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A Hope for the Church of Christ: The Influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Seminary at Findenwalde on the Church in Nazi Germany, 1935-1940

Gerri Beal
Whitworth University

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**A HOPE FOR THE CHURCH OF CHRIST:
THE INFLUENCE OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S SEMINARY AT
FINKENWALDE ON THE CHURCH IN NAZI GERMANY, 1935-1940**

A thesis presented for the degree of
Master of Arts in Theology at Whitworth University

Gerri Beal

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Introduction

The rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930's, and a subtle, self-promoting heresy from within the German church imperiled the existence of the German Evangelical Church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized and understood both threats, and believed the latter to be even more dangerous to the church than the threat Nazism itself. The purpose of this paper is to show that Bonhoeffer saw that the church in Germany was failing to answer the internal threat posed to the German Evangelical Church by the heretical teachings that were inherent in the "German Christian Movement". We will argue that he determined to stem this dangerous tide of error by sound Biblical teaching and Christian living at the new Preachers' Seminary at Finkenwalde that he was asked to direct.

Before the Nazi government came to power under Adolf Hitler in 1933, Bonhoeffer had completed a highly successful academic program at University of Berlin, where he completed his doctoral dissertation in 1927 at age 21. Although he was a popular lecturer at the university, he felt drawn to the pastoral ministry instead of an academic career. He spent a year as an associate pastor in Barcelona, Spain, and another as a pastor to youth in a church in East Berlin. During these years that he and others began seeing inroads into the affairs of the church by the government as well as the heretical teaching of the German Christians. Bonhoeffer believed that, unless resisted, these inroads would destroy the German Evangelical Church.

Chapter one examines the ideology of the German Christians to see how its beliefs differed from orthodoxy and Reformation faith. We will see how that ideology augmented the Nazi government's persecution of its Jewish citizens as well as its ability to control the church's practice. Six serious departures will be discussed that illustrate the

efforts of those two groups to distort the German Evangelical Church to the Reich Church with Hitler at its helm. Chapter one will also detail the efforts that Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, and others made in the creation of the Confessing Church and its attempts to defend the Reformation faith that had been born in their own nation. Stumbling blocks, even in the Confessing Church, of historical prejudices in Germany against Jews will become apparent to us.

Chapter two will look at the preachers' seminary at Finkenwalde, focusing on the location, the syllabus, and the structure of the program that Bonhoeffer designed. This chapter will demonstrate the importance of the Barmen Declaration in undergirding the syllabus. Special attention will be given to the daily life of the seminarians and the lectures and classes they attended. We will see how Bonhoeffer's books *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* were fundamental to his program as he trained seminarians to become pastors in the endangered church. We will gain an idea of what it was like to be a Finkenwalder – to spend five months studying and living in the place where Bonhoeffer's direction changed the definitions of the church and Christian community for those who were in training to be its pastors.

Chapter three shows how Bonhoeffer's lectures and syllabus specifically addressed the errors of the German Christians as outlined in chapter one, and as addressed in the six theses of Barmen. Bonhoeffer taught that Jesus Christ cannot be defined contrary to the Scriptural testimony to him, nor can the church be redesigned to meet the demands of new ideologies. Chapter three will also argue that Bonhoeffer's teaching was not just an academic exercise but was developed through participation in active ministry and in the daily structure of the Finkenwalde.

An epilogue will look back at Finkenwalde and consider the question not only how Bonhoeffer faced the heresy of the German Christians and their counterparts in the Nazi Party, but whether his efforts had any lasting impact from which the church of this century can learn and grow. The thesis concludes by arguing that Finkenwalde should be remembered not as a historical anomaly but as a harbinger of hope and counsel for the church today.

Chapter One

THE STATE OF THE CHURCH IN GERMANY DURING NAZI ERA

In the spring of 1935 on the windy shore of the Baltic Sea in the remote village of Zingst, twenty-four young men played soccer in the dunes. A few knew one another before they came, but most did not. One of them was to be their professor—twenty-nine year old Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They had come to prepare for church ministry under his direction and it would be like no other seminary in Germany. A few of these young men had been his students at Berlin University; they were looking forward to studying with him again but others were totally unprepared for the kind of program Bonhoeffer had planned. Bonhoeffer's plan for the seminary was born out of his disappointment and frustration with the progress of the church in Germany following the rise of the Nazi state. His hope lay in adherence to the Barmen theses of the previous year. This paper asks the question: "How was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's structure of curriculum and common life of the seminary at Finkenwalde an antidote to the errors of the German Christian Movement?"

In late 1934, the church of Jesus Christ in Germany was in a state of turmoil. Hitler was captivating the general public, and the German Christians, an anti-Semitic Protestant group, were in control of the newly constituted German Evangelical Church, referred to as the Reich Church. The Confessing Church, which emerged in response to the heresy of the German Christians, was less than year in existence, and already struggling to maintain orthodoxy. Perhaps most discouraging, the Barmen Declaration that had encouraged so many, was losing committed followers. Barmen's tenets required more courage than many possessed. Bonhoeffer, pastor and university teacher, was at that

time serving two German Lutheran congregations in London. He was given a new challenge, which was to direct a preachers' seminary for the Confessing Church. He accepted the opportunity. He knew what he wanted to do, and over the course of the next year he created a remarkable program. It was unlike any Protestant seminary in Germany at that time, requiring adherence to Barmen's theses, liturgical reading of the Scriptures, personal meditation, group prayer, and serious commitment to brotherhood. It also required courage. The seminary's program will be described in chapter two.

The critical situation that faced Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church we now call the *Kirchenkampf* or "church struggle". Disturbing rulings came from the National Socialist state but the most troubling roots were within the church of Germany itself. In his book, *The Barmen Theses, Then and Now*, Eberhard Busch says, ". . . that the church did not seriously know any longer what it really means to be *church*, to be the church of *Jesus Christ*, which belongs to him and is ruled by him."¹ We will begin in chapter one by looking at the condition of the church in Germany at that time.

Although the church struggle is most apparent during the years surrounding the Second World War, its history begins earlier. Prior to the First World War an aberrant Protestant ideology began to develop in Germany that was anti-Semitic and promoted a theory of German and Nordic superiority. It greatly increased in strength after the economic collapse and disgrace that followed the war.² Named the "German Christian Movement", it strayed from orthodox Protestant doctrine in disturbing ways. Members did not agree on everything but all possessed an intense pride in all things German and a

¹ Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses, Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2010), 50.

² Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1,2,3.

repugnance of Jews and Judaism. Their goal was to build a “*Volkskirche*”, a church based on “blood, race and soil”. Groups with similar views of national pride and racial bias joined together and the German Christian Movement became an official entity in 1932.³

German Christians, the self-designated name of the movement, from the beginning saw the church as a means of “purifying” Germany and bringing back pride of race and nation after the disgrace of the World War I and the Versailles Treaty. In her comprehensive book on the German Christian Movement, Doris Bergen writes,

I will argue that they were above all church people with their own ideas for transforming Christianity. Although twisted and offensive, the German Christian teachings reflected a fairly stable set of beliefs built around a specific understanding of the church. The German Christians intended to build a church that would exclude all those deemed impure and embrace all “true Germans” in a spiritual homeland for the Third Reich.⁴

The German Christians’ vision for the *Volkskirche*, or church of the people, was restricted to the white race and bore little resemblance to the church of Martin Luther or John Calvin. Though it was a lay and pastoral movement, some well-known professors of Christian theology at major German universities were members, including Gerhard Kittel, Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Althaus, although Althaus repented and left in 1937. Kittel removed his membership in 1933, but remained anti-Semitic.

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany and the National Socialists gained control of the Reichstag. Hitler saw an opportunity to use the belief system of the German Christians to his advantage. With Nazi help, in only a few months, German Christians gained control of the German Evangelical Church through election to

³ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 5-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

church offices. Their rapid influence was a serious threat to doctrinal purity. When the new church constitution was written in July 1933, the problem became acute. In 1934, a number of concerned pastors and scholars led by Karl Barth answered with a confessional statement, the Barmen Declaration, which reaffirmed the church's commitment to the Scriptures and confessions of the Reformation. The Confessing Church developed from Barmen. We will look further at the Confessing Church and the Barmen Declaration below.

Among the threats to Christianity in Germany, six areas of belief and practice of the German Christians and the reorganized Reich church are worthy of mention:

FIRST: Governance of the church was removed from the church's ecclesial order and increasingly given to the state (contrary to the constitution of Germany) and the Reich Church. The state sought control by isolating the German church from the rest of the Christian world through travel restrictions and misinformation.

Before September 1933, the German Evangelical Church, the *Landeskirchen*, was comprised of twenty-eight independent churches. The churches were Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, with some smaller groups. The Nazis and German Christians reorganized the *Landeskirchen* creating, a new *Reich* Church. More direct governance by the state was the result. At that time also, German Christians began ignoring requirements for baptism, communion, and other practices of Reformation doctrine. Many pastors were alarmed.⁵ Doris Bergen notes this was just the beginning.

In point of fact, however, the German Christians opened the church gates to the totalitarian state with its slogan of racially appropriate Christianity, rooted in German blood and soil. According to its guidelines at the end of 1933, "the church of the German people recognizes in the totalitarian claim of the National-socialist state God's call to family, folk and state."⁶

⁵ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 183-184, 186-188.

⁶ Busch, *Barmen Theses*, 73.

Interference in the governing authority of the church was exacerbated two years later. In December 1935, Reich Minister Hans Kerrl decided to force unification and end the struggle between the Confessing Church and the Reich Church by means of seventeen implementation decrees. He moved to dissolve the Councils of the Brethren, the governing body of the Confessing Church, promising, “. . . the church committees . . . guarantee that the Confessing Church’s vital interests are looked after.”⁷ In actual fact, as the introduction to *Theological Education at Finkenwalde* explains, the Fifth Decree issued by Kerrl on December 2nd,

. . . declared all governing and administrative institutions of the Confessing Church null and void. Specific prohibitions affected the ability to occupy pastoral positions, to examine and ordain candidates, to make pulpit proclamations, and to announce and carry out collections.⁸

Pastors were tempted to join with the committees by guarantees of a parish and a salary. Those who refused could only serve illegally and were frequently arrested and harassed by the Gestapo. Oaths of loyalty to Hitler were later required from the pulpit, and non-compliance was similarly punished. In time, collections to aid families of arrested pastors were forbidden and confiscated. Intercessory prayer in worship services for persecuted pastors was even forbidden and punished.⁹

SECOND: Contrary to Scripture and the history of Christendom, the state moved to control the membership of the German Evangelical Church, excluding Jews.

⁷ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 495-6.

⁸ H. Gaylon Barker, “Editor’s Introduction”, in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 9. (See also footnote 22, p 9).

⁹ Eric Metaxas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 308.

In April 1933, wasting no time with his new authority, Hitler passed the Aryan paragraph through the Reichstag.¹⁰ This law removed Jews, including those who were baptized church members, from public office. Jewish scholars were also removed from the faculties of the universities that were the academic seat of theology. There was painfully little reaction from German citizens. Within a year, German Christians proposed that this rule should apply to pastors, church officers, and even to membership in the church itself. Church and nation were for the *Volk*.

Bonhoeffer wrote that April, in a published essay, “The Church and the Jew”

What is at stake here is by no means the question whether our German members of congregations can still tolerate church fellowship with the Jews. It is rather the task of Christian preaching to say: here is the church, where Jew and German stand together under the Word of God; here is the proof whether a church is still a church or not.¹¹

Bonhoeffer clearly rejected the German Christians’ proposal to apply the Aryan clause to the church, but as we see in this quotation from April 1933, he made a distinction between Germans and Jewish Christians. It is surprising to hear Bonhoeffer define being German as Aryan, and failing to acknowledge that many Jewish Christians had been German for generations and indeed centuries.¹² We will revisit this issue later in this chapter.

¹⁰ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 88-93.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, Edwin Robertson, ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 229.

¹² Earlier in this same essay, Bonhoeffer discusses the Lutheran Church’s historic position that Jews were responsible for Christ’s death. “The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the ‘chosen people’, who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering . . . But the history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final home-coming of the people of Israel to its God. And this home-coming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ” (*No Rusty Swords*, 226). It is surprising to have this theologian who led the struggle for full acceptance in the church of his Jewish

In September 1933 when the Aryan clause was to be implemented in the church of the Old Prussian Union, the Pastors' Emergency League, newly instituted under the leadership of Pastor Martin Niemöller and Bonhoeffer, issued the following statement:

According to the confession of our church, the church's teaching office is bound only to the authorized vocation. The Aryan clause of the new Church Civil Service Law has given rise to a legal situation that directly contradicts this fundamental principle of the confession. This proclaims a situation that is unjust according to the confession as church law, and violates the confession.¹³

Within a month a groundswell of support was seen from other pastors and by the end of December 1933, 6000 pastors¹⁴ had joined the Pastors' Emergency League in opposition. This organization was the predecessor of the Confessing Church.

THIRD: German Christians and the Reich Church saw the church as established by people –the *Volk*—and that this *Volkskirche* would be victorious through the bravery and skill of its leaders and people.

