

STUDY GUIDE

GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS

FOUR SESSIONS

BONHOEFFER

A Four-Session Study on the Life and Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ERIC METAXAS

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF AMAZING GRACE

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The Life and Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ERIC METAXAS
WITH CHRISTINE M. ANDERSON



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Group Size

The *Bonhoeffer* video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any small group gathering. To ensure everyone has enough time to participate in discussions, it is recommended that large groups break up into smaller groups of four to six people each.

Materials Needed

Each participant should have his or her own study guide, which includes notes for video segments, directions for activities and discussion questions, as well as personal studies to deepen learning between sessions.

Timing

The time notations—for example (20 minutes)—indicate the *actual* time of video segments and the *suggested* times for each activity or discussion. For example:

✦✦ Individual Activity: What I Want to Remember
(2 minutes)

Adhering to the suggested times will enable you to complete each session in 90 minutes. If you have only one hour for your meeting, you will need to use fewer questions for discussion. You may also opt to devote two meetings rather than one to each session. In addition to allowing discussions to be more spacious, this has the added advantage of allowing group members to read related chapters in the *Bonhoeffer* book and to complete the personal study between meetings. In the second meeting, devote the time allotted for watching the video to discussing group members' insights and questions from their reading and personal study.

Group Practice

Each session ends with a suggested application activity for group members to complete *together* between sessions. Although the activity is completed outside of the group meeting, it's a good idea to look over the group practice before concluding the meeting to clarify any questions and to make sure everyone is on board.

Facilitation

Each group should appoint a facilitator who is responsible for starting the video and for keeping track of time during discussions and activities. Facilitators may also read questions aloud and monitor discussions, prompting participants to respond and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate.

Personal Studies

Maximize the impact of the curriculum with additional study between group sessions. Every personal study includes reflection questions on Bonhoeffer's life and teaching as well as a Bible study and a guided prayer activity. You'll get the most out of the study by setting aside about thirty minutes between sessions for personal study, as well as additional time to complete the group practice activities.



SESSION 1

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The movement upward [toward God] cannot be separated from the movement toward our neighbor. Both belong indissolubly together . . . Standing under God's rule means living in community with God and with the church.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*

✦ Welcome!

Welcome to Session 1 of *Bonhoeffer*. Each of the four sessions in this study is designed to be completed in 90 minutes. If you have only one hour for your meeting, you will need to choose fewer questions for your discussion. You may also opt to devote two meetings rather than one to each session.

If this is your first time together as a group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to each other before watching the video. Then let's begin!

✦ Watch Video: What Is the Church? (20 minutes)

Play the video segment for Session 1. As you watch, use the outline provided to follow along or to take additional notes on anything that stands out to you.

NOTES

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and a theologian. He had a passion for truth and a commitment to justice on behalf of those who face implacable evil.

Bonhoeffer was a member of the *Igel* (pronounced "eagle") fraternity at Tübingen University in 1923. *Igel* is the German word for hedgehog.

Karl Bonhoeffer wanted his children to think clearly—to follow rigorous logic to a conclusion and not be sidetracked by emotions. This was part of the Bonhoeffer family culture.

At eighteen, Bonhoeffer decided he wanted to spend a semester studying in Rome. There, he encountered a larger vision of the church:

The universality of the church was illustrated in a marvelously effective manner. White, black, yellow members of religious orders—everyone was in clerical robes united under the church. It truly seems ideal.¹

At twenty-one, Bonhoeffer completed his doctorate on the topic, "What is the church?"

At twenty-two, he spent a year in Barcelona, Spain, as the assistant vicar at a German-speaking church.

At twenty-four, he studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Bonhoeffer's cosmopolitan upbringing and the rigorous tradition of thinking clearly led him to think beyond national lines when it comes to the church.

Bonhoeffer's characteristics:

- He was not afraid to question things.
- He was always considering both sides of an issue.
- He was willing to think things through rigorously and never rejected anything out of hand.
- He was committed to a pure search for the truth. This meant asking, "What is God's idea of Germany?" Ultimately, this led him to reject Hitler and the political doctrine of the Nazi party called National Socialism.

What does this mean for us today?

