

GTW Winter 2021

Discipleship According to Bonhoeffer

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Rev. Michael Thornton

First Presbyterian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado

GTW Content Blog: <https://my.firstprescos.org/growtogether>

## Week 8: Identity (Life in Participatory Relationship)

### Weekly Devo:

#### Psalm 47

1 Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.	6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.
2 For the Lord Most High is awesome, the great King over all the earth.	7 For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise.
3 He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet.	8 God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.
4 He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.	9 The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted.
5 God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.	

#### 2 Peter 1:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:

<sup>2</sup> Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

<sup>3</sup> His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.<sup>4</sup> Through these he has given us his very great

and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup> and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup> and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. <sup>8</sup> For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, <sup>11</sup> and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## Introduction to the theme of “Identity” within Bonhoeffer’s Ethics

- The culmination of Bonhoeffer’s ministry found him deeply committed to searching out coherency within the Christian worldview regarding responsible conduct against the dark complexity of sin that permeates earth. Although early in his Christian walk Bonhoeffer activated that the Christian ethic must include a strong stance for pacifism, Bonhoeffer wrote most of his ethical essays under the tyranny of the Third Reich, by which time he had resolved to not only comply, but play a central role in the assignation of Hitler.<sup>1</sup>
- By primarily examining Bonhoeffer’s pivotal work *Ethics*, one is offered a response to this dark complexity that rejects any attempt to construct an ethic that does not recognize and take into account the difficulty of living responsibly under the curse of the fall.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the primary sources to hear Bonhoeffer defend the pacifist position see his letter to his friend Elizabeth Zinn on January 27, 1936 where Bonhoeffer states that "Christian pacifism (... is ...) utterly self-evident." Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935-1937*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 14. Fortress Press, 2013.

- Bonhoeffer offers a compelling response to Christian ethics that is built around
  - **a living relationship with Jesus Christ, focused primarily on the reconciliation of God with his people, empowered by the Holy Spirit,**
    - which alone produces *true responsible action*.
- In order to understand responsible action according to Bonhoeffer it is imperative to define three key terms: identity, freedom, and responsibility, these three terms will lay the framework for our final three weeks together. Tonight we will look at the first term, *identity*.

### **Life in Relationship: Toward Identity**

For Bonhoeffer, *relationship* is a term that encompasses all one experiences regarding oneself, one's neighbor, and God.

#### ***Relationship to oneself***

Relationship with oneself begins with understanding oneself as an individual who is called by God to respond to God without the help of another. Bonhoeffer stresses that “Christ makes everyone he calls into an individual” and the resulting need for every individual to heed the instruction given by the author of Hebrews who implores each and every believer to look to Christ, the founder and finisher of one's faith.<sup>2</sup>

What arises is a deep connection between creature and Creator, self and Savior.

The individual rejoices that instead of being left in isolation she is joined to Christ who binds the individual to Himself and thereby to the entire cosmos.<sup>3</sup> This relationship of individual to the Father through Christ as the only bridge to **reconciliation** leaves the individual in a posture similar to Abraham when God demands complete obedience, the purity of his heart.

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Discipleship and the Individual” in *Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works—Reader's Edition* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2015), 59. Scripture cross reference, Hebrews 12:2. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2001, Crossway, 2011 text edition.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Heritage and Decay” in *Ethics*, 62.

Awe and fear mark the beginning posture of an individual who understands his relationship before a holy God, an individual who alone is powerless and whose sole bridge is Jesus Christ.

***Relationship to one's neighbor***

Perhaps nowhere more clearly than in his work *Life Together* does Bonhoeffer demonstrate the necessity of the individual and the neighbor coming together as a key ingredient for the flourishing of life as God intended.

The individual must now recognize and accept

*ownership*

of his involvement in the community.