This humanistic view, reminiscent of the Wagnerian heroic myths, saw the German *Volk* creating a new world and a new church in the twentieth century that would bring in a better society through the leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, in part by eliminating those people who were considered unfit to be part of that society. Emanuel Hirsch wrote in *The Essence of Christianity* in 1939,

We set our entire power of life and spirit on this, to bring our *Volk* and the Reich into a healthy, life-protecting order, and to create for them a durable and

Christian brothers, articulate their guilt in this way. He does not criticize that position in this essay, but in November 1938, when his students suggested that *Kristallnacht* was a reflection of that curse, Bonhoeffer strongly rejected that idea, saying that it was “utter violence”. He added, “If the synagogues burn today, the churches will be on fire tomorrow” (Maltsauch, Gottfried, in, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Wolf Dieter Zimmerman, Ronald Gregor Smith, eds. (London: Williams Collins 1973), 150.).

¹³ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 309.

¹⁴ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2010), 138.

honorable existence in the circle of the white ruling peoples, to which God has entrusted the responsibility for the history of humanity.¹⁵

The church was to be their creation. A belief in natural theology said man had enough divine spirit to comprehend what was good and to achieve it. Though contrary to the doctrine of grace of God in Scripture and Reformation thought,¹⁶ Hirsch seemed to think Germans were entrusted with saving the church where God in Christ had failed.

The Barmen Declaration of May 1934 recognized and rejected this plan of German Christians to design a church, as Hirsch states, by their “entire power of life and spirit”,

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.¹⁷

The interference of the Reich Church consisted, for the most part, in administrative attempts to shut down the Confessing Church, but theological errors of the German Christians were at the bottom of the problem, including the distaste for the doctrine of sin.

FOURTH: The German Christians dismissed the idea of sin and, consequently, the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone.

German Christians found the doctrine of sin repugnant, and called their view “positive Christianity”, based on the idea of “purification and liberation”,¹⁸ words Hitler used in his description of the Reich Church. On November 11, 1933, in an ill-conceived speech at the Berlin Sports Palace, Berlin Nazi leader Reinhold Krause,¹⁹ after demanding that the Old Testament be jettisoned from the canon, “. . . demanded removal

¹⁵ Emmanuel Hirsch, in Hubert G. Locke, *Searching for God in Godforsaken Times and Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 35.

¹⁶ Busch, *Barmen*, 28, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 158.

¹⁹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 335.

from the New Testament of an ‘*exaggerated* emphasis on the crucified Christ’.”²⁰ Some German Christian theologians distanced themselves from his remarks and the German Christian Movement.²¹ Others, however, took up the challenge and attacked the notion of human sinfulness as a Jewish addition to the true Gospel.²²

In a 1934 declaration, the Protestant faculty of theology in Breslau denounced emphasis on sin as inimical to the needs of the people’s church. Blasting Barthian theology, Judaism, and foreign foes in one rancorous breath, the Breslau group announced that Germans could not tolerate a religion based on the concept of sin.²³

Ludwig Müller, elected bishop of the reorganized German Evangelical Church (Reich Church) in 1933, agreed with the faculty at Breslau in his statement, “The Lord God requires no more than that man should realize his error and do better next time. At the last judgment God will ask each individual whether he has tried to be a respectable chap and to do his duty toward his fellow countrymen.”²⁴ He also was quoted as saying, “The voice of the people is the voice of God.”²⁵

FIFTH: German Christians did not recognize the Jesus Christ of the Bible as the one Incarnate God and Savior.

A failure to recognize the fallen state of humanity, compounded with the Nazi view of the superiority of the Aryan peoples, required a new picture of Jesus Christ. German Christians failed to see the Jesus Christ of history and revealed in the Bible as the One Human Face of God. They saw in Germany a new savior for the day, Adolf Hitler.²⁶ Their confidence in Aryan strength and superiority made a belief in justification by grace

²⁰ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 158.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

²² Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 158, 174.

²³ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁴ Franz Hildebrandt “Election Pamphlet in Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 212.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁶ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 159.

both unnecessary and unattractive. German Christians worked to de-Judaize the New Testament and blot out the Jewish identity of Jesus. In order to retain him as a possible hero, they needed to remove any of his teaching that related to the Old Testament Scriptures. Thus they were left with a man of their own making. Some claimed Jesus could not be Jewish because he opposed the Jews.²⁷ Others said he was a Nordic exile in Palestine. Some supported the Gnostic view that he was not actually human.²⁸ August Jaeger, State Commissar for the churches in Prussia, went so far as to say, “The appearance of Jesus in human history is in its ultimate significance a phenomenon of a Nordic character”²⁹ The Biblical view of Jesus was not significant. German Christians had a savior for today that could stand by Jesus as a near equal; the new heroic savior that would save Germany was Adolf Hitler.

SIXTH: The German Christians and the Reich Church denied the authority of the Scripture as the revealed word of God

All errors of the German Christians and the Nazis are symptomatic of their view of the Scripture and their preference for a new revelation from man, not God. The failure to see Biblical Scriptures as the authoritative revelation of God is apparent from the above errors. This failure opened the door for additional heresy.

Nazi ideology and German Christians claimed that “nature and history” were equal or superior to the Bible.³⁰ Natural development, achievement, and progression of history had shown that the German race was the epitome of God’s design. This long dreamed of *Volkskirche* took precedence over the Biblical word. That word said the church was

²⁷ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 155-157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

²⁹ Hildebrandt in “Election Pamphlet in *No Rusty Swords*, 209.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

God's design in which he had made peace through Christ between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2: 11-22).³¹ German Christians believed God had revealed Aryan superiority by a new revelation that was as authoritative as Scripture. As Müller said, "The voice of the people is the voice of God."

The Old Testament necessarily had to be discredited. This was, of course, not a new idea, for in the second century, Marcion dismissed the Old Testament from the canon of Scripture. German Christians, however, did not wish to point back to that heresy, but to see this as a *unique idea* of their making.³² Confirming their prejudice were other German scholars. Even Adolf von Harnack, Bonhoeffer's teacher and mentor (who died before Hitler came to power), thought the Old Testament was archaic.³³ Consequently, most German Christians denied the canonicity of the Old Testament.

Nor did the New Testament escape their negative scrutiny. Antipathy toward Jewish texts extended to the roots of Christianity in the Old Testament and to the ancestry of Jesus Himself. From Doris Bergen we learn,

Nevertheless, although neither biblical evidence nor logic was on their side, the German Christians remained steadfast on two points: Jesus was not a Jew, they insisted, and the essence of the Gospels' message was hatred towards Jews.³⁴

Hirsch, a Göttingen professor affiliated with the German Christians, argued against the Jewish ancestry of Jesus in his 1939 work, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The nature of Christianity).³⁵

³¹ *Master Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1981), 1211.

³² Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 143-44.

³³ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

Dismissing the validity of the teaching of Scripture was not new in Germany, either. In 1911, Albert Schweitzer said of the Enlightenment scholars of the 19th century,

The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma. Afterwards when it was freed from this ‘pathos’, it sought to present the historical Jesus in a form intelligible to its own time.³⁶

German Christians avoided any firm doctrine. We have seen above the denial of the universal fallen state of mankind, the love of God for *all mankind*, the denial of the orthodox canon of Scripture and of God’s unique revelation in Jesus Christ. For German Christians, the confessions contained doctrine, ostensibly those we just listed, not appropriate for the modern world. It is apparent from the previous deviations from orthodox Christianity that German Christians denied the basic tenets of the Reformation, *Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Christos, Sola Scriptura*.

Recognizing German Christians’ theology, Bonn professor Karl Barth, mentor of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and major author of the Barmen Declaration, wrote in 1933,

Our protest against the false doctrine German-Christians cannot begin only at the “Aryan paragraph”, at the rejection of the Old Testament, at the Arianism of the German-Christian Christology, at the naturalism and Pelagianism of the German Christian doctrines of justification and sanctification, at the idolizing of the state in German-Christian ethics. It must be directed fundamentally against the fact (which is the source of all individual errors) that, beside the Holy Scriptures as the unique source of revelation, the German-Christians affirm the German nationhood, its history and its contemporary political situation as a second source of revelation, and thereby betray themselves to be believers in “another God”.³⁷

It is difficult for the twenty-first century person with the retrospective view of the Holocaust to understand how Germans could have accepted this religious system. Why did so few voices speak against the injustice of the Aryan paragraph?

³⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Dover, 2005), 4.

³⁷ Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 17-18.

It is important to remember the economic collapse and struggle that followed the First World War as well as the threat of atheistic Bolshevism that loomed at their eastern border. These fears occupied their minds daily. Hitler was the hero who rescued Germany and would restore her pride. The desire to believe Hitler's power to determine Germany's future success was demonstrated in the fall of 1933 when he withdrew Germany from the League of Nations. Martin Niemöller, founder of the Pastors' Emergency League and Confessing Church pastor, sent Hitler a telegram of congratulations that was signed by most of the members of the Pastor's Emergency League.³⁸ They were patriots who separated the Nazi political or military decisions from the voice of Christ in the Gospels and how that voice called the church in Germany to respond. Prior to the more drastic inroads to church authority of 1934, there were few who could see the seriousness of these issues. Two who did were Karl Barth of Bonn and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote his grandmother, Julia Tafel, in late 1933,

It is becoming increasingly clear to me that what we're going to get is a big, popular, national church whose nature cannot any longer be reconciled with Christianity and that we must be prepared to enter upon entirely new paths which we will have to tread.³⁹

In July of 1933, Ludwig Müller, a close associate of Hitler, was elected Bishop of the new Reich Church. Alarmed by the choice, groups of theologians, although not without confusion, began work on the return to confessional Christianity. In August 1933, Bonhoeffer, Herman Sasse, Friedrich von Bodelschwingh and Georg Merz met at Bethel to draft a new confession. They began with "joyful collaboration". But the Bethel confession proved to be a terrible disappointment at the time. When sent to major

³⁸ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 325.

³⁹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 302.

theologians for review, it returned so watered down that Bonhoeffer would not sign it.⁴⁰

Some of sections penned by Bonhoeffer on the issue of Jews were among those the scholars rejected.⁴¹

Bonhoeffer was the first church scholar to publically address this issue and, although he seemed ambiguous in not seeing Jews as “fellow Germans”, he clearly considered the Aryan clause incompatible with the church. In fact, he said failure of the church to correct this created a “*statis confessionis*”.⁴² He quotes Martin Luther,

There is no other rule or test for who is a member of the people of God or the church of Christ . . . than this: where there is a little band of those who accept the word of this Lord, teach it purely and confess it against those who persecute it, and for that reason suffer what is their due. Luther on Psalm 110, v. 3⁴³

The lack of clarity on the German identity of Jews who had been in the country for so long is inconsistent with the facts. They were German citizens. The failure to receive Jewish believers as full members of the church, was symptomatic of the cultural bias that existence even within the Confessing Church. Martin Niemöller and the Young Reformation Group, in their confession attempt, defended the church’s autonomy from the state, denying the Aryan clause use in the church. Unfortunately, they also chose to

⁴⁰ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 303.

⁴¹ In the November 1933 draft of the confession, Bonhoeffer included the Lutheran position placing blame for Christ’s death on the Jews. He very clearly countered, however, with the mutual guilt of all peoples, saying, “We reject the false doctrine that would make the crucifixion of Christ the fault of the Jewish people alone as though other peoples and other races had not crucified him. All races and peoples, even the mightiest, share in the guilt for his death and become guilty of it every day anew, when they commit outrage against the spirit of grace” (*Berlin, 1932-1933*, Vol. 12, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 398). It is also important to note again that by November 1938, Bonhoeffer appears to have clearly rejected the curse on the Jews in the events of the time (note 12, of this paper and quotation below in this paper).

⁴² *Berlin 1932-1933: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* Vol. 12, Larry Rasmussen, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 371.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, 370.

affirm God “. . . leading in ethnocentric renewal of our Fatherland.” They went so far as “. . . expecting their Jewish brothers to have restraint . . .” in their expectations.⁴⁴ More coherently, Karl Barth and Wilhelm Niesel worked with the Reformed Church of Bonn on a new confession in January 1934. This document greatly influenced the Barmen Declaration that followed in May.⁴⁵

As we consider these failures, it is important to look forward twelve years from 1933. In 1945, the World Council of Churches graciously asked to meet in Germany. Before they could welcome this offer, Martin Niemöller, Otto Dibelius, and others courageously confessed the church’s failure during the Nazi years. It is called the Stuttgart Declaration. Many Germans felt the confession unfair.⁴⁶ But Niemöller, Dibelius, Hans Asmussen, and Wilhelm Niesel were adamant.⁴⁷

But in the fall of 1933, deeply disappointed with the failure of the Bethel Confession, Bonhoeffer decided to accept a pastorate of two German congregations in London. Writing to Karl Barth from England, he explains,

I was offered at the same time a pastorate in the East of Berlin; my election was certain. Then came the Aryan Clauses in Prussia and I knew I could not accept the pastorate I longed for in this particular neighborhood without giving up my attitude of unconditional opposition to the church, without making myself

⁴⁴ Busch, *Barmen*, 2-3, 92.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁶ Wilhelm Niemöller, “Niemöller Archives” in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, eds., Franklin H. Little, Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 54.