1. *We have to consider Bonhoeffer's idea of a pure search for truth.*
 - We have to ask, "Am I just accepting tradition?"
 - What did the first-century church do? What did Jesus do? What are we to do?
 - We must have the confidence to be willing to question things.
2. *We need to take seriously the question, "What is the church?"*
 - Do we think along the lines of, "My church is the only real church"?
 - What does God say about the church? What are the non-negotiables for God?
 - You may have theological differences with someone, but does that put them outside God's church?

We ought to be challenged, and to think these things through without fear.

To confess and testify to the truth as it is in Jesus, and at the same time to love the enemies of that truth, his enemies and ours, and to love them with the infinite love of Jesus Christ, is indeed a narrow way. To believe the promise of Jesus that his followers shall possess the earth, and at the same time to face our enemies unarmed and defenseless, preferring to incur injustice rather than to do wrong ourselves, is indeed a narrow way . . . If we regard this way as one we follow in obedience to an external command, if we are afraid of ourselves all the time, it is indeed an impossible way. But if we behold Jesus Christ going on before step by step, we shall not go astray.²

✠✠✠ **Group Discussion** (50 minutes)

Take time to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

2. Attending a mass in Rome, the eighteen-year-old Bonhoeffer witnessed an "ideal" picture of Christian community when he saw "white, black, yellow members of religious orders . . . united under the church." Having been raised in a German Lutheran congregation, it was an experience that gave Bonhoeffer a much larger vision of the church.

- Why does it matter so much—for Bonhoeffer and for us—that the church is “universal”?

- What are the potential dangers when the definition of “church” is too closely associated with one culture or nationality?

- In what subtle or not-so-subtle ways do you think North American Christians today might be susceptible to blending cultural or national values into their understanding of the church?

3. Drawing on your own experiences, what vivid pictures come to mind when you think of the “ideal” church, or the church when it’s at its best? For example, as with Bonhoeffer, it might be something you experienced in communal worship. Or it could also be something you experienced in relationship with someone, or something you witnessed in the world, etc.

What foundational truth or truths about the church are embodied in the experience you just described? In other words, based on your experience, how would you complete the following sentence: *The church is . . .*

4. Among the first pictures the Bible provides of the church—and one that Bonhoeffer relied on in describing his understanding of the church³—is the following passage from Acts 2. Go around the group and have a different person read each verse aloud. As the passage is read, underline any words or phrases that stand out to you.

⁴²All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. ⁴³A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—⁴⁷all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47 NLT)

- What connections, if any, do you make between this description of the church and the personal experience you shared in response to question 3?
- At the mass in Rome, Bonhoeffer witnessed something beautiful he'd never experienced in church before. As you read the passage from Acts 2, what stood out most to you as something you've never experienced in church before but would like to? What is it about this expression of Christian community that you find especially compelling?

A PURE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

5. Bonhoeffer was not afraid to question things; he was willing to consider both sides of an issue and to think things through rigorously. Eric Metaxas described this as Bonhoeffer's willingness to engage in a "pure search for truth." In an emerging Nazi state, this search for truth led him to wrestle with the question, "What is God's idea of Germany?"

- How do you feel about asking the question, "What is God's idea of my country?" In what ways might it be a productive question? In what ways might it be an unproductive question?

- When it comes to the role of the church in the political sphere, we tend to err in one of two extremes: by either avoiding political issues altogether or by making political issues a litmus test of faith. How would you describe the dangers of both extremes? As part of your response, consider the potential impact of either approach on people both within and beyond the church.

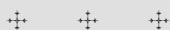
6. Metaxas suggested that we have to be willing to question things in order to pursue the truth. For Bonhoeffer, this included not merely accepting the traditions and cultural expressions of the German Lutheran church he'd grown up in, but going back to the biblical texts and wrestling with the question, "What is the church?"

- How would you describe your comfort level when it comes to asking questions about the church that may not have easy answers?
- Based on your own church experiences, would you say the Christian community is open to questions and encourages thinking things through rigorously? Or does it tend to avoid exploring questions in favor of explaining answers?

GROUP LIFE

OPTIONAL GROUP DISCUSSION: THE MINISTRY OF LISTENING

Use this discussion if time permits, or if you are devoting two meetings to each session rather than one.



