

Ankeny UCC Life Together Study Guide
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Chapter 1: Community

In the opening section of Life Together, Bonhoeffer offers his view of Christian Community. What is meaningful to you that, "it is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament"?

Have you been cut off from Christian community before?

What is it about the physical presence of other Christians that might bring joy?

Bonhoeffer says that "what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day." In a city with churches on every corner, we have ample opportunity for Christian community. Who might be the lonely individuals in Ankeny?

Through and in Jesus Christ

What does it mean that Christians need others through Christ and only come to others through Christ? Is it important that he starts with Christians and not with Others?

Have you ever "confused Christian brotherhood with some wishful idea of religious fellowship, [confounded] the natural desire of the devout heart for community with the spiritual reality of Christian brotherhood?" What do you think that means for you?

Not an Ideal but a Divine Reality

Why is it important that community is not an ideal but a reality?

Bonhoeffer writes that a serious Christian "is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams." Bonhoeffer thinks this is a good thing. Do you agree? Have you seen what he is talking about?

A Spiritual, not a Human Reality

What is the difference between a spiritual and emotional (or human) reality for Bonhoeffer?

What does Bonhoeffer see as the danger of human love in a Christian Community? What is the challenge of human love? How is it related to human absorption, in Bonhoeffer's view?

Have you ever encountered the phenomenon where "Human love cannot tolerate the dissolution of a fellowship that has become false for the sake of genuine fellowship, and human love cannot love an enemy, that is, one who seriously and stubbornly resists it"?

Bonhoeffer writes "the exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ." Do you agree? How has this been a challenge to you in your church life? Or has it?

Chapter 2 The Day With Others

The Day's Beginning

"Common life under the Word begins with common worship at the beginning of the day." Have you ever practiced a form of common worship at the beginning of the day? What was it?

Do you ever feel "the beginning of the day [is] burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day's work?" How might starting the day with worship change that?

The Secret of the Psalter

Bonhoeffer asks, "How can God's Word be at the same time prayer to God?" How can it be? What does Bonhoeffer think? What do you think?

The "imprecatory psalms" are ones that ask God to punish specific people, sometimes in graphic ways. What's Bonhoeffer's answer to how we pray those psalms? Is it a satisfying answer for you? What other answers might you find?

Bonhoeffer's idea of Christian community is centered in Christ's life as a person, in whom we find ourselves. How does praying the "psalms of unspeakable misery and suffering" speak to this understanding, and what does it mean to pray them "because all this suffering was real and actual in Jesus Christ"?

Reading the Scriptures

Would you find it a challenge to "read and listen to a chapter of the Old Testament and at least half of a chapter of the New Testament every morning and evening?" Why? Do you agree with Bonhoeffer that this should be a source of "profound shame" among adult Christians?

Midway through the chapter, Bonhoeffer advocates the consecutive reading of Biblical books (53 in my copy). How have you found yourself in the story of the Bible?

Have you participated in Bible reading by reading different verses in turn? What was your experience?

Singing the New Song

Describe a time a hymn or spiritual song has "expressed the fact that our spoken words are inadequate to express what we want to say, that the burden of our song goes far beyond all human words."

Do you think "there is no place in the service of worship where vanity and bad taste can so intrude as in the singing"? What do you think of Bonhoeffer's rant toward the end of the section (60 in my book)?

Saying Our Prayers Together

Have you experienced that "There is no part of common devotions that raises such serious difficulties and trouble as does common prayer, for here we must ourselves begin to speak"?

How do you pray? What would it mean to pray not "the chaotic outburst of a human heart but the prayer of an inwardly ordered fellowship?"

How do you think of the balance between a perhaps-monotonous repetition of the same petitions week after week and the risk of a too-individualistic accent in prayer? Do you see any conflict?

"It will happen again and again that the person who is charged with offering the prayer for the fellowship will not feel at all in the spiritual mood to do so, and will much prefer to turn over his task to another for this day." Discuss.

How can "the poorest mumbling utterance be better than the best-formulated prayer"?

The Fellowship of the Table

How can we make the fellowship of the table (during communion) have a festive quality?