⁴⁷ “. . . Through us infinite wrong was brought upon many peoples and nations. What we have often witnessed to in our communities we confess now in the name of the whole church: Indeed for long years we have fought in the name of Jesus Christ against the Spirit (sic) which found its fearful expression in the National Socialist rule of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not having confessed more boldly, prayed more faithfully, believed more joyfully and loved more ardently . . .”(“Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt” in Klaus Scholder, *A Requiem for Hitler*, (London: SCM Press, 1989), 122.).

untrustworthy to my people from the start and without betraying my solidarity with the Jewish Christian pastors—my closest friend is one of them . . . ⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer further expresses his disappointment in the same letter,

I felt I was incomprehensibly in radical opposition to all my friends, that my views of matters were taking me more and more into isolation, although I was and remained in the closest personal relationship with these men – and all that made me anxious, made me uncertain. . . . and I saw no reason why I should see things more correctly, better than so many able and good pastors, to whom I looked up –and so I thought that it was probably time to go into the wilderness for a while . . . ⁴⁹

Because he left at this point to pastor the London congregations, Bonhoeffer missed the opportunity to participate in what has been called a miracle of cooperation and confession. While he was in London, the next year under the leadership of Karl Barth, a group of Lutherans, Reformed and United church leaders met in the city of Barmen to dispute the errors infecting the church by addressing those issues directly and answering them with the confessions and the Scriptures.

Bonhoeffer continued the struggle for orthodoxy in London, and a year later accepted the call from the leadership of the Confessing Church to return to Germany to direct a Preachers' seminary. When he returned, he came prepared to implement the Barmen Declaration in this new seminary at Finkenwalde, not just in theory, but with a structure that would help bring the theses of Barmen into genuine practice of the Reformation faith they espoused.

We turn in chapter two to the structure of the Finkenwalde community and in chapter three we will consider how Bonhoeffer's seminary responded critically to the errors of the German Christian movement.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 235.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 235-6.

Chapter Two

THE SEMINARY AT FINKENWALDE

On a June day in 1935, the quiet that had enveloped the dusty old two-story building at Finkenwalde was interrupted by footsteps on the creaking stairs. The silence was pleasantly disturbed as several young men looked hopefully into the rooms that had been empty for two years. This would be home for the next four months. The twenty-six candidates for ministry who had begun their seminary education at the Baltic youth camp were now able to leave the cramped and cold cabins and move into their permanent building. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was happily in their midst, planning how this building would meet their needs.

This day was a culmination of much planning from the Councils of the Brethren of the Confessing Church for the preachers' seminary in the Berlin Brandenburg district. Bonhoeffer was to direct one of five seminaries established by the new Confessing Church in 1934 as reaction to the reorganized German Evangelical Church dominated by Nazi leadership and German Christians. As we saw in chapter one, in 1933 demands were placed on churches of Germany contrary to Biblical teaching and the Reformation Confessions-- even contrary to the constitution of the nation, which itself forbade interference with church governance. Pastors and theologians who had tried other means to stem this tide found these newest laws intolerable and began a movement to restore Biblical adherence to the church. Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, Otto Dibelius, Karl Barth, and Hans Asmussen, among others, were determined to make a clear delineation between the new Reich Church and the genuine church of Christ. As mentioned above, two major outcomes proceeded from this understanding: The Barmen Declaration

¹ and the Dahlem Synod. ² The Barmen declaration of May 19, 1934 contained six theological statements that listed the errors of the Reich Church and declared commitment to the confessions of the Reformation. Barmen was followed in July by the Dahlem Synod, whose purpose was to form an ecclesiastical framework for the church based the theological positions of Barmen. These two declarations brought about the creation of the Confessing Church. The official governing body of the Confessing Church was named the Councils of the Brethren. Reacting to these events, the Reich Church authorities closed the preachers' seminaries in the Synods of the Old Prussian Union that approved Barmen and Dahlem. The Councils of the Brethren then needed to establish preachers' seminaries to train pastors for the Confessing Church. They established five programs in the Old Prussian Union; Elberfeld, Bielefeld, Naumburg, Bloestau and Finkenwalde, each located in the synod it would serve. All were essentially illegal from the beginning.³ Besides these five programs, other Confessing Church schools existed at Wuppertal, Bethel, Berlin and Ilsenburg. Over 1000 students and seminarians were eventually under the care of the Confessing Church.⁴

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was recommended to direct the Berlin Brandenburg Synod seminary by Confessing Church Pastor Gerhard Jacobi. Wilhelm Niesel of the Council

¹ Dale Paulsen, "The Barmen Declaration" in *The Barmen Declaration and the Church Struggle* (Jamestown, ND: Jamestown University, 1987), i-v.

² Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 164-167.

³ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 491.

⁴ Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 185.

of the Brethren of the Old Prussian Union agreed with the choice.⁵ Both men respected his theological work although they did not know his plans for the seminary.⁶

This district included Berlin, the seat of the Nazi Government, so the seminary needed to be a distance away to avoid contact. Finding a suitable property was difficult but availability of a church camp at Zingst on a spit in the Baltic Sea made it possible to start the program on time in April. By late spring, the old manor house at Finkenwalde, convenient to rail lines, near Stettin in Pomerania, was available. The two months of operating the seminary program at Zingst on the Baltic proved to be a good place to begin and *esprit de corps* developed among the men. The complete curriculum began in earnest at Zingst, but Bonhoeffer often conducted classes on the dunes and encouraged swimming and beach walks for exercise. The move to Finkenwalde, located in a wooded area near an estuary and river, was accomplished in late June. The manor house itself was large enough but somewhat stark. Since it had previously housed a school closed by the government, it included a large dormitory room, a gymnasium, one other large room and smaller rooms. The ordinands slept in the dormitory and the gymnasium became a chapel and refectory. The last large room became library, general gathering place and music room with two grand pianos—one was Bonhoeffer's. In the first year, Bonhoeffer's personal books made up most of the theological library. Three smaller rooms became classrooms but none of the rooms was equipped with even the most basic necessities such as furniture, bedding, curtains, or cooking tools of any kind. The

⁵ Wilhelm Niesel, "From Keelson to Principal of a Seminary" in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Wolf Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, eds., (London: Fontana Books, 1973), 145.

⁶ Gerhardt Jacobi, "Drawn Toward Suffering" in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 74.

Councils of the Brethren of the one-year old Confessing Church had few financial resources, so it was up to the first group of ordinands and their director to make it functional and livable. Many letters were written and Confessing Churches and families responded warmly with financial gifts. Desks, chairs, and tables arrived—even a suitcase full of household utensils. Leather chairs were given for the music room and library. Curtains were sewn and delivered. When it was discovered that even food would be in short supply, more letters were sent. Fresh produce, baked goods and meats came from families in the surrounding countryside-- including a live pig delivered with a tag, “For Pastor Bonhoeffer”!⁷ Even with this sacrificial help, their food budget was very tight and meals were often quite plain.

The Participants: Ordinands and Staff

Bonhoeffer’s assistant director was Pastor Wilhelm Rott. He was a fellow enthusiastic follower of Karl Barth but unlike Bonhoeffer a member of the Reformed Church rather than the Lutheran Church. Rott and Bonhoeffer worked well together, not allowing their theological differences to be overly important.⁸ They encouraged lively but respectful open discussion. Mrs. Struwe was housekeeper-cook, but a lot of the household work would be the responsibility of the seminarians themselves. An important part of the staff after the first session was the House of the Brethren that will be discussed below. For Finkenwalde’s first term that spring of 1935, seminarians came from urban and rural areas with both Lutheran and Reformed backgrounds. Former university students of Bonhoeffer’s from Berlin were in this class. Others came from towns in the

⁷ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 427.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 424.

Berlin-Brandenburg Synod. Eberhard Bethge, who would become Bonhoeffer's close friend and assistant, was in the first class. Other names of the first class include Winfried Maechler, Joachim Kanitz, Albrecht Schönherr, Johannes Goebel, Horst Lekszas, Friedrich Onnasch, Wolfgang Schrader, Gerhard Vibrans, Wolfhard Danicke, and Wolfgang Dell.

The Community Life at Finkenwalde

It was not the curriculum that surprised the seminarians when they arrived at Zingst in April but rather the general atmosphere and daily routine established by their director. The syllabus was comparable to that of the other four Confessing Church seminaries. But Bonhoeffer had returned to Germany from visiting three monasteries near London with a structure for the seminary that was unlike the others. It was based on communal living, common worship, and focused personal use of the Bible.⁹ This was the Finkenwalde community that young men would enter each of the five semesters from 1935-1937. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann who was in the third group remembers.

To arrive at these surroundings was a shock for us. Most of us came from 'solid' families, where everything was laid on. Now we were thrown into a makeshift existence where we found little of what we were accustomed to. When this external shock had been more or less overcome, we experienced the inner shock. We were pressed into a hard order of life.¹⁰

That hard order of life began and ended with group prayer services that included a regular liturgical schedule. Psalms were read in rotation; each Psalm repeated often for a week until it was familiar. This was followed by a hymn, which would also be repeated for a few days. Next, a chapter of the Old Testament would be read, often chosen by a

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, Edwin H. Robertson, ed., (London: William Collins Ltd. 1966), 29-33.

¹⁰ Zimmermann, "Finkenwalde" in *I knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 107.

seminarian, followed by a set verse of a hymn that might be sung by the group for several weeks. Then a New Testament passage, again chosen by a seminarian, would be read.

Intercessory prayer followed. In the early weeks when intercessory prayer was an uncomfortable experience, Bonhoeffer was often the only one to pray aloud. The prayer session ended with the Lord's Prayer said in unison, followed by another hymn.¹¹

After the morning session of worship and prayer, the group would eat breakfast together. Following breakfast, Bonhoeffer would give each man a passage from Luther's Bible on which to meditate for half an hour, repeating it for a week. This was an unfamiliar discipline and some balked at the practice, but Bonhoeffer was adamant and it remained an integral part of the program. Some did learn to appreciate meditation and they received texts for meditation from their director until his arrest in 1943.¹²

For many of us that half hour remained a burden to the end. But it taught all of us that a Biblical word is more than a 'subject' that can be handled *ad libitum*. A text which had been meditated on can no longer be dissected into different sources and layers. The power of the word, just as it is transmitted, is only felt by him who bows before that word.¹³

After the half hour of meditation Bonhoeffer or Rott would lecture on one or more parts of the syllabus. Lunch would follow that. Another unexpected policy was a two-hour rest in the afternoon and lights out with silence after the evening prayers! This last direction was probably due to all twenty to twenty-five young men sleeping in one large room. Lecture and discussion continued in the afternoon. The hours after dinner could include games, table tennis, outdoor sports, walks in the woods. Music was important to Bonhoeffer and to many of the ordinands, so singing and piano concerts were common.

¹¹ Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 180.

¹² Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 464-5.

¹³ Zimmermann, "Finkenwalde" in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 108.

The day often ended with enthusiastic discussions about the subjects of the day. Conversation also centered on the current struggles of the Confessing Church of which they were well informed because of Bonhoeffer's continued involvement. He often brought the seminarians with him to synods and other events including an ecumenical conference and encouraged their participation.¹⁴ From Wilhelm Rott,

Thus for two years, mostly after lunch or before making the round through the 'halls' of the seminary, 'Brother Dietrich', who always had time for his brethren sat on the steps of small stairway which led to the inspector's room. The picture is unforgettable: the small wooden staircase, the man sitting on it with crossed legs . . . He had been in Berlin yesterday; he told us of it. Late in the evening when he came home, he gave those of us who waited for him an exciting report of the deviations and embroilments of that time of church committees, of spiritual and worldly affairs, politics of the Church and of the State, about those who stood firm, those who wavered and those who fell.¹⁵

The last hour of the day repeated the prayer service with which the day began and was followed by quiet. The weekends differed in that Bonhoeffer might preach during the prayer service on Saturday. On Sunday they worshipped together and were joined by members of the local community. No class work was done on Sunday and Sabbath was taken seriously. For Bonhoeffer that meant music, walks, outdoor games and sports.

Good relationships among ordinands and with their director were crucial to the spiritual discipline. Bonhoeffer's rule was to not speak about a brother in any way, positive or negative, outside of that person's presence and to ask forgiveness for any lapse. It was hard to follow, but mattered when preparing for worship and especially before communion. Bonhoeffer referred to Jesus' words, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you,

¹⁴ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 543.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Rott, "Something Always Occurred to Him" in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 133.

leave your offering there before the altar and go your way and first be reconciled to your brother...”(Matt. 5:23-24).¹⁶ (Interestingly, there doesn’t appear to have been any serious conflict between the Lutheran and Reformed views of communion during the time at Finkenwalde.)