An essential component of Bonhoeffer's life and legacy was his commitment to intentional Christian community, which he wrote about in his book, *Life Together*. Throughout this study, each session includes an optional discussion that is devoted to learning from Bonhoeffer specifically about Christian community, and to reflecting on your life together as a group.

(cont.)

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer devotes a chapter to describing various "ministries" that are to characterize authentic Christian community. Among them, he states that the first service we owe to others is the "ministry of listening."

The beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them . . . Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon no longer be listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life . . .

Secular education today is aware that often a person can be helped merely by having someone who will listen to him seriously, and upon this insight it has constructed its own soul therapy, which has attracted great numbers of people, including Christians. But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by him who is himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.⁴

- Briefly recall a time when someone listened to you in the way Bonhoeffer describes. Based on that experience, how would you describe what it means to "listen with the ears of God"?
- According to Bonhoeffer, listening is something we learn to do, which assumes some trial and error. If you were to somehow fail to listen well in this setting, how

would you want the other members of the group to bring this to your attention *within the context of the group*? In other words, if it happens within the group, it needs to be addressed within the group—so how do you want the group to help you *learn* listening when you fail to listen well?

7. In addition to learning about Bonhoeffer together as a group, it's important to also be aware of how God is at work *among you*—especially in how you relate to each other and share your lives throughout the study. As you discuss the teaching in each session, there will be many opportunities to speak life-giving—and life-challenging—words, and to listen to one another deeply.

Take a few moments to consider the kinds of things that are important to you in this setting. As you anticipate the next few weeks of learning together in community, what do you need or want from the other members of the group? Use one or more of the sentence starters below, or your own statement, to help the group understand the best way to be a good companion to you throughout this study. As each person responds, use the two-page chart that follows to briefly note what is important to that person and how you can be a good companion to them.

It really helps me when ...

I tend to withdraw or feel anxious when ...

I'd like you to challenge me about ...

I'll know this group is a safe place if you ...

In our discussions, the best thing you could do for me is ...

Name	The Best Way I Can Be a Good Companion to This Person ...

Name	The Best Way I Can Be a Good Companion to This Person ...

✦ Individual Activity: What I Want to Remember (2 minutes)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session—from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session . . .

NOTE: Each session in the *Bonhoeffer* study includes a group practice activity for group members to complete *together* between sessions. Although the activity is completed outside of the group meeting, it's a good idea to look over the group practice before concluding the meeting in order to coordinate plans or to clarify any questions group members may have.

GROUP PRACTICE: DISCOVERING A LARGER VISION OF THE CHURCH

Bonhoeffer's ideas about the church were challenged and shaped by his experiences in diverse settings and cultures—Rome, Barcelona, and New York City—as well as diverse worship styles (Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, Afri-

can American, etc.). Sometime during the duration of this study (and ideally within the next week or two), attend a church service together in your community where the worship style or cultural setting differs from that of your own church. Observe, listen, and talk to those you meet. Afterward, have coffee or share a meal together to talk about how worshiping with the larger Christian community both challenges and enriches your understanding of the church.

As an option, also consider learning more about how various churches—including your own—respond to the question, “What is the church?” Visit the websites for two or three diverse local churches (or visit denominational websites) and print out each one’s statement of faith (sometimes simply called “what we believe”). Most statements of faith will include a section specifically about the church. Note the similarities and differences between what each statement says about the role and purpose of the church. Bring your observations and questions to the next group discussion.

✠✠✠ Closing Prayer

Close your time together with prayer.

SESSION 1 PERSONAL STUDY

✠✠✠ Read and Learn

Read the introduction and chapters 1 – 11 of the *Bonhoeffer* book. Use the space below to note any insights or questions you want to bring to the next group session.

✠✠✠ Study and Reflect

To think of the church as something universal would change everything and would set in motion the entire course of Bonhoeffer's remaining life, because if the church was something that actually existed, then it existed not just in Germany or Rome, but beyond both. This glimpse of the church as something beyond the Lutheran Protestant Church of Germany, as a universal Christian community, was a revelation and an invitation to further thinking: *What is the church?*

ERIC METAXAS, *BONHOEFFER*, PAGE 53

1. Bonhoeffer's ideas about the church were shaped by many factors, including his upbringing in the German Lutheran church, his mother's faith, his academic work in theology, and his experiences in diverse cultures and worship settings.

