giving and life-lasting, and those things he tells us to give up and leave behind as we journey with him. We will be looking at how it is that Jesus calls women, men and children today – the ways in which we may come to know that we have been noticed by him, and been invited to come and follow him. And finally, we will be looking at what it means to know Jesus' call resonate in us in such a profound way that we may say that we belong to him so intimately as to be members of his body. We will do this by examining the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, as recorded by St Luke, and by looking at the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*.

On 9 April 1945 Bonhoeffer was martyred in a Nazi concentration camp; punishment for his part in the conspiracies within the highest levels of German military intelligence to kill Adolf Hitler and overthrow his regime. He died in the final days of the Second World War. Just as the evangelists' story of Jesus can speak to us today with great immediacy, so Bonhoeffer's reflections on what it means to be a follower of Jesus can also speak to us as powerfully today as they did when he first composed them in 1938, the last year before the Second World War.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* was written for a group of Protestant students and clergy who, like him, were opposed to the rule of fascism. From the outset of Hitler's coming to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer had seen the role of the church as leading a prophetic opposition to injustice. It was not good enough simply to take care of those who had fallen foul of the regime. It was the role of the church to stop the terror of fascism altogether. The church must not only 'bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam the spoke of the wheel altogether,' Bonhoeffer

believed. His *Discipleship* was based on years of reflection and on a series of lectures delivered at his underground seminary in an abandoned school on an estate in Finkenwalde. The book developed his ideas about what discipleship meant and what it would require of people who followed Jesus.

In Lent 2019, the reflections were presented as a series of popular Lenten sermons at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne, and the translations and biography were presented at a sold-out event at St James' Institute in Sydney. Many people came to these presentations specifically because Bonhoeffer had transformed their lives, particularly older members of the audiences. Younger people who learned about Bonhoeffer for the first time were inspired and excited to learn more. This book is suitable for small groups or individuals in both Protestant and Catholic parishes to undertake a sustained study of a hero of the faith.

## **How to use this book**

Each chapter of the book is designed as a session: with a translated poem or prayer by Bonhoeffer, a paragraph from *The Cost of Discipleship*, a Bible reading put into context, extended reflections, some questions for discussion, and a prayer.

The six weeks of Lent would make an excellent period in which to read this book, either in a group or on your own—both because Lent is a time of repentance, preparation and study, but also because Bonhoeffer was martyred on 9 April 1945 and the anniversary will typically fall in the Lenten period. In fact, in 2020 it will be the 75th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's execution, and 9 April will be Maundy Thursday.

However, the book could be used at any other time during the year, as the message of Bonhoeffer's life and thought is relevant to our Christian journey when we are facing times of difficulty, when we are helping others, in times of political challenge, or when we are trying to live in community with our God and our fellow Christians—in short, at any time. Perhaps you could use

this book in different ways at different times.

We have gained so much from going back multiple times to Bonhoeffer's words and life as we wrote this book. We hope you also have a chance to go deeper as you engage in different ways with the ideas presented here.

## **Using this book in groups**

Bonhoeffer was willing to be flexible in order to build community and live as a disciple of Christ. He met people where they were. His brilliant students at the University of Berlin got challenging and intellectual lectures; but the children and teenagers in Harlem, Wedding and Sydenham (disadvantaged areas of New York, Berlin and London) got fun and engaging classes. He was willing to live in community with ordinands; but when the seminaries were shut down by the Gestapo, and when he was in prison, he was willing to write the prayers and teaching down and circulate them by letter. In public lectures like 'The Church and the Jewish Question' he was unafraid to be radically political in criticising the Nazis; but hours before he was taken to his final court martial, he gave an uplifting sermon to his fellow prisoners in the concentration camp. We hope that this book will be used in different ways to meet people where they are.

Bonhoeffer regularly taught confirmation classes, and then was the director of a seminary, so the book could be relevant for adult baptism or confirmation classes, for church leadership professional development, or for a pre-ordination or clergy retreat.

We wrote this book first of all for our own context at St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, where study groups meet weekly through Lent. But we believe this book would also work for long-running small groups, Bible study groups or youth groups who meet less frequently. It could also be effective for an intensive retreat, where each chapter is a morning or afternoon session. However you meet, each chapter is a self-contained study unit.

We recommend spending some time each session

familiarising yourself with Bonhoeffer's ideas from *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Some groups love to have lots of reading to do at home, and value coming to the group discussion fully prepared. These groups should plan for everyone to read the whole of each week's chapter, or even reading from *The Cost of Discipleship* itself, and then working through the questions when you come together.

If you have a group where people don't have the time or inclination to read such a lot of words, there can be a presentation from the leader or a group member. The presenter can use the Biography and Reflection to plan what to say, and how to answer questions that might arise in discussion. Once you meet, you might get people to read the poem and then the Bible reading. Some people find reading aloud is uncomfortable, or find it harder to listen, so you could all read together in silence. Don't forget that people who speak English as a second language often find poetry more accessible than longer sections of prose.

There are questions in each chapter that help you to reflect on the theme of each week. You can work through all the questions, giving each an equal amount of time, or you can pick one or two that you want to focus on more deeply.

At the end of the session, we recommend you close with prayer. You can read the prayer we have included aloud, or everyone can read the prayer in silence. Alternatively, you can close with your own prayers, knowing our prayer is joining in.

Between sessions, people might like to put the prayer in a prominent place—as a reminder on their calendar, or pasted up somewhere they will see it like a pinboard or fridge. Every day until you next meet, perhaps the members of the group would like to pray that prayer.

### **Using this book as an individual**

As an individual reader, you have the greatest freedom in the way that you use the book. There is nothing to stop you just reading the poems all at once, or just praying the prayers.



Perhaps you pick one chapter, that seems very relevant to you right now, and sit with it for a few weeks or months, reading it over and reflecting on your own responses and your own calling. Perhaps you sit down and read the whole thing, end to end (it is quite a short book!).

The other way we see this book being of particular use to an individual is as an accessible study guide on Bonhoeffer's life, thought and writings on the cost of discipleship. If you are reflecting on your own call, or you are a church leader or teacher who needs to help others with discernment and growth in their Christian journey, then this book can help you think deeply, encouraged by one of the most inspiring leaders and sophisticated thinkers of the church in the twentieth century.

### **Using this book as a whole church community**

The reflections started out as sermons, so you can also use the chapter structure to help shape your weekly sermon series, whether in Lent or leading up to any time of commitment to discipleship. You might use it in youth groups for older teenagers (16+) or your young adults' group, if they meet separately. The questions might make good jumping off points for your own reflections, as you prepare your Sunday address.

