

One of the best and most important books ever written on Christian community is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer is perhaps best remembered for his foiled attempt at assassinating Hitler that led to his execution just days before he would have been freed from prison by Allied forces. He is justly regarded as a Christian martyr and one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century. While his theology was often quirky, he was determined to apply the gospel to the nationalistic idolatry that gripped his native Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. He was a man of fierce and courageous integrity. He could have remained safely ensconced from his native land in England, where he was working as a theology teacher, but when he determined that the faithful anti-Hitler Christians in Germany needed him, he returned home. He sacrificed his own peace, comfort, and safety for the sake of his brethren.

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer explores various facets of Christian community. The book carries the sense of urgency that you might expect, given the circumstances of its writing: Bonhoeffer penned this treatise to tell the story of the kind of community he and others experienced as part of an underground seminary during the time of Nazi reign. The book captures the essence and heart of the gospel-shaped life -- a life of communal service, love, and encouragement.

Bonhoeffer says that the “fact that we are brethren only through Jesus Christ is of immeasurable significance.” His point is that we share brotherhood with others who have been called by the gospel. The basis of our brotherhood is found outside ourselves, in Christ, not in anything in ourselves. Thus, the “other person has been redeemed by Christ, delivered from his sin, and called to faith and eternal life. Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. This is true not merely at the beginning, as though in the course of time something else were to be added to our community; it remains so for all the future and to all eternity. I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the

one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.”

We have Christ as we have one another. Christ gives himself to us in and through each other. Thus, there is a profound sense in which we should be satisfied with the community as it exists. “That dismisses once and for all every clamorous desire for something more. One who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere; he is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood. Just at this point Christian brotherhood is threatened most often at the very start by the greatest danger of all, the danger of being poisoned at its root, the danger of confusing Christian brotherhood with some wishful idea of religious fellowship, of confounding the natural desire of the devout heart for community with the spiritual reality of Christian brotherhood. In Christian brotherhood everything depends upon its being clear right from the beginning, *first, that Christian brotherhood is not an ideal, but a divine reality.*”

Bonhoeffer then attacks overly idealistic views of community that serve to keep at us at arm's length. He says that what often leads to the break down of Christian community is what he calls, “a wish dream.” The wish dream stems from the desires of a serious Christian who has “a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be,” and then tries to realize it. “But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. . . . By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world.” Bonhoeffer argues that the sooner an individual or community becomes disillusioned with their wish dream the better. All of us must learn to embrace the community *that is*, not the community that *we wish there were*. We must not impose our dreams on the community but fulfill our obligations to the community as it stands. We cannot hold ourselves aloof until the community begins to approximate our image of what it should be. “A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse. Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a

community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

This wish dreaming turns us into discontent complainers who make demands on others rather than cheerfully serving: “God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.”

We must learn to see that Christian community is a gift to be received, not a wish-dream to be imposed: “Because God has already laid the foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients . . . 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 that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.”