He said if we wished to be free, we would have to make a clean breast of the grudges we bore one another So on this evening before communion, we went to see one another and spoke of the many grievances stored up in the last few weeks. It was a great surprise to realize how we had hurt the other person without intention . . . Now we knew what it meant to consider other people. The atmosphere was pure again and we could go to communion together without bearing a grudge against anyone among us.¹⁷

The relationship among the men and their director, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was warm but not casual. He preferred to be called “*Bruder Bonhoeffer*” rather than “*Herr Director*”, as was customary, but he was definitely the leader. He expected respect that to some of the men felt too much like obedience. He was caring, but not overly casual.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer encouraged a further more serious step towards genuine common life among his seminarians. Though it was not a requirement, he urged each man to find another to whom he could confess and be accountable on a regular basis. Bonhoeffer elucidates the benefits of this in *Life Together*.¹⁹ “Where sin is hated, admitted, forgiven, there the break with the past is made.”²⁰ It was a shocking “Catholic” idea to some, but others made it a part of their lives.

¹⁶ *Masters Study Bible: New American Standard Translation* (Nashville: Holman, 1981), 993.

¹⁷ Zimmermann, “Finkenwalde” in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 109.

¹⁸ Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 179.

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper, 1954), 110-114.

²⁰ Edwin Robertson, *The Shame and the Sacrifice* (New York: Collier, 1988), 126.

The ordinands were expected to keep their personal spaces tidy. Occasionally a young man would be embarrassed to learn that Bonhoeffer himself had made his bed for him when he had neglected to do so. The same principle of responsibility and consideration would apply to helping with household chores. Sharing the housekeeping both added to a sense of community as well as relieved costs when they operated on a very low budget!²¹

The Syllabus

The syllabus at Finkenwalde was similar to all the seminaries in Confessing Churches, containing all the necessary preparation for a new pastor, including homiletics, pastoral care, catechetical studies, ministry and church, community issues and confessional writings. Seminarians finished their training at the preachers' seminaries prepared to lead in the sacraments, to lead communion, baptize as well as marry, catechize young people and conduct funerals. In one aspect the syllabus was unique, however, and this included a series of lectures by Bonhoeffer on "Discipleship". By late 1937, after the Gestapo closed the seminary, Bonhoeffer had developed it into his widely-known book, *Discipleship*. The lectures were in two sets covering a period of weeks. Remarkable in their content, the lectures reflected Bonhoeffer's convictions on the church and Biblical authority, asking the seminarians to take seriously Jesus' command to follow him in obedience. Teaching the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer says, "The only proper response to this word that Jesus brings us from eternity is simply to do it. Jesus has spoken: his the word, ours the obedience."²² Bonhoeffer did not see it as simplistic idealism but rather essential to faith; obedience opens the door to faith. His

²¹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 427.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959), 175.

well-known saying, “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”²³ is expanded when he says, “For that reason his call is an actual call and he wishes it so to be understood, because he knows that it is only through actual obedience that a man can be liberated to believe.”²⁴ Bonhoeffer did not see this as contrary to Lutheran and Reformed doctrine of *solo gratia*. “It was not the justification of sin but the justification of the sinner that drove Luther out of the cloister back into the world,” writes Bonhoeffer.²⁵ He was convinced that only through faithfulness to the Scriptures and Barmen would the Confessing Church be able to reject the German Christian movement and restore Christianity in Germany to orthodoxy.

In the modern world it seems so difficult to walk with absolute certainty in the narrow way of ecclesiastical decision and yet remain in the broad open spaces of the universal love of Christ, of the patience, mercy and ‘philanthropy’ of God (Titus 3.4) for the weak and the ungodly. Yet somehow or another we must combine the two, or else we will follow the paths of men. May God grant us joy as we strive earnestly to follow the way of discipleship. May we be enabled to say ‘No’ to sin and ‘Yes’ to the sinner. May we withstand our foes and yet hold out to them the Word of the Gospel which woos and wins the souls of men.²⁶

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s lectures on “Discipleship” addressed Biblical teaching in three major areas: the life of faith in Christ, the call to the ministry of the Gospel of Christ, and the nature of the church in the world. These ideas can be illustrated by quotations from his book that were first presented in his lectures at Finkenwalde. The term “costly grace” is now identified with the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but the Finkenwalders were the first to hear it. The introductory discipleship lectures, “Discipleship and the Cross” and “Discipleship and the Individual”, introduced this

²³ Ibid., 54.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 72.

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

phrase but “costly grace” permeates the rest of the series as well. It is expanded in lectures on “The Hidden Character of the Christian Life,” which is central to the teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Further lectures dwelt on call to ministry under the title “The Messengers”. Thirdly, he focused on the church as the Body of Christ in the world in the lectures “Visible Church” and “The Visible Community”. In these last lectures and chapters we see the theology of the church and discipleship on which Bonhoeffer bases the genuine community life at Finkenwalde itself.

First, Bonhoeffer describes costly grace.

Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. It comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and to follow Him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My Yoke is easy and my burden is light.’²⁷

Bonhoeffer saw the believer identified with Christ’s sufferings in the Scripture. Believers are united with Christ through obedience even or especially when suffering ensues. Bethge remembers Bonhoeffer saying, “The Word Incarnate is content to be despised and rejected.”²⁸ In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer says, “To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.”²⁹ Bethge points out Bonhoeffer’s “distinction between discipleship and an ideal”. Calling to ministry does not mean fulfilling personal goals for which one makes use of Christ as an “occasional aid” to one’s own choices.

What constituted a genuine call to ministry and what that call might cost was a serious issue for these men, for it was unlikely the Confessing Church would be able to

²⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁸ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 456.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 78.

support them adequately. Bethge says “The Messengers” was written during the lecture series as the men faced uncertain futures. Here Bonhoeffer says,

The work of God cannot be done without due authorization, otherwise it is devoid of promise . . . But does not the very love of Christ constrain us to set no limit on its proclamation? The love of Jesus is something very different from our own zeal and enthusiasms because it adheres to its mission.³⁰

Bonhoeffer warned against self-chosen ministry that elevates the preacher rather than the word. “Their commission is not a heroic struggle, a fanatical pursuit of a grand idea or a good cause.”³¹ But having received that call from Christ,

. . . They will not be perturbed when Jesus warns them that their way among men will be one of suffering. . . . the Holy Ghost himself will stand by their side and make them invincible. He will give them ‘a mouth and a wisdom which all their adversaries will be unable to withstand or to gainsay’ (Luke 21.15). Because the disciples remain true to the Word in their suffering, the Word will remain true to them. To self-sought martyrdom this promise would not apply, but there is no doubt whatever that it does apply to suffering with the Word.³²

Bonhoeffer’s lectures on nature of the church painted a very tangible, even concrete picture of the Body of Christ, which were closely connected to his lectures on “costly grace”. Teaching his seminarians on the visible church, Bonhoeffer said,

The Body of Christ is identical with the new humanity which he has taken upon him. It is in fact the Church. Jesus Christ is at once himself and his Church (1 Cor. 12.12). Since the first Whit Sunday the life of Christ has been perpetuated on earth in the form of his Body, the Church. Here is his body, crucified and risen, here is the humanity he took upon himself.³³

To Bonhoeffer, the church is more than a congregation of believers or even the church universal; it is the actual, physical, Body of Christ on earth.³⁴ Christ is incarnate now in the believers, and believers in him. He bases this theology on language of the

³⁰ Ibid., 184.

³¹ Ibid., 189.

³² Ibid., 192.

³³ Ibid., 216.

³⁴ Ibid., 222, 224-227.

Apostle Paul in Eph. 2:20-21 and the historicity of the Incarnation. The Incarnation *requires* a visible space-occupying presence on earth now, just as the Incarnate God became visible, tangible, and human in Jesus Christ.³⁵ The church is known as it “gathers round” the visible, humanly experienced sacraments of baptism and communion.³⁶ This concrete perspective on the reality of the church as the Body of Christ denies a purely mystical or philosophical ideology. Because of this, it directly and practically affects the believer in his human relationships, especially with fellow believers. This was a serious challenge for the Confessing Church concerning Christians with Jewish ancestry. He illustrates this by arguing that Philemon and Onesimus are “fellow cells in the Body of Christ.” Philemon must accept Onesimus as a brother because they are now united in one organism.³⁷ Rejecting the Aryan policies of the Nazi church, Bonhoeffer tells his seminarians,

No law of the world can interfere with this fellowship. The realm of Christian love is subject to Christ, not to the world. The church can never tolerate any limits set to the love and service of the brethren. For where the brother is, there is the Body of Christ, and there is his Church. And there we must also be.³⁸

Together with the common life and spiritual disciplines that were a part of each day at Finkenwalde, these lectures provided the core of Bonhoeffer’s belief about the nature of the church of Jesus Christ and the nature of their future ministry. Some lectures were developed during the first year, but most of the lectures were solidified by the time the second group of seminarians arrived. Some of his later lectures were transmitted nearly verbatim to the book. Bonhoeffer’s series on discipleship was unexpected and exciting.

³⁵ Ibid., 223.

³⁶ Ibid., 226.

³⁷ Ibid., 231.

³⁸ Ibid., 232.

For some seminarians the lectures were distressing and even shocking since it seemed to put obedience before faith, but, according to Bethge, the deterioration of the German state under Nazism caused them to understand the point he made that faith did not exist without obedience. “*Discipleship*” affected the way they heard and applied the rest of the syllabus.

The nine lectures on “The Sermon on the Mount”, demonstrate its importance to the syllabus. Other sets of lectures were “The New Life in Paul”, “Concrete Ethics in Paul”. Bethge tells us Bonhoeffer discussed in the “Visible Church” lecture that there was no disparity between the Jesus of Sermon on the Mount in the Synoptic Gospels and the “Christ of Paul” in the Epistles.³⁹

William Rott lectured on the Heidelberg Catechism. Though Bonhoeffer did not lecture on teaching catechisms at every session, he did so in 1935 and 1936. The importance he placed on this subject, however, is evident by his development of two new Lutheran catechisms in 1931 and 1936. They were very different because of the acceleration of Nazi interference in the church in the intervening years. In 1931, four years before the Finkenwalde program began, Bonhoeffer and Franz Hildebrandt wrote a new catechism, although did not use the usual base of the Apostles Creed, Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Instead, they made use of Luther’s Confession of Faith. Bethge writes,

Bonhoeffer liked it so much that he kept it in his daily prayer and service book for the rest of his life . . . Its appeal was Luther’s immediate connection between the ontological and functional affirmations with their ethical implications⁴⁰

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 212-216.

⁴⁰ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 187.

Bonhoeffer and Hildebrandt presented forty questions: What is the Gospel? Who is God? Who is Jesus Christ? Did Jesus really live? The answers were paraphrased from Luther and contained didactic replies rather than the imperative “*Thou shalt*”. Bonhoeffer used a version of this catechism with a group of unruly boys in North Berlin in 1932, who had exhausted a previous pastor. Remarkably, Bonhoeffer saw them all confirmed and he kept up relationships with many of them. He wrote Erwin Sutz at that time,

I have devoted almost all the second half of the semester to the candidates. Since New Year, I have been living here in North Berlin so as to be able to have the young men up every evening, in turns, of course . . . We eat supper and then we play something. . . . Then I read something from the Bible and we have a short spell of catechizing.⁴¹

In the letter to Sutz, he wrote that, when speaking to the boys, “. . . here the Biblical material and references to the great hope which we have, appeared time and time again in sermons like these. And it was just at these points that the young people paid most attention, even if such a sermon lasted more than half an hour.”⁴²

Though this early catechism appeared in Bonhoeffer’s lectures at Finkenwalde, he developed a very different one in 1936. The 170-question catechism is sometimes referred to as a “lecture on confirmation” because it was hand written and never fully revised. Focused on scriptural answers to the destructive errors of the Nazi church, its purpose was to make Lutheran orthodoxy clear. The church was negotiating dangerous waters in those years.⁴³ Here, Bonhoeffer returned to Luther’s Shorter Catechism, with

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴³ *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Vol. 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 782 (footnote).

connections to the Heidelberg Catechism and included the Barmen Declaration.⁴⁴ The questions were Biblically answered in every case and dealt with response to the Aryan clause, and the very pertinent issue of living with an unjust government, which was in the forefront of each seminarian's mind.⁴⁵ Uncommon in catechisms, both 1931 and 1936, discussed Christian response of war. Where the 1931 document said "... the church knows nothing of sacredness of war. . . . and asks God only for peace," the 1936 document recognized this reality for the congregants and included a path to forgiveness if required to "take up the sword". Though the catechism was never completed, Bethge's notes at a retreat in October 1936 indicate its worth to the seminarians: "Our fingers were bloodied from taking so many notes just to get a little bit of Brother Bonhoeffer's confirmation plan."⁴⁶ In 1935 and 1936, Bonhoeffer lectured on catechesis and foundations for early Christian education.⁴⁷ The conclusion will return to that lecture.

William Rott who lectured during Bonhoeffer's frequent absences, lectured often on pastoral care as well as catechetical studies. Rott led discussions and critiques during homiletics, but the lectures on preaching were Bonhoeffer's own. He had strong convictions on proclamation of the word, believing that, once carefully prepared and presented, it was Christ Himself speaking to the listener. Bonhoeffer allowed no criticism on a preached message no matter how inexperienced the speaker. Only read-aloud sermons were discussed. Bonhoeffer stressed that a sermon was not to chastise or convince, but to entice and offer the Gospel as an attractive gift to be received.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 783.