Most churches already read sections of the Bible aloud each week, and you might want to use the Bible readings from this book in that time. The weekly prayer can be used as a collect, or in your intercessions. Three of the translations are from prayers written by Bonhoeffer: 'Evening Prayer', 'Morning Prayer' and 'Prayer in a time of Hardship'. Some churches like to have a mixture of poems and music for reflection, so you could use the translated poems in your worship time.

However you use this book, we hope you find it as inspiring, challenging, heart-breaking and soul-uplifting as we did to write it.

### **Notes on: Introduction from the authors**

**Suffering:** 'Leiden', *from*: 'Stationen auf dem Weg zur Freiheit',

Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, p. 571.

## Biography of Bonhoeffer



*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, August 1939, in Waszkowo (Waschke). Photograph: Bundesarchiv Germany.*

## **The last days**

It was spring among the Fichtel mountains, in the dense forests and blue-grey granite quarries of that part of Bavaria that runs close to the Czech border. But in a narrow valley, rows of tin barracks encroached into the mountains. As other concentration camps were hurriedly closed at the forward march of foreign soldiers from the west and east, the main camp and sub-camps of Flossenbürg swelled with thousands of men and women from Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union. They travelled to the main camp by train and then marched the final kilometres to the walled camp, through the metal gates, past the inscription on the granite pillar that declared *Arbeit macht frei* (labour makes you free). By April 1945, there were more people than work to do, either in the quarries or the Messerschmidt factories. The camp had always been overcrowded, and the prisoners had always suffered from malnutrition, disease, and a lack of fresh water. Many died of starvation or untreated sickness. Others were executed, often in large numbers at a time, by shooting, lethal injection or hanging.

On Easter Day, Bonhoeffer had been in special (and comparatively comfortable) prison quarters in Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, hearing the Allied guns in the distance and waiting to be liberated. On the Tuesday, with other special prisoners, he was evacuated by truck west and south, to Weiden, and then incorrectly sent further south to Regensburg concentration camp. They then had to be brought back by bus towards Flossenbürg concentration camp. On 5 April, Hitler had personally demanded the liquidation of high-ranking political prisoners associated with the failed '20 July' assassination plot. The group of prisoners made it as far as the village of Schönberg on Friday afternoon, where they were kept in a quickly repurposed schoolhouse.

For three days, the special prisoners waited. But for now, the views were beautiful, there were some potatoes to eat, the

sun was shining, and there was a delay as they waited for the SS lawyer and SS judge to make their way right across the country from Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the outskirts of Berlin where, unknown to Bonhoeffer, they had just sentenced his brother-in-law to death.

A week later, it was another Sunday, and one of the special prisoners asked the pastor in their group to lead a service. Bonhoeffer consulted with the group of men and women—which included Catholics and an atheist—and with their permission he gave his final ecumenical service. It was an unlikely collection of people. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris had been head of the *Abwehr*, the German military intelligence, for whom Bonhoeffer had worked as a double agent since the beginning of the war, along with other high-ranking members the ‘Canaris Circle’. A monocled English spy based in the Netherlands, Sigismund Payne Best, had been kidnapped during talks with German double agents in what came to be known as the Venlo Incident. Wassily Kokorin was the nephew of the Soviet Foreign Minister, Molotov. SS Dr Rauscher had been responsible for human experiments on concentration camp prisoners, but after being exposed as a medical fraud and accused of murdering his lab assistant, was now a prisoner. Six of the men were to be tried and executed in Flossenbürg, some of the others would be taken on to Dachau concentration camp near Munich, some to be executed, and some to be held until the camp was liberated.

The service was simple. Bonhoeffer read the texts for the day, said the prayers and explained the meaning of the Bible verses. The Old Testament verse was from the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed’ (Isa 53:5). At that moment, Bonhoeffer reflected on the way of sacrifice taken by the suffering servant, who Christians believe to be Jesus on the cross, and the everlasting hope of salvation that was brought through him.

That night, Canaris, Bonhoeffer and four of their fellow

conspirators were taken to a drum court-martial at Flossenbürg. The trial was set up hastily in a laundry, without witnesses. The men were condemned to death. The next morning, the men were stripped, walked the scaffold and hung.

## **The early days**

The twins, Dietrich and Sabine Bonhoeffer, were born on 4 February 1906 in Breslau, Silesia. This city had previously been Polish, Bohemian, Hungarian, and Prussian. Today it is Polish again, and called Wrocław. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was part of a united Germany which had only been formed 35 years earlier. The twins already had five older siblings, and three years later the family would be complete with another sister. Their father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a neurologist, director of the Breslau psychiatric hospital and an academic at Breslau University. Their mother, born Paula von Hase, was the granddaughter of the academic Protestant theologian Karl von Hase and daughter of an academic judge. Thus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into a large, well-educated, and socially well-connected family. His relatives were scientists, artists, diplomats, lawyers, doctors and theologians.

Paula Bonhoeffer had trained as a teacher and had spent time at Herrnhut, the community central to the Moravian Brethren Church (*Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine*). She hired Käthe and Maria Horn, Moravian Brethren sisters, as nannies and governesses to her younger children, and the three educated the children at home until they were old enough to go to secondary school. Paula worshipped at home, too, and rarely attended church services until the Confessing Church was formed.

In 1912, Karl Bonhoeffer was appointed to Berlin University and the Charité, the university's teaching hospital. In 1913, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began his studies at the Friedrich Werder Grammar School. The next year, the outcome of the Great Powers' stockpiling of weapons exploded in the Balkans, and German Empire entered the European War in alliance with the

Austro-Hungarian Empire. The two eldest sons, Karl-Friedrich and Walter were called up to active duty in 1917. Less than three weeks after beginning active duty, Walter Bonhoeffer died of wounds. Immediately, Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided to become a pastor, though he would delay announcing it until after his confirmation.

## **Bonhoeffer the Student**

In 1916, the family moved to the Grunewald area of Berlin. The Bonhoeffers moved in a close-knit social circle. Family friends made through school and confirmation classes would go on to become colleagues, family and co-conspirators. Hans von Dohnányi was a school friend of Klaus Bonhoeffer, who would marry Christel Bonhoeffer, and his sister Greta would marry Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer. Von Dohnányi's friend Gerhard Leibholz would marry Sabine Bonhoeffer. Emmi Delbrück was a family friend who would marry Klaus Bonhoeffer. Ursula Bonhoeffer would marry Rüdiger Schleicher and they would live in the house next door when the elder Bonhoeffers retired to the Charlottenburg area of Berlin. Dietrich and Klaus Bonhoeffer, Hans von Dohnányi, and Rüdiger Schleicher would all be executed for their work against the Nazi regime; along with Klaus' brother-in-law Justus Delbrück, and Paula Bonhoeffer's cousin Karl Paul von Hase.

