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The Courage to Stand
Bonhoeffer's Journey and Ours

by Richard E. Burnett

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young Lutheran pastor who stood for the gospel of Jesus Christ, who resisted the Nazification of his church, who eventually decided to join a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, and who was hanged as a consequence of his involvement in this plot, his story is familiar to many.

Bonhoeffer's life has inspired many because he bore faithful witness in one of the most severe periods of testing of Christians, especially Protestant Christians, in the twentieth century. Where would Protestants be on the world's stage in the twentieth century without Bonhoeffer's witness? He was a strong, resolute, courageous young theologian who confessed the faith and not only wrote a book about the cost of discipleship, but he paid the price for it with his life. Under enormous pressure, he stood bold and unbending. In the face of great temptation, he was unwavering, unyielding, firm, and unflinching in his commitment to lay down his life for the sheep.

Yet Bonhoeffer was not always so bold and unbending. Few biographers mention it, but there was a period when he was *not* so firm and unflinching, so strong, resolute, or unwavering. There was a time when he was quite weary, confused, and anxious.

I do not know if you have known times when you were quite weary, confused, or anxious, but I have. And I thought it might be helpful to think with you about this time in Bonhoeffer's life, and to ask if there is anything we can learn from his journey about our own.

Bonhoeffer's Upbringing and Education

Bonhoeffer grew up in a prominent, elite, highly educated family in Berlin, the sixth of eight children, the youngest of four sons. His father, Karl, was a world-renowned psychiatrist and neurologist on the faculty of the University of Berlin and Director of the famous university hospital *Charite*. Biographers claim he was ambivalent about religion, if not an agnostic. What is clear is that the Bonhoeffer family rarely went to church. Dietrich's older siblings saw the church as a pathetic, mediocre institution that existed primarily to promote middle class values. So, when he announced at age fourteen that he was going to become a pastor, his older siblings teased him and told him that "the church to which he proposed to devote himself was a poor, feeble, boring, petty, bourgeois institution," to which young Dietrich replied, "In that case I shall reform it."[1]

He began his studies at the University of Tübingen in 1923 when a debate erupted in the pages of the most prestigious church journal, *Die christliche Welt*. It was between the most esteemed, influential, and internationally renowned scholars in Germany, Adolf von Harnack, Professor of Church History at the University of Berlin, and a young pastor from an obscure Swiss village who had written a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,

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Karl Barth. A theological revolution led by Barth had emerged and was attracting younger pastors and theologians in Germany, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Professor von Harnack was trying to put a lid on it. His article was entitled, "Fifteen Questions to Those Among the Theologians Who Are Contemptuous of the Scientific Theology," to which Barth immediately responded, "Fifteen Answers to Professor von Harnack." Caught up in this revolution, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin the next year to study under Harnack, who was a friend and colleague of his father. Despite this family connection, Dietrich's classmates reported that he repeatedly challenged Professor Harnack in class, defending the theological revolution Barth had begun.

Bonhoeffer was a brilliant student of theology. At age twenty-one, he wrote a brilliant doctoral dissertation entitled, *Sanctorum Communio*. It is remarkable not only because of its content but because he defended it successfully under the most theologically liberal faculty in the world. His teachers, von Harnack, Karl Holl, and Reinhold Seeberg, were all renowned theological liberals. Despite their disagreements, Bonhoeffer respected them, and they respected him. He had earned their respect because (as 'classical liberals') they admired his scholarship. Indeed, they respected him so much that the following year, 1931, they approved him as a lecturer in Systematic Theology at the University of Berlin.

The German Church Struggle

By 1931, however, it was clear to most that the Weimar Republic, Germany's first experiment in democracy, was failing and, with social, economic, and political pressures mounting, was on the verge of collapse. Fears, not unfounded, of a Bolshevik revolution loomed, terrifying most Germans, including most Christians, and leading many to vote for the National Socialist Party, which gained thirty-seven percent of the popular vote in 1932. Thus, after a long period of political gridlock, President Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor. Hitler was sworn in on Jan. 30, 1933. Bonhoeffer and his family were distressed and openly expressed their concerns.[2]

On Feb. 27, the Reichstag, Germany's main government building in Berlin, was set ablaze, allegedly, by a young Dutch Communist, Marinus Van der Lubbe. About the size of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C., the Reichstag was completely gutted by the fire, which sent the nation into panic. For Germany, it was a kind of 9/11 experience, only worse because it proved, according to the Nazis, how dangerous the Communists within the body politic were and how desperate the situation was.