⁴⁵ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 189.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Finkenwalde*, 814 (footnote).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 782 (footnote).

⁴⁸ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 442-3.

Lectures on “Ministry and Church” discussed the German Christian doctrinal errors, but also included typical questions of church discipline and order. In this series were lectures on the Reformation Confessions, in particular the Augsburg Confession, Schmalkald Articles, and the Formula of Concord and their relationship to the German church. This was new to most of the men. Bethge says, “Each dogmatic article was removed from its context of *past* controversies and became a *contemporary existential argument* against the German Christians’ solutions of ecclesiological problems . . . Today it is difficult to convey the excitement of these classes”⁴⁹ (Italics mine).

Much of the syllabus and discussion that followed involved reaction to the German Christians, Nazis, and the need for faithful response by the church. “Ministry and Church” lectures brought intense discussions on schism and reunification. With German Christians overwhelming the German Evangelical Church, some felt separation imperative, but others were tempted by the offers of the Reich Church consistories that guaranteed salaries and ministry. How were the Councils of the Brethren to respond? Also there existed diverse theology between Lutheran and Reformed congregations in the Confessing Church. How seriously should differences be taken in a congregation? What constituted the difference between a “school of opinion” and a “schismatic difference”? Bonhoeffer believed the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, was helpful. Bethge writes:

‘... the Early Church Fathers sometimes divided up the ground for straw or hay but for all that, they did not seek to destroy the ground.’ Thus Bonhoeffer maintained that the church must leave room for bad theologies and the better ones must not be allowed to expel the worse.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., 444.

⁵⁰ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 445.

In the rules for church order in Germany, a pastor could be removed from ministry on three grounds: “doctrine, conduct, and gifts”. While false doctrine would necessitate removal of a pastor from his office, and poor conduct would make it permissible, these two grounds were less controversial. The ground of “gifts”, or lack of them, was used as an excuse by German Christians to remove pastors of Jewish descent. Distressingly, despite the declared “Christocracy of brothers and sisters” in the third Barmen thesis,⁵¹ even some Confessing Churches considered a possible “inappropriateness” for a Jewish brother for Christian ministry. False doctrine and inappropriate conduct necessitated removal, but the last ground, gifts, Bonhoeffer saw as a sign of weakness in the congregation who would not accept a brother.⁵²

Other lectures covered the relationship between ministry and the congregation. Bonhoeffer said Christ created the ministry and the ministry created the congregation, rather than the congregation creating the ministry, which gave the congregation authority over Christ and Scripture. “Grace is derived only from conformity to the Scripture and not from succession within the ministry.”⁵³ His lectures on discipleship confirm this view.⁵⁴

During their five months, every class at Finkenwalde participated in practical training in evangelism and preaching in nearby churches. Some trips necessitated staying for a few days in a community and boarding with families. The ordinands shared preaching responsibilities and practiced visitation skills with the local people. The spring 1936

⁵¹ Busch, *Barmen*, 50.

⁵² Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 445-6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 227.

class travelled to Sweden, benefitting from the ecumenical relations with Swedish believers and church leaders.⁵⁵ There will be more on this trip in chapter three.

House of the Brethren

During the first year, Bonhoeffer wanted to expand the program into a stronger Finkenwalde community of genuine brotherhood. He proposed retaining a few graduates who could provide a ready atmosphere of community for the new seminarians as they arrived each semester. He asked the Council of the Old Prussian Union to financially support six graduates who would stay, serve in neighboring parishes, and live at Finkenwalde.⁵⁶ Called the House of the Brethren, this group provided an established community and assisted in lectures and other areas during the next four semesters. Housing was provided separately from the main building, but financial support never materialized. They lived by pooling the resources of members who had assistant pastorates or other jobs. The original House of the Brethren included Eberhard Bethge, Albrecht Schönherr, Winfried Maechler, Johachim Kannitz, Horst Lekzas, and Fritz Onnasch.⁵⁷

The House of the Brethren also provided the opportunity for pastors already serving in churches, often Finkenwalde graduates, to come for short or extended times of retreat. Bonhoeffer strongly encouraged these six retreats, because it furthered his deeper purpose for the seminary. He wanted to keep those who were done with training in the fellowship. He understood the loneliness of those who were serving in small parishes and knew how much they need encouragement. He later published his lectures on the

⁵⁵ Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 196-197.

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 33.

⁵⁷ Bethge, 468.

common life, nearly verbatim, in *Life Together* as a gift to the seminarians. Written after the two-and-half- years at Finkenwalde, it verbalized the essentials of body life. Pastor Wolfgang Schrader remembers Bonhoeffer's genuine conviction about this fellowship and his continued care for the men after they left.

We old Finkenwalders were scattered across the country, often holding rather lonely posts. Almost all of us illegal pastors and curates of the Confessing Church were liable to encounter the hostility of the Nazi Party and the Gestapo. Whenever he could, Dietrich Bonhoeffer visited his brethren and urged us in our turn to not leave anybody to himself in loneliness . . . in 1936 he came to visit me in Kuhz. . . .In the afternoon he inquired in detail about the congregation and myself.⁵⁸

In September 1937, before the sixth group arrived, the Gestapo came without warning and closed Finkenwalde. Nearly 100 young men had completed their training there, but Bonhoeffer and the Councils of the Brethren were not ready to quit. Though the seminary would continue underground in two locations, as we will see below, the loss of the house at Stettin sadly meant the end of the House of the Brethren as an intact community.

The Seminary goes underground.

Before the closure of Finkenwalde, a sister program at Bloestau had tried moving to a different location, but was detected and its director and candidates were arrested. As a consequence, Niesel, Rott, and Bonhoeffer decided instead to become invisible. Finkenwalde at Stettin, and the other four programs were closed, but Bonhoeffer continued his theological program in a limited and clandestine manner by dividing the program into two groups, not identified as seminary but functioning in pastoral roles in two church districts. Schlawe and Koslin, both in East Pomerania, were the districts

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Schrader, "A Visit at Asparagus Time" in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 149.

willing to accept ordinands. The superintendents in those two districts gave them internships in their churches and housed them. Consequently, for the next two-and-a-half-years, Bonhoeffer's program was divided in these two groups.⁵⁹ In Koslin, the district superintendent, Friedrich Onnasch, provided a large parsonage that housed ten young men. His son, Fritz, who had been part of the House of the Brethren, assumed the direction of studies in that district. Eberhard Bethge, who had remained in the House of the Brethren, took charge of the program at Schlawe. Bethge and his group of men lived together in a ramshackle house in Gross-Schlönwitz. Superintendent Eduard Block assigned each man to be an assistant in a small town church. He registered them as residents but they actually lived together in Gross-Schlönwitz. Later their attitudes were tested further when they had to move to a very remote house, Sigurdshof, without electricity or running water! These two living situations made it possible for them to continue in the common life of daily worship and brotherhood as they had at Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer remained the director, and spent parts of the week with each group, driving over a hundred miles between them. He continued the syllabus with the help of Onnasch and Bethge, augmented by his own circular letters. If he was gone, he mailed the meditation texts for them and continued to do so until he was arrested in 1943.⁶⁰ It was a dangerous and courageous choice for everyone involved. One candidate described what those difficult two and half years brought to his life.

I did not come to Schlönwitz eagerly or hopefully . . . I thought of it as a necessary evil that one had to bear with good grace and go through for the sake of self-discipline . . . It all turned out differently from what I feared. Instead of stuffy atmosphere of theological cant, I found a world that embraced a good deal

⁵⁹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 588-90.

⁶⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Vol. 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 277.

of what I love and need; straightforward theological work in a friendly community . . . brotherhood under the Word irrespective of the person and with it all, open mindedness and creativity that still makes this fallen creation loveable – music, literature, sport and the beauty of the earth—a grand way of life.⁶¹

Eighty-six additional young men completed their training in the fray of those dangerous conditions. *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi attack on Jewish synagogues and businesses on November 9, 1938, left the synagogue of Koslin burned to the ground. Ordinands struggled with how to respond. One remembered a discussion with Bonhoeffer when he returned from Berlin the next day.⁶²

Some of us spoke of the curse that has followed the Jews since Jesus death on the cross, but Bonhoeffer rejected that with extreme sharpness . . . He utterly refused to see in the destruction of the synagogues by the Nazis a continuance of the curse. He said it was utter violence, ‘If the synagogues burn today, the churches will be on fire tomorrow.’⁶³

In 1938, there were further failures of consistency with Barmen. It was a very difficult year for the Confessing Church. The Reich Church, after the elimination of the Provisional Church Administration that earlier tried to woo Confessing Church pastors into the Reich Church through committees, began a new program. They now set up “consistories”, which again promised a legalization process, to entice pastors to leave the order determined at Dahlem and submit to Reich Church authority. The temptation to submit was heavy, because it again offered a path towards a salary and legal ministry, and the illegal Councils of the Brethren could not promise a salary or even a parish. Some pastors and church leaders thought it was possible to be theologically faithful to Barmen but give up the Dahlem ecclesial order. Bonhoeffer rejected that idea, saying one

⁶¹ Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 211.

⁶² See note on page 15 of this paper.

⁶³ Gottfried Maltzsch, “When the Synagogues Burned” in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 150.

could not follow Barmen without the structure of Dahlem. Failures to stay the course in these years were devastating. Though the normal schedule of lecture and liturgy continued, these griefs consumed the prayer and discussion of the years in the collective pastorates.⁶⁴

Fearing the collapse of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer struggled to encourage his former students and prepared another retreat on the Baltic shore in 1938. Forty-five former seminarians came to Zingst where he admonished them to stand firm on the Barmen and Dahlem decisions. This was the suffering church of the “Discipleship” lectures. Urging the brothers to keep encouraging each other, he continued to do so himself with frequent visits and letters.⁶⁵

In June 1939, with the specter of military draft looming, Bonhoeffer left the collective pastorates to the direction of Helmut Traub and went to America, where he was to teach and pastor German immigrants. His friends were relieved for him to be out of danger of draft or arrest. Their relief was short lived, however, and they were dismayed when he returned to Germany in August. Bonhoeffer was unable to leave the job he had begun and felt compelled to continue the struggle with his brothers in the Confessing Church. He wrote Reinhold Niebuhr who had encouraged him to come,

. . . I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. My brothers in the Confessional Synod wanted me to go. They may have been right in urging me to do so, but I was wrong in going.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Victoria Barnett, “Editor’s Introduction” in *Education Underground*, 8.

⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer, “To the Young Brothers in Pomerania” in *Education Underground*, 29-36; 39-40.

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, “To Reinhold Niebuhr” in *Education Underground*, 210.

He returned to work with the collective pastorates in Pomerania that fall, but in March of 1940, the Gestapo shut down these remnants of the Finkenwalde seminary. Eberhard Bethge and several seminarians were arrested. They were released in a few weeks, but could not even recover possessions they left behind. Most of Bonhoeffer's reference books, including his great grandfather's Erlangen Luther Commentary, were scattered about like the seminarians that had benefitted from their use. And, also like them, many were lost.⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer's program was over. Many pastors who persevered with what they learned at Finkenwalde were imprisoned for weeks or months. But Hitler's war in Europe had begun and most of the young men Bonhoeffer trained became soldiers instead of pastors.⁶⁸

After five years of intense Biblical and confessional study and communal life, Bonhoeffer's great experiment was over. The weather-beaten house in Stettin that had become a welcoming place was closed up and quiet again in 1937. The parsonage at Koslin and unheated cabin at Sigurdshof were emptied of their seminarians. Bonhoeffer, Otto Dibelius, William Niesel, and others continued the fight for the church of Christ, but the Confessing Church was no longer able to train its own pastors, and a new phase of the struggle for the church in Germany began in 1940.

⁶⁷ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 428.

⁶⁸ Barnett, "Editor's Introduction" in *Education Underground*, 13.

Chapter Three

HOW DID FINKENWALDE ANSWER THE ERRORS OF THE REICH CHURCH?

Eberhard Bethge remembers that on February 4, 1936, a group of seminarians sat by an open fire in the large hall. This was the second group at Finkenwalde who were nearing the end of their five months in the drafty old building in Pomerania.¹ It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thirtieth birthday and they were enjoying his travel stories as they often did. Most had not travelled far and none besides Bonhoeffer had been to the United States. It was exciting to hear about bullfights in Spain, the Colosseum in Rome. They enjoyed hearing about the Abyssinian Baptist church in New York, the source of the spirituals they often sang in the evenings. Their director had described other Christian communities in New York, Rome, Barcelona, and London. That night, one young man remembered a tradition that said guests at a birthday party could make a wish. He thought that Bonhoeffer should give them a gift in honor of his birthday. The gift he proposed was that their director augment their education by taking them to Sweden with him. They could experience church life and theology in an ecumenical setting.² Bonhoeffer enthusiastically agreed.

That evening at Finkenwalde and the ten days in March in Sweden illustrate Bonhoeffer's determination to expose his ordinands personally to the church away from the influence of the Nazi Reich Church and German Christians. In doing so, Bonhoeffer

¹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 506

² *Ibid.*, 506-7.

directly challenged two related errors of the Nazi church faced by the Confessing Church: freedom of the church to govern itself and train its leaders, and freedom of association with the church outside of Germany.