At the age of 17, Bonhoeffer left home to study towards his first degree as well as the Civil Service Entrance exam (as in Prussia, and later in Nazi Germany, the state was responsible for qualifying pastors). He travelled over 500 kilometres to the south-west of Germany, to study at one of the oldest universities in the country, at the Protestant Faculty of Theology of the University of Tübingen. His father, two of his brothers, and his sister Christel had already studied at the University. His studies were challenged by the rampant inflation that had affected Germany since the war. As he wrote in his letters home, within a semester the cost of textbooks rose nearly 80% and the

cost of his meals more than doubled. Bonhoeffer belonged to a fraternity along with Walter Dress, who would be a classmate later at the University of Berlin, and would eventually marry Bonhoeffer's youngest sister Susanne and become an active member of the Confessing Church.

At the end of the year in Tübingen, Bonhoeffer suffered a concussion in a skating accident and spent the summer travelling with his brother Klaus to recuperate. They visited Rome, Sicily, Tripoli and the Libyan desert, and then spent some months studying in Rome. The Bonhoeffers were globetrotters—and Dietrich had their taste for travel. In 1924, Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin to continue his studies as changing universities mid-degree is common in Germany. In 1927 he graduated *summa cum laude* (with the highest distinction). Bonhoeffer's academic credentials were impeccable.

The purpose of all of his study was always ordination. However, first Bonhoeffer needed to turn 25 years old to be eligible. He worked as a volunteer assistant pastor in a church in Berlin, and as a volunteer teaching assistant at the University. In 1928-29, Bonhoeffer served the German Congregation in Barcelona, Spain. In 1930, Bonhoeffer travelled to the United States of America to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. There he would be taught by Reinhold Niebuhr who became a life-long mentor. There too, Bonhoeffer came to be influenced by early Civil Rights movements through the African-American church. Frank Fisher, a black fellow-seminarian, introduced him to Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., under whose leadership the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem had grown to be the largest Protestant congregation in the country with 10,000 members. Bonhoeffer helped to teach the Sunday school, and was inspired by the Gospel of Social Justice he heard taught there. In 1931, Bonhoeffer reached the age of 25, and so he returned to Berlin to be ordained.

## **Return to Berlin: 1931**

Berlin in the 1930s was at the centre of a crumbling and disunited Germany. First World War reparations were crippling the economy, and the world was two years into the global Great Depression. Minor political parties were gaining influence. They were in and out of the courts and getting close to the necessary votes of no confidence to disrupt the German Parliament, the Reichstag. Protests, rallies and street fights led to violent clashes between gangs, political parties and individuals with guns, knives, clubs and firebombs. The Austrian banking industry had collapsed and inflation was even more out of control. But Berlin was also a centre for arts, literature, film and music, as well as for academic work.

Bonhoeffer was working as Lecturer in Systematic Theology at his *alma mater* when he was ordained into the Evangelical Church of the Old-Prussian Union, a church that had already had five names in the 60 years since the Lutheran and Reformed denominations were combined in Prussia to form the largest German Protestant Church. Alongside his mother's influence, this is another reason that Bonhoeffer's religious affiliations were more generically 'Protestant' than specifically Lutheran. One of the ways Bonhoeffer pursued ecumenism at that time was by working as Youth Secretary of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches.

## **Bonhoeffer the anti-fascist**

The leader of the largest of the extremist parties, the National Socialists, was made Chancellor in January 1933. Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and its associated Brownshirts had been, for about 15 years, facing political and legal opposition for street violence, assassinations, political gun fights, and trials for high treason.

The majority of the German populace were what Hannah Arendt has called 'the slumbering majorities', who had been



alienated both from governments made up of the social elite and technocrats, and from the violent infighting among extremists, and were no longer paying attention. They would be complicit in the Nazi regime across the next 12 years, either actively participating or ‘just doing their jobs,’ ‘just obeying orders’.

However, the Nazis were widely opposed by conservatives. This is why many of the names in the plots against Hitler are aristocrats or what John A. Moses calls the ‘industrialist and commercial elites’: military officers, and middle-class professionals. These were people like the Bonhoeffers, who valued the rule of law and the modern, educational and technological united Germany that had been created by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and scientists like Alexander von Humboldt. Other opposition was raised by communists and socialists, by anarchists, by trade unionists, by Jewish groups, and by many others.

When the Nazi Party decreed that all German Protestant Churches were to be brought together in a pro-Nazi Protestant Reich Church in 1933, more than 7,000 pastors formed the Pastors’ Emergency League (*Pfarrernotbund*) in protest. This group would go on to form the basis of the Confessing Church in 1934. Up to 800 pastors from the church would be arrested and jailed for their protests in 1937 alone. Others went into exile. According to Elizabeth Raum, about one third of pastors spoke out against the ‘Aryan Paragraph’ in 1933 (the requirement that members of all kinds of German organisations be of Aryan descent), though those numbers were reduced over the next decade as the persecution of outspoken pastors increased. It is likely that some of those who were not strong adherents of the ‘German Christian’ faction were undertaking quiet acts of resistance, though many were not.

It was impossible for objectors to remain within the new church after it had accepted the ‘Aryan Paragraph’. The new leadership was so keen to strip the church of Jewish influence

that it was proposed that the Old Testament be removed from the Bible. The first two times this recommendation was made there was such outcry that the proposal was forced to be rescinded. Yet in spite of the Reich Church's enthusiastic support of Hitler, soon it would be mandatory for all young people to belong to the Hitler Youth, which met on Sunday morning, and so the church was quickly made less relevant in society. Besides, the government found other ways to pursue their anti-Semitic agenda: from burning synagogues and books and destroying Jewish businesses on *Kristallnacht* in 1938; through tagging Jews with a yellow star from 1939; to the 'Final Solution' of total extermination from 1941. From the beginning, Bonhoeffer and his family could see where this was likely to lead, and in 1933 Bonhoeffer published a defence of German Jews in 'The Church and the Jewish Question.' Bonhoeffer's academic work and his freedoms were increasingly limited due to political interference from church and university leaders who opposed his inclusive views.

Bonhoeffer's colleagues encouraged him to leave Germany for his safety, and so he moved to London and spent some months as a pastor of two small German Lutheran churches, where he began work on the book that became *The Cost of Discipleship*. In the United Kingdom, Bonhoeffer built relationships with the Church of England, particularly with Bishop George Bell.

Bonhoeffer had been strongly interested in the Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi's ground-breaking work on non-violent resistance for many years. In 1935, Bonhoeffer received an invitation to visit Gandhi's ashram. Instead of going to India, however, Bonhoeffer heeded the rebuke of his mentor Karl Barth who reminded him that he was needed to resist the violent Nazi regime at home. There, he completed *The Cost of Discipleship*.