A state of emergency was declared on Feb. 28 which was the first step toward suspending civil rights such as the right to privacy, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, etc. On March 23, a law for "Removing the Distress of People and Reich" was enacted which transferred legislative power from the Parliament to the Chancellery, giving Hitler unprecedented powers—powers to declare martial law and turn Germany essentially into a police state. On April 7, a law for "the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" was passed that prohibited any non-Aryan from holding public office, including professors, teachers, and ministers in the German Evangelical (*Evangelisch* i.e., Protestant) Church.

Days later, Bonhoeffer delivered a lecture, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in which he stated that the church is obliged "to aid the victims of state action," even if they "do not belong to the Christian community." If this fails, he said, the church must act "not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself."[3]

Bonhoeffer spent the next six months rallying the church, helping its leaders to understand what was happening and to recognize that they were facing a confessional crisis (a *status confessionis*), a time when the church must speak and act or else betray the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the German Evangelical Church was deeply divided and various groups in the Church had different ideas about what to do. There was: 1) a group of younger pastors known as the "Young Reformers," who wanted to split and start a new "free church," independent of the main body; 2) there was a "Young Church" group (*Junge Kirche*) who took a "'tread softly' and 'take it easy' attitude" toward what was happening[4]; 3) and then there were the so-called "German Christians," a highly vocal minority, who stood in favor of a Nazified church, a church that was aligned with the values and reforms championed by the new Nazi government. Indeed, if there was ever a group convinced that they were on 'the right side of history,' it was they.[5]

It was in the middle of this boiling cauldron of ecclesial chaos that Bonhoeffer bore witness to Jesus Christ by teaching, preaching, counseling, exhorting, admonishing, debating, persuading, having meeting after meeting, one hard conversation after another, trying to convince his friends, his students, and his colleagues to go in one direction rather than another. It must have been exhausting. Yet he was there in the middle of what came soon to be known as the *Kirchenkampf*, the church struggle.

He was there when Karl Barth, then professor of Dogmatics at the University of Bonn, published a pamphlet on June 25, entitled, *Theological Existence Today!*, which awakened many in Germany and throughout the world to the crisis the German Church and the German people now faced. Bonhoeffer came to know Barth personally when he attended a seminar Barth taught at Bonn in 1931. Barth became his mentor. They corresponded. He

became not only increasingly close but also helpful to Barth because Bonhoeffer was not only a bright young theologian, but he was also a Berliner who had his finger on the pulse of much that was going on inside both the Church and the State.

Bonhoeffer was also very helpful to Martin Niemöller, pastor of the Dahlem congregation in Berlin, in organizing the Pastor's Emergency League. Niemöller was a decorated U-Boat Commander in the First World War whose patriotism could hardly be questioned. He sent out a four-point pledge to all the ministers in the Church, asking them whether they would still stand, according to their ordination vows, "bound solely to Holy Scripture and to the Confessions of the Reformation," and would, on this basis, reject the so-called "Aryan Paragraph," as a violation of their confessional stand. Seven thousand pastors responded that they would.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1933, Bonhoeffer was in the middle of it all—delivering lectures, preaching sermons, writing letters, drafting essays, and using his diplomatic and interpersonal skills to gather, inform, awaken, and motivate church leaders to speak and to act. And more and more, they looked to him for leadership.

Time to Go into the Wilderness

But then, abruptly, in mid-October, when so much was still up in the air, when so many decisions had yet to be made, when most pastors still had no idea what a confessing church was, let alone what it would cost to become one—amid all this chaos and confusion—Bonhoeffer simply walked away. He left Germany to serve two small congregations of German refugees in London, England. Many wondered why.

On Oct. 24, a week after arriving in London, he wrote to Barth to explain. He said that he "wanted to write six weeks ago" and "Why I did not write to you then is now almost incomprehensible to me. … I knew that you were busy with a thousand other things …" He told Barth that he knew he should have asked him first, but he said: "I knew that I would have to do what you told me and I wanted to remain free; so I simply withdrew myself." He asked Barth "to forgive [him]." And then he explained: "I simply did not any longer feel up to the questions and demands which came to me. … I was afraid I would go wrong out of obstinacy—and I saw no reason why I should see these 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 and simply do pastoral work, with as little demands as possible. The danger of provoking a reaction at the present moment seemed to me greater than that of going off for some quietness. So off I went."[6]

Bonhoeffer talked about having always wanted to be a pastor, about his pastoral duties, and about his desire to do ecumenical work, not least for the sake of the German Church. But he felt torn. He said, "[I] receive news almost daily from Berlin about the state of affairs. That almost tears one apart inside. And now you will soon be in Berlin and I cannot be there. It also occurs to me that I have let you down personally by my going away. Perhaps you will not understand that." He concluded: "I think of you and your work very often, and where we would be without it. Would you please let me have your frank opinion on all this? I would be ready, and thankful, I think, even for a sharp word."[7]

Hurry Back to Your Post in Berlin!