Individual she may be, but she is also a part of the whole. “No man is an island” is the way John Donne pens the idea that directly connects the individual to the community. Bonhoeffer writes,

“Every member serves the whole body,  
contributing either to its health or to its ruin,  
for we are members of one body not only when we want to be,  
but in our whole existence.”<sup>4</sup>

- Bonhoeffer

The good or ill an individual commits or refrains from committing triggers a sequence of events that affects the community, perhaps without end. “The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt” is how Frederick Buechner explains this relationship between individual and neighbor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The Day Alone” in *Life Together*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, “Pontifex” in *The Hungering Dark* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 1969), 46.

### *The believing neighbor and the unbelieving neighbor*

- Because they are the body of Christ, the relationship with the believer is marked primarily by trust, commitment, and the affection that is natural within this intimate relationship of being brought into right relationship with God by Christ.
- The relationship with the nonbelieving neighbor, however, is a relationship marked by “a prayer of most intimate love... for peace for these... disturbed and destroyed souls, a prayer for the same love and peace that we ourselves enjoy.”<sup>6</sup>

A healthy starting place for Christian ethics lies in recognizing that the Christian has the opportunity to strive toward the goal of reuniting these “disturbed and destroyed” souls with their Maker.

*Reconciliation between humanity and God—  
humans becoming truly human again—  
is at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s ethic.*

### *Relationship with God*

There is nothing more central to Bonhoeffer’s ethic than understanding that **Jesus is the God-man**: the mediator, the bridge, and the reconciler. The individual is linked to his neighbor and to God through the mediator Jesus Christ. This becomes *the theme of formation in Christ* in Bonhoeffer’s writing. Jesus saves the individual by *forming* the believer back into right relationship before the Father.

“Do not be conformed to this world,  
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...”

- The Apostle Paul

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<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The Sermon on the Mount” in *Discipleship*, 113.

This question of form is crucial for Bonhoeffer and his conclusion is that the only form one can take that corresponds to the reality desired by God is the form of Christ, by which **the individual is reconciled with the Father.**

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If the end goal of Christian ethics is the reconciliation of individuals to God through Jesus, then “the starting point of Christian ethics is the body of Christ, the form of Christ in the form of the church, the formation of the church according to the form of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> The relationship of the individual to God is a relationship of reconciliation where “through Christ, God has loved, judged, and reconciled the world.” This idea of reconciliation “is the word on which everything turns.”<sup>8</sup>

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From the right understanding of **relationship** the believer is placed on a foundation from where she can move in responsible action. The foundation is a three-fold platform of understanding one’s identity as an individual, a member of the whole of humanity, and a creation of God. The believer understands that she is an individual who alone bears the weight of **personal responsibility**. She further understands that she is a human being **belonging to humanity**, a vast network of individuals linked together to their core. The individual is finally **in relationship with God through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ in whom the individual finds her true form** and is connected intimately with God and humanity. From the right understanding of relationship comes the beginning of understanding one’s identity. Through identity the context for freedom is established, which is where we will turn next week.

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<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Ethics as Formation” in *Ethics*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, “159. To Eberhard Bethge: June 6, 1944” in *Letters and Papers From Prison*, 413.

## Reflection & Growth (Small Group Prompts)

- Bonhoeffer offers a rich definition of our identity by establishing that we must understand ourselves as 1) individuals, 2) in community, and 3) reconciled to the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit. How does Bonhoeffer's understanding of *identity* correspond or conflict from how you live day-to-day. In other words:
  - Do you take *personal responsibility* for your actions?
  - Do you embrace *belonging* to those around you, both the saved and the yet-saved neighbor?
  - Do you view your union with Christ as a starting point for the in-breaking of the *reconciliation of God* in this city?

End your time in prayer, praying that the very Spirit of God would lead each of us in our walk, making us clear light and useful salt to everyone we meet.

## Final Reminders

**After this call: Do you have a small group video call to join?**

- Next Week:
  - Ethics: Freedom (Entering into the Reconciliatory Work of Christ)
    - See Syllabus for plenty of reading opportunities