With the formation of the German Confessing Church—a non-legal church—had come the need for the education of new

pastors outside of the traditional university structures. So it was that the Church set up five ‘underground’ seminaries. Bonhoeffer was the director of the seminaries in rural Pomerania. First they gathered in Zingst, up on the Baltic coast in the far north and then, when the unheated holiday cottages become unbearable with the onset of winter, 250 kilometres away in a former school at Finkenwalde in another part of Germany that is now Poland.

The small community was set up on the grounds of the von Blumenthal estate, neighbouring the grounds of the von Wedemeyer estate. It had been the work of Ruth von Kleist-Retzow (the grandmother of Maria von Wedemeyer, Bonhoeffer’s future fiancée) to bring this together. Von Kleist-Retzow has been described by Jane Pejsa as a ‘matriarch of conspiracy’ for her role in bringing together conservative resistance to Hitler in the military and politics. As well as her work with the underground seminaries, her circle included Hans-Jürgen von Blumenthal and Ewald von Kleist-Schmenzin, local aristocrats and significant national figures who were executed after the failure of the ‘20 July’ von Stauffenberg plot in 1944. Thus, we see that the women in this story are by no means fitting the Nazi slogan *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (‘children, kitchen, church’) of the passive and private sphere—but rather they were active, powerful leaders and allies in the resistance.

The Seminary was declared illegal in 1936, and closed by the Gestapo in 1937, at which point it dispersed across the households of supporters like the Wedemeyers. Among the most important of Bonhoeffer’s students was a mature-age student, Eberhard Bethge, who continued as the ‘student inspector’ working until 1940 with the scattered groups of ordinands attempting to continue their studies. Although Bonhoeffer was clearly a theological leader, he was surrounded by others who shared his commitment and who formed a community that strengthened and encouraged each other. Several members of Bonhoeffer’s theological community were also martyred for

their vigorous opposition to the Hitler regime.

During this time Bonhoeffer was also travelling to Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland, where he met with international allies. Karl Barth was forced to flee from Germany back to his native Switzerland. Bonhoeffer's colleague, Martin Niemöller, was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, just north of Berlin; one of the camps with the infamous gates that declared *Arbeit macht frei*, also emblazoned on the gates of Flossenbürg, Auschwitz and Dachau. Bonhoeffer's university friend and Pastors' Emergency League colleague, Franz Hildebrandt, had to be helped to escape to England after being arrested. Bonhoeffer and Bethge helped drive Bonhoeffer's twin sister Sabine, his half-Jewish brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz, and their two girls across the country, so that, like in *The Sound of Music*, they could walk into Switzerland and escape just as the authorities were about to close the borders. Confessing Church pastors were being arrested, interrogated, threatened, and their houses searched. Pastors were interned for short or long stays in the growing number of concentration camps for political opponents of the regime, the disabled, homosexuals, Jews and many others. There were physical fights in churches as Confessing pastors were wrestled away from their pulpits by Reich Church leaders.

### **Bonhoeffer the Double Agent**

In 1939, war was declared, heralding eight months of waiting in the 'Phony War' (*Sitzkrieg*). Bonhoeffer was about to be conscripted; his lectureship was removed on recommendation of the Bishop for Foreign Affairs; and he was banned from speaking, writing or travelling without special permission from the Gestapo. So Bonhoeffer fled to New York in 1939. However, within days of arriving in the United States, he turned around to return to Germany, knowing that he was returning to eventual imprisonment and probably death. Bonhoeffer could have

remained in America, avoiding conscription and working for international peace and understanding. However, once again he decided he needed to return to Germany and face the struggle there.

The resistance to National Socialism in Germany had not ceased. Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnányi (pronounced now in the German, no longer the Hungarian way) had been part of the resistance since 1934. A lawyer with a doctorate in international shipping law and an international aviation law expert, he had been keeping a record of the Nazi's crimes so that when the regime fell, their leaders and members could be brought to justice. He had a senior role in the *Abwehr* (military counterintelligence) which surprisingly was, as F. Burton Nelson puts it, 'one of the primary centres of the resistance movement.' Under General Wilhelm Canaris the *Abwehr* is said to have enabled 500 Dutch Jews to escape to safety in 1941. Many Jews were given training as *Abwehr* agents and then sent abroad, where they were able to escape. Von Dohnányi would later be described by the Gestapo as the 'spiritual leader' of the multiple assassination attempts against Hitler that were supported or carried out by the *Abwehr*, as Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Stern have described in detail.

Dohnányi recruited Bonhoeffer as an *Abwehr* agent, citing his international and ecumenical links as useful for spying purposes against the Allies. At the same time, his recruitment into the *Abwehr* placed Bonhoeffer in an excellent position to meet with Allies and their proxies in neutral territories like Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland as a double-agent.

The whole family was involved in, or supportive of, Dohnányi's and Bonhoeffer's resistance work, and actively opposed anti-Semitism. Raum describes how the family would meet at Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer's house, with a pillow over the telephone to avoid wiretaps, and the children sent to play outside to check no-one could overhear the discussions. The

family developed codes to carry on their conversations. Eight members of the Bonhoeffer family would be arrested over the next six years, Bonhoeffer, his brother Klaus, his sister Christel von Dohnányi, his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi, his other brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, Rüdiger's son-in-law Bethge (who had married Bonhoeffer's niece Renate in 1942), Klaus' brother-in-law Justus Delbrück, and their mother's cousin Karl Paul von Hase. Christel was released, Bethge liberated. The others were all executed.

The Bonhoeffers and the 'Canaris Group' collaborated with other resistance collectives, including the 'Kreisau Circle' with Helmuth von Moltke towards the successful Norwegian pastors' strike in 1942.

The 'Canaris Group' were also involved in multiple plots to assassinate Hitler, and in staging a coup which would enable them to stop the war. In 1943, for example, von Dohnányi helped smuggle a British-made bomb, disguised as two bottles of Cointreau, onto Hitler's plane. The bombs failed to go off. In January 1944, von Dohnányi and Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist-Schmenzin were involved in another attempt, thwarted because Hitler's schedule kept being changed at the last minute.

In early 1943, Bonhoeffer became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, a budding mathematician and granddaughter of Ruth von Kleist-Restow. Von Wedemeyer went on to be a groundbreaking female mathematician and computer programmer, and then manager in major US computer companies after the war, but she was only 18 at the time of their engagement. Only a few weeks later, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned.

## **Bonhoeffer in Prison**

It was the currency violations, for sending money to the Jewish refugees in Switzerland that Dohnányi had helped save, that led to the arrests of Hans and Christel von Dohnányi and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in April 1943, along with other members

of the *Abwehr*. Von Dohnányi and Bonhoeffer would never be released. They were kept in different prisons and faced repeated interrogation, illness, boredom, anxiety, and fear for their families.