If Bonhoeffer was asking for some tough love, he got it. Few biographies of Bonhoeffer mention his exchange with Barth at this time, and none give it the attention it deserves. But it had a profound influence on Bonhoeffer, which I will seek to demonstrate. It has certainly given me a lot to think about over the years, and I wonder if it has anything to say to you. It is deeply personal. It yields deep insight into how *theology mattered* to these men at one of the most stressful periods in their lives. And even if you have never read one page of Barth or Bonhoeffer, I think you will understand much that is at issue here.

Bonhoeffer said he wanted to hear from Barth, even if it is "a sharp word." On Nov. 20, Barth wrote to him:

> You can infer from the way in which I address you that I do not consider your retreat to England as anything but a necessary personal interlude. Once you had this matter on your mind, you were quite right not to seek my wise counsel first. I would have advised you against it entirely, and probably by bringing up my heaviest guns. And now, as you mention it to me after the fact, I can honestly not tell you anything but 'Hurry back to your post in Berlin!'
>
> What is all this about 'getting distance,' 'the quietness of pastoral work,' etc., at a moment when you are needed just now in Germany? You, who know as well as I do that the opposition in Berlin and the opposition of the church in Germany as a whole stands inwardly on such weak feet! That every honest man should be fully absorbed in making our opposition sharp and clear and firm! That now perhaps everything is falling apart not because of the supposedly great power and cunning of the German Christians, but because of the pig-headedness, stupidity, and desperate shallowness of, of all people, the anti-German Christians![8]

In other words, it was not that the Nazified German Christians were so strong or clever. It was that the other groups were so weak, dull, and theologically superficial. Bonhoeffer had expressed a similar frustration working with these groups. And now he risked losing friends.

Losing and Finding Friends

He told Barth: "I felt that 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."[9] Barth said bluntly what Bonhoeffer tried to say politely. Working with such groups was indeed frustrating. It was 'worse than herding cats,' which is why the unity granted six months later at Barmen was such a "miracle."[10]

Neither man knew such a miracle would come, but that did not absolve them from doing their duty *now*, which is why Barth told Bonhoeffer he could not just run away:

> One can now under no circumstances play Elijah under the juniper tree or Jonah under the plant, but must shoot with all barrels! What use is the praise you lavish on me—from the other side of the channel?! What use was the message which your student gave me when I was busy having it out with the brilliant 'council of brethren' of the Emergency League instead of your being there and supporting me against these brethren?[11]

Barth was sarcastic in referring to "the brilliant 'council of brethren' of the Emergency League." He *did not* think them brilliant. Their leader was Martin Niemöller, the former U-Boat commander, whom Barth was just getting to know. Bold, decisive, Niemöller was in some ways 'a piece of work.' He was used to giving orders, not taking them. Even his colleagues in ministry said that sometimes from "the tone of the voice of the former submarine commander at meetings in his parish house, they could have sworn they were sitting in the officers' mess."[12]

But what Niemöller lacked in theological knowledge or professional tact or etiquette he made up for in courage. In 1952, Barth said their relationship had gone more or less like this: "Martin, it amazes me that despite drawing upon so little theology, you still almost always come out at the right place," to which Niemöller replied: "Karl, it amazes me that despite drawing upon so much systematic theology, you still almost always come out at the right place."[13] They were so different and had such different gifts and personalities. But having stood together for the faith, they could laugh about it in 1952 because they did not let such differences stand in their way in 1933. They both knew the stakes were simply too high, which is what Barth was trying to communicate to Bonhoeffer:

> Look, I have now been to Berlin twice in recent weeks and I think that I know rather well what is going on there. I have also tried my best to grab the helm and steer in a different direction, and I have also had some degree of success; but if things are to turn out well, I will need a quite, quite different kind of success, and so I went away from the place very depressed, particularly the second time. Why weren't you there to pull on the sail with me, the sail that I could hardly raise by myself? Why aren't you always there, where now so much could depend on there being a few courageous people on the watch at every occasion, great or small, and trying to save what there is to be saved? Why, why?[14]

And the German church?