Within months of Hitler becoming chancellor, the Nazi government began tightening down on travel, particularly for the church, and even more specifically, the Confessing Church, thereby keeping citizens ignorant of the views of the rest of Europe.

Nazi travel restrictions only allowed Germans to leave the country with the equivalent of only \$10, so it was a great deal of work for Bonhoeffer to put this trip together-- including arrangements at no cost for twenty-six people in four cities. Bonhoeffer wrote for help from Swedish churchmen who were glad to welcome them.³ The trip was, of necessity, a little clandestine. Bonhoeffer obeyed the law, notifying the required offices, but avoided getting direct permission from those who would surely have prevented the trip. Theodor Heckel, bishop of German congregations outside of Germany, made an effort to prevent them going, but he learned too late. They were in Sweden before he could stop them but managed to warn the German consulate; as a consequence the Finkenwalde group was given a cool reception.⁴ They carefully avoided political topics, but on their return they were accused of being subversive. Bonhoeffer was referred to as “a pacifist and enemy of the state who should no longer be allowed to train theologians”.⁵ Despite the cool reception with German officials, in Sweden, the seminarians found that Barmen was affirmed. It was a great encouragement. Albrecht Schönherr wrote when they returned,

³ Bonhoeffer, “To Nils Karlstrom”, in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, English Edition, Vol. 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 136.

⁴ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 511-12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 512.

There was a splendid evening with Professors Nörregaard and Torm. We were amazed to discover how clearly they saw our situation and understood our attitude. . . . It is to our great benefit that among these Lutheran churches our attitude is not condemned as non-Lutheran but meets with approval.⁶

The seminarians and Bonhoeffer both attended and preached in Swedish Lutheran churches, experiencing firsthand the best of the ecumenical movement and the Reformation faith in another culture. It was a delightful recognition of the concrete reality of the Body of Christ beyond the restrictions of the Reich church but it was also a carefully planned rebellion against the intentions of the Reich leadership! Bonhoeffer wrote from Sweden to a friend in England,

We will have to see how this goes when we get back. We're certainly breaking the law of December 2 every day, but so far nothing has happened to us. Perhaps it will be different once the Olympics are over.⁷

This trip exemplifies the purpose of Finkenwalde. It illustrated *in actual time and experience* what Bonhoeffer covered in lectures on the difference between the church of Barmen and the Reich Church. It was consistent with the monastic life they experienced at Finkenwalde, because they shared this time as brothers.

In December of the previous year, following the announcement of Kerrl's Seventeen Implementation Decrees, Bonhoeffer answered those rulings with a series of lectures on "The Visible Church in the New Testament".⁸ The purpose of the Nazi decrees was to woo confessing pastors to the Reich Church committees, and leave behind the ecclesial governance established at Dahlem. Bonhoeffer was determined to stop the drain. The weakened Confessing Church synods had failed to give direction created confusion for

⁶ Ibid, 508.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, "To Phillip Cromwell" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 147.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, "The Visible Church in the New Testament" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 434-475.

Confessing pastors. Could they submit to the Reich Church while still attempting to maintain fellowship with Barmen? Bonhoeffer said, no. Faithfulness to Dahlem was crucial to the existence of the Confessing Church. Lecturing in December, he wondered, “Does the Church of the Word of God have a place in the world, and if so, what is the nature of this place?”⁹ He asked,

How can one delimit epistemologically the space of the church from the space surrounding it? Is the relationship between the church and state a matter of juxtaposition? (Rome). Subordination? (Geneva). Intertwining? (Rothean theology), the Above (sic) of the state and Below (sic) of the church (false Lutheran orthodoxy in the eighteenth century)? It is from this perspective that the New Testament discloses itself.¹⁰

Edwin Robertson’s translation in *The Way to Freedom* translates, perhaps more clearly, “How is the place of the church to be marked out in a recognizable way from the other spheres surrounding it?”¹¹

Bonhoeffer insisted that the church could be defined only by the New Testament. Church could not be defined even by the church itself at any particular time in history, even though it might “. . . adapt the form of its order according to contemporary needs . . .”¹² The church certainly could not be defined by an outside authority. The church was defined by the Biblical witness.¹³ The state did not have the authority to create regulations that disrupted the spiritual calling of the church to determine its direction. The state had a role in the world, but the function and rule of the church lay in the Word

⁹ Bonhoeffer, “The Visible Church in the New Testament” in *The Way to Freedom*, 42.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, “The Visible Church in the New Testament” in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 436-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 227.

of God in the Scriptures, as stated in Barmen Declaration's fifth thesis on church and state.

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the church also exists, the State has by divine appointment, the task of providing for justice and peace. (It fulfills this task) by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility of both rulers and the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.¹⁴

More than other church leaders, Bonhoeffer insisted on faithfulness to Barmen and Dahlem. In April, soon after the trip to Sweden, he presented "Essay on Church Community" on the nature of the true Church of Christ, as defined in the Scriptures and confirmed in Barmen.¹⁵ Bethge explains why his director wrote this paper.

Bonhoeffer thought it advisable to give students a report and an overview so that they could assess the recent developments theologically and with regard to the internal affairs of the church. Who was still in the church with them? What criteria should set the standards here?¹⁶

Bonhoeffer created a gulf between himself and "neutrals" in this essay by looking at Luther's, "*Extra ecclesium nulla salus*", and interpreted it for the present struggle. He wrote, "Whoever knowingly cuts himself off from the Confessing Church cuts himself

¹⁴ "Barmen Declaration" in Busch, *Barmen Theses*, 71.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, "Essay on Church Communion" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 556-675.

¹⁶ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 518.

off from salvation.”¹⁷ To submit to the administration of the heretical Nazi church implied agreement with their heretical views on Christ and the church.

At issue regarding the boundaries of the Confessing Church were really two groups. First, as mentioned above, in the present controversy over the fifth decree, were the pastors. Could those who signed with the committees and submitted to the Reich church administration still be part of the Confessing Church? As we have seen above, Bonhoeffer said, “no”. He wrote a friend in London,

Either the Barmen Declaration is a true confession of the Lord Jesus Christ which has been brought about through the Holy Spirit, in which case it can make or divide the church –or it is an unofficial expression of the opinion of a number of theologians, in which case the Confessing Church has been on the wrong track for a long time.¹⁸

The interference with the church’s business and order was severe in 1937. That year in a lecture on “The Power of the Keys and Church Discipline”, Bonhoeffer stated emphatically, “It is inconceivable for the New Testament that people should be appointed to the offices of the church from outside the community. For the community is the body of Christ.”¹⁹ To Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, the offices of the church, including that of pastor, were a response to a spiritual call to service by the Holy Spirit. “They (the offices) are not appointed *by* the church. Even where the Church makes itself responsible for distributing the offices, it does so only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13.2 etc.)”²⁰ Graduating from Finkenwalde did not free a

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, “Essay on Church Communion” in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 675.

¹⁸ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 525.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, “The Power of the Keys and Church Discipline” in *Way to Freedom*, 160.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 227.

seminarian from concern and counsel from *Bruder* Bonhoeffer who urgently admonished those who leaned towards committees to be faithful to Barmen and Dahlem.²¹

But the most serious break with the Scriptures by the Reich Church was the status of the second group-- their Jewish brothers. Were baptized Christians with Jewish heritage part of the church? Bonhoeffer emphatically said, “yes”! The German Christians said “no”!

The Aryan clause was made law by the Nazi state in April 1933, just three months after Hitler became chancellor. The German Christians who by that time were gaining offices in the German Evangelical Church eagerly moved to include these civil rules in church offices. Two years later at Finkenwalde, the candidates knew that Bonhoeffer had disputed the Aryan paragraph from its first announcement. He was adamant about the deadly results that would come to the church from not accepting Jewish Christians as brothers. His essay on the Aryan clause, written two years prior to the seminary, was echoed in the lectures and was the foundation of the fellowship of brothers at Finkenwalde. In the essay, he stated graphically that beyond the Christian’s responsibility to “do good”, “by binding up the wounds of those under the wheel”, it might be necessary to go further and to “put a spoke in the wheel itself”.²² When that might be needed, in the case concerning their Jewish brothers, depended on how the state carried its own mandate.

Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and desirable when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order. . . . There would be too little law if any group of subjects were deprived of their rights, too much where the state intervened in the character of the church and its

²¹ Bonhoeffer, “Report for 1936” in *Way to Freedom*, 126-7.

²² Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 225.

proclamation, e.g. in the forced exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or in the prohibition of our mission to the Jews.²³

The Bethel Confession's original statement on this matter, written by Bonhoeffer, carefully shows the Biblical record of God with the nation of Israel,

The church teaches that God chose Israel from among all the nations of the earth to be his people . . .

. . . The Sanhedrin and the Jewish people rejected Christ Jesus, promised by the law and the prophets in accordance with the Scripture . . .

. . . The barrier between Jew and Gentile has been broken down by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2) . . .

. . . God abundantly shows his faithfulness by still keeping faith with Israel after the flesh, from whom Christ was born after the flesh despite all their unfaithfulness, even after the crucifixion. It is his will to complete the salvation of the world, which he began with the election of Israel through these selfsame Jews (Romans 9-11)

. . .

. . . The Church has received from its Lord the commission to call the Jews to repentance and to baptize those who believe on Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 19:5ff; Acts 2:38ff; Acts 3:19-26) . . .

. . . The community of those who belong to the church is not determined by blood and therefore not by race, but by the Holy Spirit and Baptism . . .

. . . The way in which the Jewish Christian has a special position in the church which is not based on any legal ruling in itself makes him a living memorial of God's faithfulness within the church and is a sign that the barrier between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and that faith in Christ may not be perverted into a national religion or a racially determined Christianity. It is the task of the Christians who come from the Gentile world, to expose themselves to persecution rather than to surrender, willingly or unwillingly, even in a single respect their brotherhood with Jewish Christians in the church, founded on Word and Sacrament.²⁴

As we have noted, the Bethel Confession, courageously begun, was tragically denuded of power by the university professors asked to review it. Though Bonhoeffer

²³ Ibid., 225.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 242.

didn't sign it, his words in the Bethel confession are heard later at Finkenwalde (See Romans study below).

In September 1935, Bonhoeffer took his first group of seminarians on a bicycle ministry tour. When they returned, Jewish Confessing pastor, Franz Hildebrandt, warned him that the Old Prussian Union Confessing synod was considering a statement in support of the Nuremberg Laws. Those laws restricted citizenship rights to those of Aryan blood, removing *all* rights to those of Jewish birth.²⁵ The synod, to Bonhoeffer's and Hildebrandt's distress, was to consider those laws for church leadership at this time. The meeting, full of sharp disagreement, concluded disappointingly.²⁶ It barely avoided the appearance of condoning the laws by making "... a declaration that defended the mission to the Jews and Jewish baptism."²⁷ By being silent, the synod failed to condemn the Nuremberg Laws. Because he was not a delegate, Bonhoeffer could not speak officially but he supported those who could. He also did nothing to prevent his Finkenwalde candidates from "heckling from the gallery"! Such a weak response and lack of courage from this Confessing synod was very disappointing to Bonhoeffer; he returned to Finkenwalde to lecture and discuss Romans 9-11. The manuscript is lost, but Bethge's notes recall his concluding words after the Romans 11:15 discussion of the Jews' hardness of heart in rejecting Christ.²⁸

It remains such that Israel is the missionary of the world, suffering in a vicarious representative fashion, and yet nonetheless because of guilt . . . That means that God does not deviate from His plan. He uses guilt for this purpose. . . .God's will,

²⁵ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 487.

²⁶ Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 192.