Bonhoeffer wrote letters to his parents, to his student Eberhard Bethge who had since been conscripted into the army, and to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer. These are the letters collected in *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Resistance and Resignation), *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and *Love Letters from Cell 92*. Bonhoeffer and von Dohnányi were also passing secret coded messages.

Bonhoeffer's Three Prayers (see Chapters 1, 2 and 5) were written early in 1943 and are typical of his thinking and writing about his time in Tegel Prison—he reflects on his difficulties but also on his intentions. He wrote prayers, similar to the prayers he had written in Finkenwalde, carefully, using the Psalms as a model. In the prayers, Bonhoeffer expresses how he is prepared to suffer for his belief, and draws on his faith in God to support him, even as he fully recognises the horrors of his experience.

Of course, he was not writing without an audience. He was acutely aware of the need to encourage and reassure his readers (his parents, his very young fiancée, his student and now nephew-in-law Eberhard Bethge) that he was still alive, that they should continue to be brave.

For example, in 'Night-time Voices' he writes to Bethge:

Stretched out on my pallet-bed,

I stare at the grey wall.

Outside, a summer morning —

That is no longer anything to do with me —

is progressing, rejoicing into the countryside.

Brother, after this long night,

Our day will break.

We hold our ground.

Von Dohnányi took a different route. He was much sicker

and facing much more intense interrogation, and had many more people at risk if he slipped up or broke down and gave away any details. He asked his wife to bring food on one of her visits intentionally poisoned with diphtheria germs. There are some gruesome benefits in being the daughter of the one of the leading doctors of Berlin's university hospital. The plan was successful, and von Dohnányi was sent to hospital seriously ill. His interrogations by the SS and Gestapo were reduced until he was forcibly brought back to prison.

Bonhoeffer's poems were primarily written between June and September 1944. A final poem was written in November. There are comparatively few letters in this period, though Bonhoeffer continued to work on the draft of his theological books, and occasional authorised visits from his parents and fiancée continued until September. There were good reasons for this change.

In early June 1944, the D-Day landings had finally come, when Allied forces pushed into Normandy and began their final, successful liberation of the Continent of Europe from the west. Within the next weeks the '20 July' plot was due to take place: another aristocratic conspirator, Claus von Stauffenberg, would smuggle a bomb into Hitler's highly protected Military Headquarters on the Eastern Front, the Wolf's Lair. The bomb exploded and killed four of the people in the room, but not Hitler who was protected by a desk. In the aftermath of the failed plot, over 6,000 people were rounded up and most were executed: including Justus Delbrück, two of Delbrück's cousins, and Karl Paul von Hase, the City Commandant of Berlin who, according to Joachim Fest, was arrested while having dinner with the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.

The poems are a form of the coded speaking that Bonhoeffer had become used to. Back in the early 1930s, Bonhoeffer had learned to preach in a way that adhered closely to the Biblical message but that clearly held a political message of opposition for



anyone who cared to listen. The family were all used to speaking in code during their regular meetings. The poems and prayers Bonhoeffer writes are both theological and political: they assure his readers of God's enduring care for him, but also his enduring loyalty to their cause; they await God's eternal hope, but also the end of National Socialism.

By this time, both Bonhoeffer and von Dohnányi were playing a waiting game, knowing that the Allied forces were coming ever closer. Von Dohnányi was in the sick bay of Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the northern outskirts of Berlin. He was alone, because Niemöller had already been transferred to Dachau concentration camp, just outside the Bavarian capital, Munich, three years before. Von Dohnányi was extremely ill with scarlet fever, phlebitis and diphtheria, paralysed in his feet and legs, and often left lying in his own filth for days at a time. Bonhoeffer remained in Tegel prison continuing to write, think, talk with his guards, smoke and wait.

On 22 September, however, the Gestapo investigating the '20 July' conspiracy found the documents documenting Nazi crimes that von Dohnányi had hidden. His role in the conspiracy was unmasked—he was in fact identified as the 'spiritual head' of the conspiracy, though he was not the most senior officer. On 8 October therefore, his close co-conspirator Bonhoeffer was moved to the prison underneath the Gestapo Headquarters in Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in central Berlin. He was almost certainly tortured and interrogated. Klaus Bonhoeffer was also arrested and certainly was tortured. Rüdiger Schleicher and Bethge, too, were arrested and held in jails across Berlin.

### **Bonhoeffer in the concentration camps**

When Berlin's Gestapo building was destroyed in an air raid in February 1945, the prisoners, including Bonhoeffer, were moved to Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar.

On 4 April, the diaries of the most senior officer of the *Abwehr*

resistance, Wilhelm Canaris, were found. They were shown to Hitler, who ordered the immediate liquidation of the 'Canaris Group'. Von Dohnányi had been back in hospital, and his doctor, an anti-Nazi, heavily sedated him so he did not suffer as he was tried and hanged.

With the United States Army cannons close enough to hear, the other conspirators of the 'Canaris Group' were moved 250 kilometres to Flossenbürg concentration camp in Bavaria, at the southern end of the country and in the middle of nowhere. Their guards were under order to complete the liquidation, using whatever means necessary. This meant the judge who took the case was required to travel by freight train and then 20 kilometres by bicycle, for a night-time drum court martial. Before he was taken away to his trial, Bonhoeffer was asked to hold a Sunday service, where he preached on Isaiah, 'By his wounds we are healed' (Isaiah 53.5). In his last sermon, he used an Old Testament text, in an act of prophetic spirituality and political resistance. In this moment, Bonhoeffer clearly expected to take up his own cross—he was under no illusions about the horror, pain and degradation that were before him.

Canaris, Bonhoeffer and the others were hanged on 9 April.

The prison doctor later claimed that Bonhoeffer walked to the scaffold at peace and looking noble 'at the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds'—a story that has been repeated many times, including in the *New King James Version Modern Life Study Bible*. However, the prison doctor's job was to revive people as they were being executed so that the punishment would last as long as possible, so his story is considered unreliable by modern historians. Other witnesses say the execution took six hours, which would be consistent with the usual practice. We can see why von Dohnányi's sedation was, in fact, a kindness. We know Canaris was stripped naked as a humiliation before being hanged and it

is likely this was true for all the conspirators.

In short, Bonhoeffer's death was as horrific as he expected.

A week later, the camp was evacuated, and the prisoners were forced to march through heavy rain towards Dachau, thousands died on the way. Two weeks later, there were just over a thousand people left in Flossenbürg when it was liberated by United States Army soldiers.

There had been 85 raids on Berlin by Allied bombers in the previous year alone. Half of the city's houses were damaged and around a third uninhabitable. Estimates of the total number of dead in Berlin from air raids stand at about 20,000, with hundreds of thousands of people left homeless. On 16 April, the Soviet troops advancing from the east began the ground Battle of Berlin. On 21 April, they occupied the outer suburbs.