Use the following list to briefly identify some of the factors that may have shaped your ideas about the church. Check the box next to any items that prompt a specific memory in you associated with church.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Early childhood | <input type="checkbox"/> People at church |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Young adulthood | <input type="checkbox"/> Christian books and resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parents | <input type="checkbox"/> Christian media (television, radio, movies, digital) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Extended family members | <input type="checkbox"/> Church attendance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teachers/mentors | <input type="checkbox"/> Small group Bible studies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pastor | <input type="checkbox"/> Church scandals in the news |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student ministry leader | <input type="checkbox"/> International travel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Neighbors | <input type="checkbox"/> Church buildings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Colleagues | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friends | |

2. Review the items you checked in question 1 and circle two: one that represents a positive memory and one that represents a negative memory. Briefly describe each memory below.

My positive memory related to church ...

My negative memory related to church ...

How have these experiences shaped your ideas about the church?

3. Bonhoeffer understood very clearly the failings of the church as well as its divine purpose:

The church is a piece of the world; forsaken, godless, beneath the curse: vain, evil world—and that to the highest degree because she misuses the name of God, because in her God is made into a plaything, an idol. Indeed, she is an eternally forsaken and anti-Christian piece of the world in that she proudly removes herself from her solidarity with the evil world and lauds her own self. And yet: the church is a piece of qualified world, qualified through God's revealing, gracious Word, which she is obliged to deliver to the world which God has occupied and which he will never more set free. The church is the presence of God in the world. Really in the world, really the presence of God.⁵

In what ways do you recognize something of your own experiences and view of the church in Bonhoeffer's statement?

4. The New Testament writers use several metaphors to describe the church. For example:

- *A flock* (Luke 12:32; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2)
- *The body of Christ* (Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Colossians 1:24)
- *The bride of Christ* (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:31–32; Revelation 19:7–8)
- *God's family* (2 Corinthians 6:18; Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 5:1–2)
- *A spiritual house or temple* (Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 2:4–5; 1 Timothy 3:14–15)

Choose one or two of the metaphors that interest you and read the associated passages in your Bible. What do you find intriguing or insightful about this image of the church?

How does this image of the church challenge or affirm the experiences you wrote about in question 2?

5. Bonhoeffer believed that the church was Christ's presence on earth:

Since the ascension, Christ's place on earth has been taken by his Body, the Church. The Church is the real presence of Christ. Once we have realized this truth we are well on the way to recovering an aspect of the Church's being which has been sadly neglected in the past. We should think of the Church not as an institution but as a *person*, though of course a person in a unique sense.⁶

Bonhoeffer specifically distinguishes between the institution of the church and the divine reality of the church in Christ. Drawing on your responses to questions 1–3 and what you've learned about Bonhoeffer's perspective, make two lists that state your own perspective about what the church is and is not. For example, "The church *is not* a building," "The church *is not* defined by race," "The church *is* made up of people who follow Christ," etc. Write down four to six statements under each heading.

The church is not . . .

The church is . . .

What do your statements reveal about what's important to you when it comes to the church?

6. In his book *Psalms*, Bonhoeffer writes about the presence of God in the church and what is required of God's people in response:

What Mount Zion and the temple were for the Israelites the church of God throughout the world is for us—the church

where God always dwells with his people . . . God has promised to be present in the worship of the congregation . . . Christ brought in himself the sacrifice of God for us and our sacrifice for God. For us there remains only the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in prayers, hymns, and in a life lived according to God's commands (Psalms 15 and 50). So our entire life becomes worship, the offering of thanksgiving.⁷

Read Psalm 15, which describes the characteristics of those who dwell in God's sanctuary, the church. Drawing on the psalm as a reference, use the space below to write your own prayer. Acknowledge the questions you have about the church and ask for God's guidance. Invite God to help you with those things that keep you from making your "entire life worship." Thank him for his presence in your life and in the church.