²⁷ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 487-89.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, "Exposition on Romans 9-11" in *Finkenwalde*, 868-870.

which is not clear, is carried out with regard to the Jews. They remain the beloved of God but *exthroi*²⁹

In the following year, Bonhoeffer presented to the seminary a Bible study on the Book of Revelation in which he affirmed that Gentiles and Jews alike will answer one question,

What will God ask about on that day of judgment toward which we are moving? About God's eternal gospel: Did you hear and believe the gospel? God will not ask-- whether we were Germans or Jews, whether we were National Socialists or even whether we belonged to the Confessing Church . . . God will one day ask all human beings whether they believe they can prove themselves before the gospel-- and *the gospel alone* will be our judge.³⁰

Perhaps even more effectual than the lecture on Romans or Revelation was the actual practice of brotherhood that Bonhoeffer required at Finkenwalde. Oneness in Christ was not a philosophical position, but a reality that needed to be observed and lived daily. As we saw in chapter two, the seminarians prayed and read Psalms together each morning and evening. They also practiced mutual confession and forgiveness and shared the common work of daily life. This included their Jewish brothers in Christ. When Franz Hildebrandt was at Finkenwalde to lecture he was included in the schedule of the day and part of this brotherhood. Chapter two described the commitment as brothers in Christ that permeated their daily life. Bonhoeffer's lectures on discipleship include this powerful word, which spoke directly to the life situations of their Jewish brothers and sisters in the Third Reich. In the lecture, "The Visible Community",

To allow a baptized brother to take part in the worship of the Church, but to refuse to have anything to do with him in everyday life, is to subject him to abuse and contempt. If we do that, we are guilty of the very Body of Christ. And if we grant the baptized brother the right to the gifts of salvation, but refuse him the gifts necessary to earthly life or knowingly leave him in material need and

²⁹ Ibid., 869.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, "Sermon on Revelation" in *Finkenwalde*, 902.

distress, we are holding up the gifts of salvation to ridicule and behaving as liars.³¹

And teaching from Galatians 3:27 in the same lecture,

We take account of each other only with regard to our membership in the Body of Christ, that is to say, that we are all one in Christ. Jew and Greek, freedman and bondservant, man and woman now stand within the fellowship as part of the community of the Body of Christ.³²

Bonhoeffer understood that the heretical thinking of the German Christians was rooted in a truly secular view of the church that we see in the third error. German Christians were not satisfied with the New Testament church. They wanted one designed by the people –the *Volk*-- under the headship of the *Führer* Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer adamantly rejected this heretical view. His essay on church community during the third class’s tenure demonstrated the church’s essential nature in contrast to the German Christian view. In the lecture, he defined the church as God’s creation through Christ’s sacrifice and the work of the Holy Spirit. He refers to Peter’s proclamation of the Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2,

The church of the New Testament as the fulfillment of God’s promises is created by the sending of the Holy Spirit; it is the historical reality of the Holy Spirit, and thus prevents any docetism . . . The church of the New Testament is the church of the Spirit who has come . . . The coming of the Spirit and the founding of the church is a visible event, and not an incorporeal concept. The founding of the church is no hidden thing, ‘done in a corner’ . . .³³

In the same lecture, delineating the difference between a “religion” and the church, Bonhoeffer says,

Here is the essential difference between the church and a ‘religious fellowship’. A ‘religious fellowship’ is concerned to put the religious above the profane, to divide life into the religious and the profane. . . It is not the religious question or

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 230-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 232.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Way to Freedom*, 44-45.

religious concern of any form which constitutes the church—from a human point of view—but obedience to the Word of the new creation of grace.³⁴

The Cost of Discipleship, which generally undergirds the syllabus at Finkenwalde,³⁵ established for the seminarians how foreign the church designed by the German Christians and the Nazi state was to the true Christian Church. Bonhoeffer refutes their idea of the church as an institution that can be adapted to new political or social ideas or cultural expectations. He presented to his ordinands the church as designed by God and revealed in the Scripture to exist forever in the body of the crucified and risen Christ and inhabited by those who believe in him.

Here is his body, crucified and risen, here is the humanity he took upon him. To be baptized therefore means to become a member of the Church, a member of the Body of Christ (Gal. 3.28; 1 Cor. 12.13). To be in Christ therefore means to be in the Church. But if we are in the Church we are verily and bodily in Christ. Now we perceive the whole wealth of meaning which lies behind the idea of the Body of Christ.³⁶

As discussed in chapter two, Bonhoeffer maintained that the church needs a physical, observable, active presence in the world. The church is not an ephemeral theory but an actual visible entity. He refers to it as an “articulated form”, and says, “an unarticulated body is doomed to perish.” In the essay, “The Visible Community”, he writes, “The Church consisting of Christ’s followers manifest to the whole world as a visible community. Here were bodies which acted, worked and suffered in fellowship with Jesus.”³⁷ Here, Bonhoeffer rejects the German Christians view of a “heroic Church” and reveals a “suffering Church” that suffers rejection and misunderstanding in the world as Christ did.

³⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

³⁵ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 450.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 216.

³⁷ Ibid., 224.

An observable, “articulated” body made up Christian believers makes demands upon the believers in that body. They cannot remain without moral character or loving action in the household and just possess a “Christian philosophy” or have religious opinions. They are no longer “just individuals”, but part of a whole (Eph 4:4-6). Daily life at Finkenwalde powerfully demonstrated this sense of bodily unity. The seminarians learned to see themselves as a cohesive unit – a body—a genuine demonstration of the Body of Christ described in Ephesians for the five months they were together. Bonhoeffer’s commitment to this relationship was verified in his urgent encouragement to attend working retreats after graduating. There was always a welcoming bed for each one that came to visit. Bonhoeffer often went to see them, reminding them that they were still a community.

Bonhoeffer followed the lecture on the “Visible Church” directly with “The Saints”, which takes us to another error of the Reich Church. As we saw in chapter one, the German Christians, dismissed the idea of sin as incompatible with their view of *Volkskirche*, a church built by the efforts of the German people. Consequently they did not need a doctrine of justification by the grace of God. Bonhoeffer’s view was in complete contrast. Nothing demonstrates that better than one of the disciplines at Finkenwalde. The most uncomfortable—even onerous --discipline that Bonhoeffer strongly encouraged at the seminary was for each one to find a brother to whom he could confess his sins on a regular basis. This was a completely foreign expectation to them, but that discipline of honest, verbal confession to a brother illustrates the seriousness with which Bonhoeffer took sin.³⁸ The German Christians’ dismissal of sin and their snow-

³⁸ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 465-6.

blinded idea of “positive Christianity” was anathema to his theology. To fail to recognize the redemption of the sinner through Christ’s death was to deny the reality of the mercy of God. Lecturing on the Lord’s Prayer during his series on the Sermon on the Mount, he says, “Every day Christ’s followers must acknowledge and bewail their guilt. Living as they do in fellowship with Him, they ought to be sinless, but in practice their life is marred daily with all manner of unbelief.”³⁹ Teaching further on repentance,

If the Church refuses to face the stern reality of sin, it will gain no credence when it talks of forgiveness. Such a church sins against its sacred trust and walks unworthily of the gospel. It is an unholy Church, squandering the precious treasure of the Lord’s forgiveness.⁴⁰

In his lecture on “The Saints”, Bonhoeffer recognizes the proper use of the “office of the keys” in Lutheran theology in pointing out and condemning sin before pronouncing forgiveness. He also noted that the Reformers were clear that “sin must be called sin.”⁴¹ He didn’t exempt himself from personal confession; Bethge was his confessor.⁴² “He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own is uncertain, his brother’s is sure.”⁴³

Confession is the God-given remedy for self-deception and self-indulgence. When we confess our sins before a brother-Christian, we are mortifying the pride of the flesh and delivering it up to shame and death through Christ. Then through the word of absolution we rise as new men, utterly dependent on the mercy of God.⁴⁴

Simply put, the dismissal of sin makes the Incarnation unnecessary. In redefining sin, German Christians chose to redefine Jesus as well. The failure to accept the Biblical and

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 149.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴² Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 465.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 260.

Reformation teaching on the sinfulness of all mankind had serious theological implications. It denied the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and, even further, the need for the Incarnation. Jesus is reduced to a mere mortal, “heroic” perhaps, but not the savior of humanity.

The syllabi of each of the Confessing Church preachers’ seminaries reflected the Barmen theses concerning the person of Jesus Christ, and consequently all rejected the Nazi and German Christian view of Jesus. From Barmen’s first thesis,

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.⁴⁵

This first thesis of the Barmen Declaration is what Bonhoeffer taught. We can better describe the Christology at Finkenwalde, however, by looking again at *Discipleship*. This was the main vehicle for Bonhoeffer’s lectures and contained some ideas that differed from usual Lutheran or Reformed teaching done at the other schools. Like the syllabi of all the Confessing seminaries, *Discipleship* affirms the unity of the proclamation of Christ: “The Jesus of the Synoptists is neither nearer nor further from us than the Christ of St. Paul. The Christ who is present is the Christ of the whole Scripture. He is the incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified Christ, and he meets us in his word.”⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer’s lectures on “The Body of Christ” describe God’s revelation of himself, first to the Jewish people through the law and prophets, then culminating in Christ.

⁴⁵ Busch, *Barmen*, 19.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 205.

Then the supreme miracle occurs. The Son of God becomes man. The Word of God is made flesh. He who existed from all eternity in the glory of the Father, he who in the beginning was the agent of creation (which means that the created world can only be known only through him and in him), he who was very God (I Cor. 8.6; II Cor. 8.9; Phil. 2.6 ff; Eph 1.4; Col. 1.16; John 1.1ff; Heb. 1.1ff) accepts humanity by taking upon himself our human nature, ‘sinful flesh’ as the Bible calls it, and human form (Rom. 8.3; Gal. 4.4; Phil. 2.6ff). God takes humanity to himself, not merely as heretofore through the spoken word, but in the Body of Jesus. Of his mercy, God sends his Son in the flesh, that therein he may bear the whole human race and bring it to himself.⁴⁷

Bonhoeffer stressed three areas in *Discipleship* lectures on “The Visible Community”.

First, Jesus is presently *incarnate* in the Body of Christ, the church.⁴⁸ Referring to the church as the Body of Christ was, of course, not new. The Apostle Paul gave us that phrase in Ephesians and Colossians, but as we saw in Bonhoeffer’s discussion on the nature of the church, he lays additional emphatic emphasis on Christ’s concrete, visible presence in the church. “The Body of Christ is identical with the new humanity which Jesus Christ has taken upon him. It is in fact the Church. Jesus Christ is at once himself and his Church (I Cor.12: 12). Since the first Whitsunday, the Life of Christ has been perpetuated on earth in the form of his Body, the Church.”⁴⁹

Second, Bonhoeffer believed that Jesus in the Bible asked for and expected obedience. The Lutheran Church had for centuries regarded the Sermon on the Mount as an ideal—for the Parousia, perhaps, but not commands that expected obedience in the 20th Century. In chapter two, we saw Bonhoeffer say, “The only proper response to this Word that Jesus brings us from eternity is simply to do it”.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 212-13.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 201, 216, 225.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 175.

Third, the “authority”, *exousia*, of Jesus in Bonhoeffer’s Biblical view was totally unrecognizable from the authority claimed by the German Christians. They wanted a hero who had power, exerted it, and won! Bonhoeffer saw Jesus as one who was content to suffer in weakness. A suffering Christ was not a particularly new idea. But suffering in ministry was a painful and real choice for Confessing pastors who were under attack by the Nazis. The temptation to join the committees, to be accepted, and gain a salary was strong. Bonhoeffer challenged the Finkenwalders to be faithful even if it meant losing ground in everyone’s eyes but their own and the Bible’s.

The word is weaker than any ideology, and this means that with only the gospel at their command the witnesses are weaker than the propagandists of an opinion. But although they are weak, they are ready to suffer with the Word and so are free from that morbid restlessness which is so characteristic of fanaticism.⁵¹

Bonhoeffer’s powerful engagement with the German Christians’ disregard for the Scripture has been seen in each of the previous errors discussed. That was true because the underlying source of all the German Christian errors was rooted here: They denied the authority of the Scripture as the revealed word of God

Bonhoeffer’s commitment to the authority of the Scriptures pervades the entire syllabus. A possible reason for that emphasis may be found in his personal experience. In 1932, after years of teaching theology and the Bible, he experienced a new relationship with God that was characterized by his relationship with the Bible itself. We have the letters he wrote to two people explaining this change. In January 1936, during the second class at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer wrote to his good friend, a theologian and pastor, Elizabeth Zinn, to whom he sent some Finkenwalde lectures for her comments.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., 166.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, “Editorial Footnote” in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 134.

He wanted her to understand his strong Biblical teaching at that time, which differed from his earlier experience at university.

But then something different came, something that has changed and transformed my life to this very day. For the first time, I came to the Bible. That, too, is an awful thing to say. I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it—and yet I was not yet a Christian but rather in an utterly wild and uncontrolled fashion my own master. I do know that at that time I turned the cause of Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, for my crazy vanity. I pray that it will never happen again . . . The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly and so have others around me.⁵³

Four months later he wrote to his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, with whom he enjoyed discussing the Scriptures and was anticipating another conversation during Easter.