On 22 April, Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rüdiger Schleicher, were shot in the grounds of the Lehrter Straße prison where they were both being held.

Bethge's prison was liberated by the Soviet troops as the Red Army fought, and raped, their way through the city.

On 30 April, Hitler committed suicide. On 2 May, Nazi Germany accepted defeat, and the messy turn towards a post-war, Cold War, divided Germany began.

## **Bonhoeffer's Legacy**

Eberhard Bethge had carefully saved all of his letters from Bonhoeffer, and it was his work that made the remarkable volumes of Collected Letters (including *Letters and Papers from Prison*) available. It is on these works, and Bethge's championship of them in Germany and internationally, that Bonhoeffer's position as a pre-eminent twentieth-century theologian and martyr is based.

In 2020, it will be 75 years since his execution. In recent years, historians have shown just how brutal Bonhoeffer's final months were, and how Bonhoeffer was part of an active family

and large community of people working inside and outside of official structures to do the right thing. At the same time, popular culture has grown the myth of Bonhoeffer as an isolated individual standing up against an unstoppable regime, whose death was quick and composed, whose inspirational quotes (not all of which were actually ever said by Bonhoeffer) adorn posters and postcards.

We feel that the true story of Bonhoeffer's life and work is more powerful and inspiring, because it shows that we don't have to be a great leader or saint to be part of doing the right thing for each other in our communities and families. Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* for himself, as he made choices about whether to resist the National Socialist regime. But Bonhoeffer also wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* for his secret trainee pastors in the woods of Pomerania, who struggled with the choices of being arrested, being sent to the war zones where more than half of them would be killed, or swearing the oath of allegiance to Hitler.

Today, some Christians around the world face similar challenges. Where Christians are safe, it is our job to support our sisters and brothers who are being persecuted. It is also our job to make our communities welcoming to all people, regardless of race, ability, gender, health, legal status, or religion.

As Martin Niemöller famously said:

*First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a communist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for  
me.*

Bonhoeffer did speak for all these groups, but yes, they came for him and the other pastors of the Confessing Church, and

there was no freedom outside the prison walls either, for anyone to speak for him publicly, though we have seen many ways that people worked clandestinely to support him.

Germans have a well-known saying, ‘*Wehret den Anfängen*’, translated as ‘Beware the Beginnings.’ It is often used to remind us not to wait until a disaster has unfolded, but to stay awake and aware of the early warning signs. Germany had 15 years of warnings before Hitler and the National Socialists gained power, and another decade before the ‘Final Solution’ was formally put into action. Bonhoeffer and his family and colleagues saw the signs, and stood up for what was right, starting at the beginning and staying true to the end. In our time and our place, we must do likewise.

## Notes on: Biography of Bonhoeffer

**Image Attribution:** Waszkowo, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, August 1939

Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1987-074-16. CC-BY-SA 3.0.

**The account of Bonhoeffer’s last days is constructed from accounts in the following sources:** Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: a biography*, Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000; Sigismund Payne Best, *The Venlo Incident*, Reynal & Hitchcock, London, New York, 1950; Bonhoeffer-Initiative.com, <https://www.bonhoeffer-initiative.com/en/#last-hours>; Elizabeth Raum, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Called by God*, Continuum, London, 2003, p. 149; Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, Macmillan, London, 2015.

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## Chapter 1: Christ's insistent call



*Bonhoeffer on a hike with his Berlin youth group.  
Photograph: Bundesarchiv Germany.*

### **Morning prayer (November 1943)**

God, I cry to you in the early morning,  
help me to pray and to gather my thoughts;  
I cannot do it alone.  
It is dark inside me, but with you is the light.  
I am lonely, but you do not leave me.  
I am timid, but with you is my help.  
I am anxious, but with you is peace.  
There is bitterness inside me, but with you is patience.  
I do not understand your ways, but you know the right way for me.

...

Lord Jesus Christ,  
You were poor and miserable, caught and abandoned like me.  
You know all the sorrows of humanity,  
You stay with me, when nobody stays with me,  
You don't forget me, and you search for me.  
You want me to recognise you and turn to you.  
Lord, I hear your call and follow.  
Help me!

### **Bonhoeffer Reading: 'Follow me, walk behind me!'**

What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all. Going after Jesus is something without specific content. It is truly not a program for one's life which would be sensible to implement. It is neither a goal nor an ideal to be sought. It is not even a matter for which, according to human inclination, it would be worth investing anything at all, much less oneself. And what happens? Those called leave everything they have, not in order to do something valuable. Instead, they do it simply for the sake of the call itself, because otherwise they could not walk behind Jesus. Nothing of importance is attached to this action in itself. It remains something completely insignificant, unworthy of notice. The bridges are torn down,



and the followers simply move ahead.

*Discipleship*, p. 58

Further reading: read the first half of Chapter 2 of Bonhoeffer's  
*Discipleship*, pp. 57-73.

## **Bible Readings:**

### **Jesus calls the first disciples and a Rich Young Ruler**

But when Simon Peter saw the catch of fish, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' <sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

*Luke 5:9-11*

<sup>27</sup> Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' <sup>28</sup> And he got up, left everything, and followed him. <sup>29</sup> Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.

*Luke 5:27-29*

<sup>18</sup> A certain ruler asked Jesus, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' <sup>19</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.' <sup>20</sup> You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother." <sup>21</sup> He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.' <sup>22</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' <sup>23</sup> But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

*Luke 18:18-23*

## **The Bible Readings in Context**

Jesus saw Levi sitting at his roadside collection point. Rather than pay the required toll, Jesus simply told the tax collector to come and follow him. And Levi got up, left behind his workplace and that day's takings, and followed Jesus. Later that day, he invited Jesus to his own home, and gave a banquet for the man who saw him, noticed him and called him to follow him. And he invited all his former colleagues to join in the feast.

In the Gospels, the call to follow Jesus is immediate and direct. Jesus comes to a workplace—the road toll station, the boat yard—sees and recognises those who are working there, and calls them to follow him. And the people whom he calls either leave all that they have behind and follow immediately, as in the case of Simon, Andrew, James and John and Levi, or they find reasons for themselves to reject that call and remain behind.

Levi turns his back on his old business. Indeed, he gathers his former associates around him in order to enable them also to experience the life-changing call of Christ. 'A call to discipleship immediately creates a new situation,' Bonhoeffer explains: 'staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude one another. The tax collector had to leave his booth, and Peter his nets, to follow Jesus.' We cannot both remain behind in our old lives and follow Jesus at the same time. We are called to leave behind all and to step into the unknown.

