

Bonhoeffer's steadying hand needed now, too

Journeying with Bonhoeffer: Six Steps on the Path of Discipleship, by Katherine Firth and Andreas Loewe (Morning Star Publishing, 2019)

reviewed by Rhys Bezzant

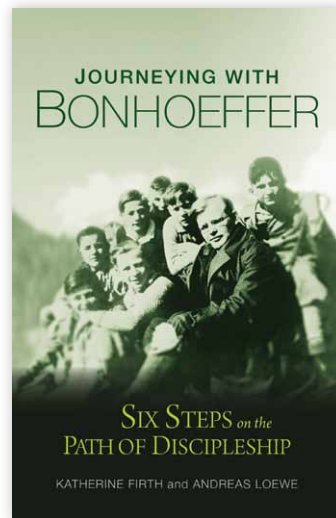
"TIME IS SHORT. Eternity is long": words written by Bonhoeffer in his book *Discipleship*. They are stark and urgent, and give us a sense of Bonhoeffer's mood as he tries to shake the German church out of its apathy and compromise during the horror years of the Nazi dictatorship.

As we discover in this series of six studies written by Katherine Firth and Dean of Melbourne Andreas Loewe, calls to obedience such as this are beautifully grounded in the life and teaching of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, and elsewhere too in the New Testament, for Bonhoeffer reflected deeply and personally on the words of Christ during his ministry leading the seminary in Finkenwalde as well as in his imprisonment. Jesus Christ himself taught his close disciples and those on the fringe that the Kingdom of God had come close, so his listeners faced a pressing decision with eternal consequences. Reading Bonhoeffer is bracing as he meditates on the equally bracing words of Jesus. And Bonhoeffer's own story gives to his theological convictions heft and hope.

Each chapter of this small book calls on us to pray for spiritual focus. It begins with a prayer composed by Bonhoeffer and includes an excerpt from his series of lectures to students in the Pomeranian seminary now published as *The Cost of Discipleship*. The authors then provide readings from Luke and commentary on the meaning of Jesus's words in their original context. There is nothing rushed about these reflections, but rather, befitting their gravitas, they unravel the text and implicitly unravel the complexity of the life of our soul at the same time.

A further section on the intersection of Bonhoeffer's story and the application of the Gospel's story make for rich resources in our own walk of obedient discipleship. The chapter ends with questions for individual or group discussion, another prayer to help us appropriate the lesson, with notes for further reading. The whole book is introduced by a chapter outlining the biography of Bonhoeffer which is short yet never shallow.

I greatly appreciated in this book the authors' inside understanding of German history and culture, with occasional autobiographical asides, like Andreas's mother's involvement in contemporary German political concerns. Several well-known biographies of Bonhoeffer are flat in the way they set the man in his context. But we see here



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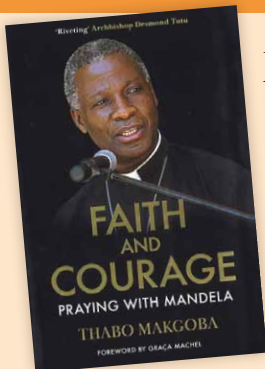
as well great insight into the leading themes of the Scriptures, which are importantly the first paragraphs in each chapter. These are not reflections on Bonhoeffer with token parallels to the Scriptures, but quite the contrary. The use of translations of the original German was also most thoughtfully done, which in an afterword is more fully explained. Bonhoeffer is

a difficult theologian to understand, for in different passages he appears sometimes more Lutheran, sometimes more Reformed (he did after all minister in the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union which combined both Protestant theological traditions!), yet the authors navigate these waters wisely. I can see that their choice of words is careful, theologically nuanced, and pastorally sensitive, all appropriate in a devotional guide like this one. Occasional pictures of Bonhoeffer or his letters added immediacy to our reading, which after all contributes to the goal of challenging our comfortable discipleship.

Though I write this review not under an oppressive government but under conditions of crisis in Australia, as we come to terms with a virus that is undoing common assumptions about the stability of life, I felt Bonhoeffer's guidance in my reactions and anxieties. More often than we care to admit, life has been difficult for brothers and sisters in Christ in the 21st century. We need Bonhoeffer's steadying hand even though he frequently felt confused and ready to fall. But grace is like that: made perfect in weakness.

The Revd Canon Dr Rhys Bezzant is Senior Lecturer at Ridley College, Visiting Fellow of Yale Divinity School and Director of the Jonathan Edwards Center Australia.

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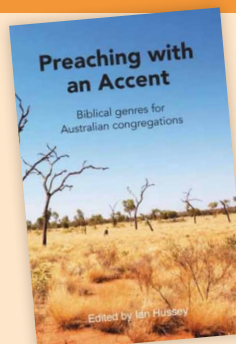


Faith and Courage: Praying with Mandela, by Thabo Makgoba (SPCK, 2019)

reviewed by Richard Prideaux

Thabo Makgoba is not the perfect priest and he is not without selfish ambition. He has successes and failures. Some things he is good at become so huge and burdensome he has to give them

up. This is in fact the honest story of a faithful priest who simply saw needs and tried to help. Powerful indeed is his call for Anglicans to maintain unity along with their current deep divisions.



Preaching with an Accent: Biblical genres for Australian congregations, edited by Ian Hussey (Morling Press, 2019)

reviewed by Bishop Paul Barker

For those tempted to channel hop for great preaching around the globe, beware. Your greatest need, not least in time of lockdown and social distancing, is to be with your own congregation being fed, challenged and comforted by your own vicar or pastor who knows you and loves you. And for those of you who do preach, do not be discouraged. This helpful book will refresh and challenge you again to preach that powerful word of God, the double-edged sword that pierces to the core of our being.