Let me first admit quite simply: I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all of our questions, and that we merely need ask perpetually and with a bit of humility in order to get the answer from it. One cannot simply *read* the Bible like other books. One must be prepared genuinely to query it. Only thus does it reveal itself . . . The reason is that God is speaking to us in the Bible. And one cannot simply reflect on God on one's own; one must ask God. Only if we seek God, will God answer . . . Only if we finally dare come to the Bible assuming that the one speaking to us here really is the God who loves us and has no intention of abandoning us with our questions will we come to rejoice in the Bible . . . Thus do I read the Bible. I ask every passage: what is God saying to us here? And I implore God to show us what he wants us to say.⁵⁴

These two letters written in the midst of the second session, reflecting on his experience with the Bible four years previous, help explain why the Bible now permeated the daily atmosphere of this seminary in a way that some of the other programs thought was either odd or an antiquated pietism. Even Karl Barth raised questions. Replying to a

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, "To Elizabeth Zinn" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 134.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, "To Rüdiger Schleicher" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 167-8.

letter from Bonhoeffer about Finkenwalde, he said, “I was bothered in this piece by the smell –one rather difficult to articulate of a monastic eros and pathos”⁵⁵

The importance of the Scriptures to Bonhoeffer is illustrated best by the priority it was given in the daily life of the seminary. Surely, he defined the church by the words of the Scriptures; he defended his Jewish brothers and sisters by the words of the Scriptures; he presented the Jesus of history as the Jesus of the New Testament Scriptures who was prophesied in the Old Testament. But the others had done that as well. The other Confessing seminaries at Elberfeld, Naumburg, Bloestau and Bielefeld defended the Reformation confessions and Barmen. The difference was that, at Finkenwalde, every day in the life of every seminarian, the Scripture was given actual time, hours of a living day. As we saw in chapter two, Psalms were read daily and repeated for a week; at least half an hour daily of meditation on the Scripture was required, plus a reading from Luther’s Bible. The Scriptures were not just given lip service, but priority. Bonhoeffer knew the university programs that had given these young men theological training because he had received the same education. He was persuaded that if the Confessing Church were going to survive the onslaught of the Nazi state, its pastors would need a *deep and familiar* relationship with the Bible to defend it. His year-end report for 1936 of the seminary said,

As well as meditation, however, daily plentiful reading of the Scripture must keep its place. No day of our life in office may go past without our having read the Bible on it. The very controversies of the last months have once again clearly shown to our shame how unversed in Holy Scripture we still are. How ready people were to make the decision for or against the church committees dependent on all sorts of contingencies of this or that kind, instead of asking for and seeking out only the evidence of Scripture.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Karl Barth, “From Karl Barth” in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 268.

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, “End of Year Report for 1936” in *Way to Freedom*, 124.

In a lecture in Pomerania in 1938, while answering those who wanted the Bible to speak *too* specifically to questions regarding following the Councils of the Brethren, he said,

(People say) . . . Show us that from the Scriptures and we will follow. I want a proof from the Scripture in my pocket as a guarantee of the course I am following. But the Bible will never fulfill even that request because, it is not meant to be an insurance policy for our ways, which might possibly be dangerous. It does only one thing: it calls us to faith and obedience to the truth once recognized in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures do not prove courses of action but the truth of God. Scriptural proof does not free us from believing . . . So ultimately a proof from Scripture can be given only to those who are on the way, i.e. to believers.⁵⁷

This caring letter to a former candidate elucidates what he said in *Discipleship*.

“The idea of a situation in which faith is possible is only a way of stating the facts of a case in which the following two propositions hold good and are equally true: *only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.*”⁵⁸

The errors of the German Christians had two basic causes: an exaggerated hubris in regard to their own identity as a people and their denial of God’s revelation in history through the Bible. Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed the church and the nation of Germany could only survive the Nazi era by a return to the Scripture and the Reformation confessions. The Barmen Declaration provided a new confession of faith based on those two foundations. Bonhoeffer set about facing the heresy of the nation and church through uncompromising teaching and consistent practice of the Scripture. Despite Bonhoeffer’s tireless efforts, the Confessing Church floundered, there was still a World War, and most German people willingly followed their anti-leader. But Bonhoeffer did answer the errors, and he inspired a way forward after the war for those Finkenwalders

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Way to Freedom*, 177.

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 54.

who survived and worked to recover the church of Christ and the German nation from the rubble left by Hitler's tremendous folly.

Epilogue

HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT FINKENWALDE TODAY?

At Christmas 1942, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an essay, “After Ten Years,” looking back on the long struggle against Nazi policies. He gave it as a Christmas gift to his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and Hans Oster with whom he was involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler. In the essay is the poignant phrase, “Are we still of any use?” It was two-and-a-half years since the last seminary program was closed, and though the essay relates more to the plot, we can hear echoes in his questions about Finkenwalde as well. “Was it of any use?” The Confessing Church organization was in shreds in 1942, though many continued to fight. We can wonder if Bonhoeffer thought of them when he wrote,

Who stands his ground? Only the man whose ultimate criterion is not his own reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these things when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and exclusive allegiance to God.¹

And we read that he was not without hope in 1942, saying in that same essay,

I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil. For that purpose he needs men who will make the best use of everything. I believe that God will give us all the power we need in all times of distress, but he never gives it in advance lest we should rely on ourselves instead of him alone.²

Now seventy years later as we look back we read again our question at the beginning of this thesis: “How was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s structure of the curriculum and the common life of the seminary at Finkenwalde an antidote to the errors of the German Christian Movement?”

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 137.

² *Ibid.*, 142.

We discussed that question in three chapters. First, we looked at those errors and the struggle they produced in the church of Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. In chapter two, we looked at the seminary with its monastic structure and Biblical and confessional curriculum. In the third, we saw how Bonhoeffer and his candidates at Finkenwalde directly answered the errors the German Christian Movement with the very words of Scripture and modeled it in their communal life. The syllabus passionately and courageously defended the Barmen and Dahlem theses that declared the true nature of the Church of Christ and how it should be ordered.

The structure of Finkenwalde bound the seminarians together as brothers. Bonhoeffer was convinced that tangible fellowship in the Body of Christ was a crucial element in the proclamation of the Gospel and understood that bond to be stronger than the human tie of kinship.

. . . then we also belong to him in eternity *with* one another. We who live here in fellowship with him will one day be with him in eternal fellowship. He who looks upon his brother should know that he will be eternally united with him in Jesus Christ.³

Bonhoeffer designed a program of study and life that made the common life a reality for them, even when they were tempted to revolt because of its unfamiliarity and the effort it required to follow the order of the day.

Buried in that thesis statement, are two unasked questions. First, how did he know the very intense daily use of the Scripture was necessary? Second, why did Bonhoeffer design this program in the very orderly, monastic way with requirements that were so initially unpopular and made both insiders and outsiders very uncomfortable? The two

³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 24.

questions are interrelated. The first one is catechetical; how does the church continue to hear the Word of God? His letter to Rüdiger Schleicher, above, expressed his conviction.

One cannot simply *read* the Bible like other books. One must be prepared genuinely to query it. Only thus does it reveal itself . . . The reason is that God is speaking to us in the Bible. And one cannot simply reflect on God on one's own; one must ask God. Only if we seek God, will God answer . . . Thus do I read the Bible. I ask every passage: what is God saying to us here? And I implore God to show us what he wants us to say.⁴

Believers only hear and obey Jesus Christ by immersing themselves daily in the Bible. The habit does not come naturally. It is a learned behavior. Each day these young men were faced with time in the Bible. Bonhoeffer gave them the chance to practice hearing the Bible speak to them individually for 150 days in the hopeful expectation that it would become a life-long habit. He knew the errors of the German Christians were born of a secular view and could only be combated by a Biblical view. Every thesis of Barmen begins with Scripture; every argument by Bonhoeffer against the heresies of Nazi church was argued from the Scripture. Bonhoeffer's lectures and essays for his seminarians referenced particular verses in the Bible no less than 2300 times in the lectures and articles printed in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*.⁵

He also answered our question in the difference between the 1931 Catechism and the 1936. The 1931 catechism developed by Bonhoeffer and Hildebrandt was based on good theology and paraphrases of Scripture, but by 1936 the German Christian heresy had to be answered differently and with authority. Every one of 170 questions in that catechism was answered unequivocally with specific use of Scripture.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, "To Rüdiger Schleicher" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 168.

⁵ "Index to Scriptural References" in *Education at Finkenwalde*, 1099-1119.

The second unasked question is answered in *Life Together*, the book he gave to his seminarians in 1937, after the close of Finkenwalde. In the first pages, Bonhoeffer talks about exile--Jesus in the midst of his enemies, John alone on Patmos, Paul in prison in Rome. In *Life Together*, we see Israel scattered among strangers, but sustained by knowing God had called it as a people for himself.⁶ Also in Bonhoeffer's personal memory was the Abyssinian Baptist church in New York, whose African American members were in a real and painful sense exiles in the streets on which they lived, but were encouraged in their life with Christ when they met together as a body. In 1934, Bonhoeffer saw the Confessing Church as an exiled body in the secularized world of the German Christians and the Nazi powers. The Apostle Paul's model of the Body of Christ in Ephesians was the vehicle of hope. If the Confessing Church was going to remain the church of Jesus Christ, if the Scriptures were to be remembered, if Barmen was to be followed, Bonhoeffer believed that his seminarians needed to be formed into a community to learn brotherhood in order to sustain their faith when they were "in exile" in the small communities they would serve. *The Cost of Discipleship* spelled out clearly what he understood the term "Body of Christ" to mean. The program at Finkenwalde created a genuine family to which they belonged and in which they lived together as brothers under the headship of Christ. Later, *Life Together* would remind them what they had experienced in the old house near Stettin. They were still brothers even though they were scattered now among strangers, exiled in increasingly dangerous situations, being harassed by the Gestapo.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 17-20.

Looking again at Finkenwalde and the original question of this thesis, one is faced with an emotion approaching grief. Not because Dietrich Bonhoeffer failed to answer the errors of the Nazi-dominated Church. He didn't fail. The grief is for the loss of Finkenwalde. Finkenwalde did not last, nor did the courageous programs at Schlawe and Koslin. But Hitler's diabolical plan to control the church and the world lasted five more terrible years. Most of the young men who lived together for those ten sessions were forced into fighting Hitler's war. Eighty of them died in that war. Others died in concentration camps or spent months or years in prison. Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself was murdered just six weeks before Germany was defeated and Hitler committed suicide. But relatively few people know that Fritz Onnasch who led the program at Koslin and his father, Superintendent Friedrich Onnasch who housed the candidates were executed by Russians in Koslin in 1945-- or that eight of the first class of twenty three died in the war, including Confessing pastor Horst Lekszas, member of first House of the Brethren. But Eberhard Bethge did survive and became a pastor to students in Berlin in the house at Marienburger Allee 43, where the Gestapo had picked up Bonhoeffer on April 5, 1943. Later, Bethge became his friend's biographer. Albrecht Schönherr survived to lead the Christian church successfully through the miasma of Communist era in East Germany. Wolf Dieter Zimmermann lived and became head of a radio service and wrote books on Bonhoeffer. Hans Georg Berg and Wolfgang Busing, both of the House of the Brethren, also lived; Busing went to England to help Bonhoeffer's friend, Bishop George Bell, minister to Jewish Christians. Berg sacrificially served churches in the Communist zone in Kolberg, Belgrade, Pomerania and Oldenberg. Wolfgang Schrader from the first Finkenwalde class led a church in East Germany and Alfred Schroder, from the fifth

class, was pastor in West Germany but courageously helped churches in the eastern zone.

In 1945, at the end of the war, both the German Christian controlled German Evangelical Church and the Confessing Church were battered. Hitler's insane determination to win and the overwhelming defeat by the Allies left much of Germany in ruins. The Confessing Church worked to restore the church of Germany despite the divisions created at Potsdam. Besides Albrecht Schönherr, mentioned above, Kurt Scharf and Otto Dibelius, Confessing Church pastors, served as bishops in the Communist controlled eastern zone. And tucked away in an ignored corner of East Germany in Lueckendorf, pastors trained by those who had known Finkenwalde continued the syllabus and community life that Bonhoeffer had designed. The seminary continued for several years, and was under the direction of Werner Krusche from 1958 -1966.⁷ The Reich Church, however, did not rear its head again. "The 'German Christian Movement which had controlled wartime Protestantism in Germany had been totally discredited.'"⁸.

Because Bethge survived, we know about Bonhoeffer and Finkenwalde. In the last sixty years, more has been written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer than perhaps any other twentieth century theologian. Can we benefit from what Bonhoeffer accomplished at Finkenwalde? We do not live in Hitler's world, thank God. But the church in the twenty-first century faces another form of secularism—again an accommodation to a different culture. Could a program like Finkenwalde provide a solid base for our uncertain, self-conscious church? Bonhoeffer designed the seminary to be a microcosm

⁷ Werner Krusche, *Ich Werde Nie Mehr /Geuge Spielen Konnen, Erinnerungen* (Stuttgart, Radius Verlag, 2007), 200-252.

⁸ James R. Edwards, "The Barmen Declaration and the Fall of the Berlin Wall" in *The Edwards Epistle*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (Mount Holly, NJ, Philip Olson), 3.

of the true church of Jesus Christ. In five months, the seminarians would “go out” to serve, but knowing they were a genuine part of Christ’s church. Finkenwalde existed for only five years, but if we think of it as a ship that has passed by, its wake is still spreading out on the waters of the world.

If once again we have forgotten how to be the church, perhaps we need a form of Finkenwalde—a short seminary program, dorm in a college or university, or a short-term monastery—not permanent or self-perpetuating. Bonhoeffer had strong words to say about “visionary communities” that demand that God perpetuate their dreams.⁹ Nor would he be happy to see us try to duplicate his seminary; it was for that time. *Life Together* reminds us that Christian community is a not “an ideal but a divine reality”.¹⁰ But for the good news of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ to be effectively brought to this generation, we need the two emphases at Finkenwalde—a serious adherence to the Scripture as God’s word to us, and his other gift, the blessed brotherhood of Christ’s Body with him as the head.

Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize the ground and strength and promise of our fellowship in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray for it.¹¹

Bonhoeffer’s program was an antidote for his time. Can it point the way for ours?

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

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