Those who follow, follow joyfully. They may leave behind their family and their livelihood, their business interests, but they follow with great expectation and joy. Some, like Levi, give a feast to celebrate their changed lives. Others, like the fishermen Simon and Andrew, put all they have in service of Jesus, turning their boats into floating pulpits, for example. Those who follow are changed, they let go of all they had in order to walk with Jesus.

There are also those who choose not to enter into discipleship, like the rich young ruler who approached Jesus in our

third Bible passage (Lk 18:18-23). A man of substance, he had kept God's commandments all his life. But Jesus told him that, in order to follow him, he not only needed to obey God's commandments, but more importantly needed to let go of his possessions. That in order to follow Jesus, he needed to love Jesus more than wealth. Jesus, seeing the man, loved him, Mark tells us in his version of the story, and describes how the man wept as he walked away from Jesus' invitation (Mk 10:21-22).

The people who remain behind, are often deeply shaken by their decision not to follow Jesus' call. The rich man whom Jesus commanded to sell all his possessions, wept over his inability to give up and let go of his past life, and follow Jesus into an unknown future (Lk 18:22). His familiar circumstances would have remained the same; there would have been little change to the external rhythms of his life. Except for the fact that he had seen and been seen by Jesus, and heard and rejected his invitation to follow.

Bonhoeffer writes: 'Jesus only has one expectation of me, namely that I believe.' Like Levi, Peter, James and John, what do we need to do in order to follow Jesus readily and with joy?

### **Reflection: 'Walk with me'**

'He got up, left everything and followed Jesus' (*Lk 5:28*).

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer showed how he understood Jesus' call to faith and service. Written in exile in London, under persecution in Berlin, and in community with the underground seminary at Finkenwalde, *Discipleship* was composed at a time when Bonhoeffer and his audience already knew what it could cost to follow Jesus. In this section of *Discipleship*—as in the lectures at Finkenwalde that were its first draft—Bonhoeffer reflects on Jesus' call to Levi, who responds by getting up and leaving everything.

Levi's ready response to follow Jesus is contrasted by the story of the rich young ruler. The young man lived his life in accordance

with the ethical standards set by the Ten Commandments, but was unwilling to give up his wealth to follow Jesus. Bonhoeffer reflects extensively on this man's story: indeed, the young man's wealth may well have been a personal challenge for the comfortably well-off pastor. Bonhoeffer was used to ready financial support from his family, whether borrowing the family car and chauffeur to distribute Confessing Church materials, or being sent a grand piano so he could keep up his music in London.

Bonhoeffer, in examining what it means to follow Jesus faithfully, comes to the conclusion that the main concern 'is not that I have any worldly goods, but that I should possess goods as if I did not possess them, and inwardly be free of them.' What is important is not what I have, or don't have, but what I do. By all means have possessions, 'but have them as if you did not have them. Do not set your hearts on possessions.' Instead set your hearts on God. Indeed, Bonhoeffer believes: 'My faith, however, is not tied to poverty or wealth or some such thing. On the contrary, in faith I can be both—rich and poor.'

The realisation that setting our heart on God means changing other aspects of our lives will always be heart-wrenching. In the case of the rich young man, it was heart-breaking because his obedience was to his wealth, not God. Bonhoeffer writes: 'The young man is standing before Jesus, the Son of God. The full encounter is present. The only choices are yes or no, obedience or disobedience.' And grieving disobedience is still disobedience, is still not following. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: 'First obey, do the external works, let go of what binds you, give up what is separating you from God's will. Do not say I do not have the faith for that. You will not have it ... so long as you will not take that first step.'

The first people to be called into discipleship by Jesus realise that right here in front of them is God's living Word. God's own command made flesh is calling out to them to get up and follow.

Bonhoeffer explains: ‘Here the gracious call of Jesus Christ to discipleship becomes a strict law: “Do this! Stop that!” Come out of the boat to Jesus, leave the toll booth and follow. And Levi, the toll collector, and the four fishermen hear and obey, and do what Jesus commands them to do: ‘follow me’, he calls, and they simply get up and follow. They hear the Word and do it without questioning whether or not they fully understand what is asked of them. Faith will grow out of that first ‘doing’, that first stepping out, Bonhoeffer tells: ‘You believe—so take the first step! It leads to Jesus Christ. You do not believe—take the same step; it is commanded of you!’. This is a response made in faith, which enables faith to grow, and the actions of faith to flourish. It builds community and enables mutual growth and care.

‘Faith no longer meant keeping quiet and waiting’, Bonhoeffer writes, ‘but going with Christ. Now all bridges had to be burned and the step taken to enter into endless insecurity, in order to know what Jesus demands and Jesus gives.’ And just as each one of us has to discern how to follow the call of Christ, Bonhoeffer believed, so the church also has to discern what it means to go with Christ and speak out boldly in the face of injustice and oppression. Later in this series of reflections we will be looking again at what it means for the church as a whole to follow Jesus’ call, what it may mean for us as a community to follow Christ. In this chapter, we will be concentrating on what it means for each one of us to step out in faith where Jesus leads.

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that stepping out in faith to follow where Christ led meant abandoning alternative careers in England and the United States and instead returning to Germany to step into leadership of the Confessing Church and membership of the Nazi resistance. For Levi in the Gospel stories, that stepping out in faith where Christ led meant abandoning his livelihood as a toll collector, and literally following Jesus. For both, the call to discipleship led to the acceptance of an unsettled, uncertain life. For us all, the call to follow Christ means to take the first step: to

get up and start walking with Jesus.

Following Jesus means getting up and walking with Jesus, not sitting still. In the days before the call came, Bonhoeffer explained to his students, faith may well have meant staying put, doing good and waiting. 'But now Jesus was there; now his call came. Now faith no longer meant keeping quiet and waiting, but going in discipleship with him.' There is nothing wrong in principle with just getting on with things as they had been. But that's not discipleship.

If sitting still and just getting on with things as they are is not discipleship what, then, does discipleship look like? 'As long as Levi sits in the tax collector's booth and Peter at his nets, they would do their work honestly and loyally, they would have old or new knowledge about God', Bonhoeffer explains. 'But if they want to learn to believe in God, they have to follow the Son of God incarnate and walk with him.' And that is just as true today, as it was for Peter and Levi. We actually need to get up and walk with Jesus, in order to be his disciples. Bonhoeffer shows discipleship is not just having knowledge about God, but learning to believe in God.

Before we get up and act, we first need to listen. Listen to Jesus' words written in the Scriptures, and spoken to you by other followers of Jesus, the members of Christ's body. Attend worship in your community. You can listen to God by praying. Bonhoeffer taught that we should pray with thanksgiving, with petitions, but we should also sit in silent meditation with God. One of the best ways to hear Jesus' Word more clearly is to read the Scriptures. Joining a study group is one way to do that. Another way is to start a regular practice of reading the Bible on your own.