Bonhoeffer reiterates "Not until one person desires to keep his own bread for himself does hunger ensue." In a world full of materialism, how do challenge the fear that leads to hoarding and hunger?

Does the message that sharing bread with one another allows us to receive the imperishable bread together in [God]'s house bring you comfort?

The Day's Work

What does it mean to you that "every word, every work, every labor of the Christian becomes a prayer...in a real breaking through the hard 'it' to the gracious Thou"? Do you get this I-Thou thing?

"The organization of our day will be better for having been rooted in prayer." Is that your experience? Do you ever feel that your day has been disorganized and is in need of a central discipline?

Noonday and Evening

One of Bonhoeffer's more challenging statements is that "We cannot simply take it for granted that our work provides us with bread; this is rather God's order of grace." Why do you think Bonhoeffer talks about bread in this way?

"It is a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that every dissension that the day has brought be healed in the evening."

Chapter 3: Life Alone

"The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion." What does this mean to you?

Solitude and Silence

"Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live rightly in the fellowship." What does Bonhoeffer mean here? What has your experience been of the relationship between aloneness and fellowship?

"Silence does not mean dumbness, as speech does not mean chatter." What is silence, then?

"There is such a thing as forbidden, self-indulgent silence, a proud, offensive silence." Bonhoeffer seems to be working to confuse us. What does a proud, offensive silence look like? How can we tell the difference?

Meditation

Have you ever been hesitant to meditate? Or worried that you aren't doing it right? What do you think Bonhoeffer has to offer to you? What are his recommendations for Christian meditation?

Prayer

What is Bonhoeffer's recommendation if we find our minds wandering during our meditations? Why might this be useful?

Intercession

Why does Bonhoeffer think "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses"? What is intercession? Similarly, why is it "clear that intercession is not general and vague but very concrete?"

Chapter 4 Ministry

Bonhoeffer frames his chapter on ministry with the idea that "Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together." What does he mean?

The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue

"But to speak about a brother covertly is forbidden, even under the cloak of help and good will; for it is precisely in this guise that the spirit of hatred among brothers always creeps in when it is seeking to create mischief." Have you ever seen this in a church community? What was its effect?

Have you ever found the freedom Bonhoeffer describes in "being able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place"?

IS it "well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community," to know they are "not useless, but usable?"

The Ministry of Meekness

Do you agree with Bonhoeffer that you should be "willing and ready to accept even insults and injuries without protest, taking them from God's punishing and gracious hand"?

What does it mean to consider yourself "the greatest of sinners"?

What does it mean that "a Christian community does not consist solely of preachers of the Word?" How can "we...go monstrously wrong here if we overlook a number of other things"?

The Ministry of Listening

How can we listen with the ears of God, as Bonhoeffer puts it?

The Ministry of Helpfulness

What does it mean to not "assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God?"

The Ministry of Bearing

"The weak must guard against pride, the strong against indifference." What might this have meant in Bonhoeffer's time? Where do you see it today?

The Ministry of Proclaiming

In the beginning of the section, Bonhoeffer lifts up challenges to proclaiming the word of God to other people in fellowship. What are some of them? What is he talking around? Why does he spend so much time on reasons we might not want to bring God into a conversation with others?

The Ministry of Authority

"His authority lies in the exercise of his ministry. In the man himself there is nothing to admire." What does this sentence have to say about pastoral leadership in Ankeny today?

Chapter 5 Confession and Communion

Bonhoeffer criticizes, "The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship." What's the problem here? How does confession address it?

Breaking Through to Community

Is it a "hard struggle until sin is openly admitted?" How?

Breaking Through to New Life

Bonhoeffer says that Confession is conversion. How might it be the renewal of the joy in baptism, as he argues?

Breaking Through to Certainty

Why does Bonhoeffer urge against relying on self-forgiveness?

To Whom to Confess/Two Dangers

Who does Bonhoeffer say should hear confessions? And why does he caution against one person hearing all confessions?

The Joyful Sacrament

Bonhoeffer has a high standard for communion: "All anger, strife, envy, evil gossip, and unbrotherly conduct must have been settled and finished if the brethren wish to receive the grace of God together in the sacrament. But to beg a brother's pardon is still not confession." What's the difference, and how do we do as a church?