Be confident that Jesus will speak to you through the readings, the hymns, the sermon and our sharing in bread and wine. Be prepared to listen to what Jesus says. And then—and this, the story of the rich young ruler suggests, is the most difficult part

of the process of discipleship—follow up on what Jesus says to you. This may well bring up areas in your life where you need to commit to change: this certainly is true for me, just as it was for Bonhoeffer who gave up his own material comfort and personal safety in service of the Confessing Church and the Resistance.

In the end, the only way in which we can become disciples is by hearing, and by believing in, Jesus' call. If the toll collector had had a conversation with Jesus and remained behind at his toll booth, he would have undoubtedly had better insights into his own life, Bonhoeffer warns: 'but he would not have recognised him as the one Lord, into whose hand he should entrust his whole life. He would not have learnt faith.'

By listening and acting, by following and accepting Christ's insistent call as true for him, Levi is given faith and a framework for life as a disciple. Starting to learn to have faith means starting to act on what Jesus calls you to do. Have faith to heed that call, and take the first step into discipleship by committing to walk with Jesus. Bonhoeffer put it like this: 'The first step is crucial. It is qualitatively different from all others that follow. The first step of obedience has to lead Peter away from his nets and out of the boat.' The first step leads Levi away from the toll booth and his past life. The first step leads us away from our preoccupation with our own lives to life with Jesus.

Jesus' disciples follow him simply for the sake of the call itself, because otherwise they could not walk behind Jesus. Jesus still calls each person to listen, follow and walk with him. And I pray that we might hear him call us and that he would help us follow him.

## **Questions: Christ's Insistent Call**

When we listen to Jesus' Word, we can hear his will. And when we act on what he wills for us, we may learn to believe. And when we believe, we may step out in faith, ready to follow where he tells us to go. This call is extended to us today.

'What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all,' Bonhoeffer encourages us. "Those called, leave everything they have.'

1. In Bonhoeffer's 'Morning Prayer,' he says: 'I cannot do it alone,' 'Lord, I hear your call and follow. Help me!' How could God help you to follow him?
2. In the Bible reading, Levi 'got up, left everything, and followed him.' What is the thing you find hardest to leave behind when you think about following Jesus?
3. Bonhoeffer says going after Jesus 'is something without specific content.' Does following just to follow Jesus feel scary or liberating to you? Why?
4. In order to hear Christ's call, we need to hear Jesus' word. Do you need to spend more time listening, rather than talking to God?
5. Bonhoeffer reflects that dispositions and life circumstances should be irrelevant in the face of faith: 'My faith, however, is not tied to poverty or wealth or some such thing. On the contrary, in faith I can be both—rich and poor.' Is there a 'some such thing' that you, or your community, thinks make it impossible for a person to truly have faith?



## **Prayer: ‘Open my ears to hear your Word’**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
Open my ears to hear your Word;  
Grant me the faith to know your will.

Open my heart to obey your call;  
Grant me the grace to use your gifts.

Open my eyes to see the way you set before me;  
Grant me your presence as I walk with you.

For in your Word I find my life,  
and in your will my freedom.  
In your ways I find my peace,  
and in your presence my joy.  
Amen.

## **Notes on: Christ’s insistent call**

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**Morning Prayer:** ‘Morgengebet’, Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, p. 204-205.

**A call to discipleship immediately creates a new situation:** Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 62.

**The young man asked about the path to eternal life:** *Discipleship*, p.73.

**Jesus only has one expectation of me, namely that I believe:**  
*Discipleship*, p. 76.

**Not that I have any worldly goods:** *Discipleship*, p. 78.

**Have them [possessions] as if you did not have them:** *Discipleship*, p. 78.

**My faith, however, is not tied to poverty or wealth or some such thing:**  
*Discipleship*, p. 78.

**The young man is standing before Jesus, the Son of God:** *Discipleship*, p. 77.

**First obey, do the external works, let go of what binds you:** *Discipleship*,

p. 66

**Here the gracious call of Jesus Christ to discipleship becomes a strict law:** *Discipleship*, p. 66.

**You believe—so take the first step! It leads to Jesus Christ:** *Discipleship*, p. 66.

**Faith no longer meant keeping quiet and waiting:** Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 63.

**But now Jesus was there; now his call came:** *Discipleship*, p. 62.

**Christ's call to discipleship dissolves all ties:** *Discipleship*, p. 62.

**As long as Levi sits in the tax collector's booth and Peter at his nets:** *Discipleship*, p. 62.

**But he would not have recognised him as the one Lord:** *Discipleship*, p. 62

**The first step is crucial:** *Discipleship*, p. 64.

**Morning Prayer:** 'Morgengebet', Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, p. 204-205.

**Something without specific content:** Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 58.

**My faith, however, is not tied to poverty or wealth or some such thing:** *Discipleship*, p. 78.

**'God, to you I cry in the early morning,  
help me to pray and to gather my thoughts,  
I cannot do it alone.'**

*(Morning Prayer, November 1943)*

Join the Dean of Melbourne, Dr Andreas Loewe, and academic and poet Dr Katherine Firth, for six weekly reflections as we journey through what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a theologian for our times: who worked across the barriers of race, denomination and language. For his role in heading an underground seminary, and his work with the resistance against the Nazi regime, he was imprisoned, interned in concentration camps and executed. Bonhoeffer's inspiring writings invite us to ask about what discipleship really means, and what it is to live out our faith. In 2020, it will be 75 years since Bonhoeffer was martyred.

These reflections, which were first delivered as Dean Andreas' Lent Addresses in 2019, draw on the Gospel of Luke and Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. Dr Katherine Firth has written a compelling new biography of Bonhoeffer, first presented at St James' King Street Sydney, and her translations of the poems and prayers bring out the spirituality, the politics and the craft of Bonhoeffer's works.

*Bonhoeffer is a true hero of the faith and an inspiration to us all. I commend to you this book, to inspire women and men in churches all around Australia and across the world to come together and study the Bible and the theology of Bonhoeffer, and then to put it into practice in their own lives and witness.*

**The Most Rev'd Dr Philip Freier**

Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia and Archbishop of Melbourne.

**The Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe** is Dean of St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and an expert on Protestant German History. He has previously published on Bach, Luther and the Reformation for academic, church and public audiences. **Dr Katherine Firth** is a Lecturer at La Trobe University. An expert on translation, literature and music, she is also an award-winning poet and educator. She has previously written on Bach, Luther and Second World War poetry for academic, church and public audiences. Both authors are fluent in German. They have previously worked together on a number of similar projects about Martin Luther and J.S. Bach for academic and general audiences.

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