Barth turns the screws in tight here. Yet he, too, was feeling enormous pressure as leader of the emerging Confessing Church; and it is understandable why he wanted Bonhoeffer at his side in these meetings. Bonhoeffer was a highly respected young theologian in Berlin. He had paid his dues and earned the right to be heard in the academy and, increasingly, in the church. At the University of Berlin, he was the only student asked to speak at Professor von Harnack's memorial service in 1930.[15] He was also a very popular lecturer. Three hundred students attended his lectures on Creation and Fall in the winter semester of 1932–33. Bonhoeffer was such a credible, articulate, effective leader from such a prominent, well-connected family in Berlin, it is easy to understand why Barth wanted him near. He tells Bonhoeffer that with his "splendid theological arsenal," especially compared to others in the fight, he ought to be "a little ashamed" not to be using it.[16] Barth continues:

> Look, I gladly assume, as I have already said, that this retreat was personally necessary for you! But I must be permitted to add, 'What does even "personally necessary" mean at the present moment?!' I think that I can see from your letter that you, like all of us—yes, like all of us!—are suffering under the quite enormous difficulty of taking 'certain steps' in the present chaos. But should it not dawn on you that that is no reason for withdrawing from this chaos, that we are rather required in and with our uncertainty, even if we should stumble or fail ten times or a hundred times, to do our bit, whether we then help our cause or damage it? I will just not allow you to put such a private tragedy on the stage in view of what is at stake for the German church today, as though there were not time afterwards, when if God will we have got a little way out of this mess again, for the study of the different complexes and inhibitions from which you suffer, as indeed others also must. No, to all the reasons or excuses which you might perhaps still be able to put in front of me, I will give only one answer: 'and the German church?' 'And the German church?'—until you are back again in Berlin to attend faithfully and bravely to the machine-gun which you have left behind there.[17]

What does Personally Necessary Mean?

Barth rejects all of Bonhoeffer's excuses and "special considerations."[18] He grants that his "retreat was person-

ally necessary," but he refuses to let him hide behind personal necessity, asking, "What does even 'personally necessary' mean at the present moment?" Barth refuses to let Bonhoeffer set personal considerations up as an obstacle to discipleship. And if you have read *The Cost of Discipleship*, you will remember that Bonhoeffer examines in detail the various 'personal' excuses various would-be disciples give in Luke 9:57–62.

Barth and Bonhoeffer were challenging a basic premise of modernity, namely, the idea that we are all *first* free, independent, self-determining, self-actualizing agents, individuals, or persons *before* we belong to God or *before* we are called by God—as if we were 'persons' apart from our call, or that we have an identity apart from our calling as disciples. By contrast, Barth, and later Bonhoeffer, argued that it is only in fulfilling God's calling on our lives that we truly become persons or individuals, or that we have an identity. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer devotes an entire chapter to this theme, entitled, "Discipleship and the Individual."[19]

One Simply Cannot Become Weary Just Now

Barth does not sugar-coat the task or minimize the cost of the battle. Nor does he try to lure Bonhoeffer back by any prospect of victory. Rather, he says:

> I cannot really give you the prospect of taking part in a triumph, when I ask you to return to Germany. Here everything is as difficult and unpleasant as you can imagine, and as far as one engages in tactical or historical-philosophical thought even a little bit, one can realize every moment that—the sea rages and will have its victims—in spite of all efforts, the German church is still lost.[20]

Is this not amazing? Barth recognized as early as November 1933 that "in spite of all efforts, the German church is still lost," that the situation was hopeless, impossible, a lost cause, humanly speaking. Yet he not only continued to fight, to bear witness, to stand faithful, to do his duty. He encouraged and, indeed, he compelled others to do the same. Yet notice that Barth also admits his own struggle against weariness. Referring to some of his recent writings as an example, he says:

> You will see … how much trouble I myself have had in not becoming weary. But, you see, one simply cannot become weary just now. Still less may one go to England! What in all the world should and would you want to do over there? Be glad that I do not have you here in person, for I would confront you even more intensely in quite a different way, with the demand that you must now let go of all these intellectual flourishes and special considerations, however interesting they may be, and think of only one thing, that you are a German, that the house of your church is on fire, that you know enough and can say what you know well enough to be able to help, and that you must really return to your post by the next ship. Well, shall we say the ship after next? But I cannot tell you emphatically and urgently enough that you belong to Berlin and not to London.[21]

The House of Your Church is on Fire

Barth saved his most importunate plea for last: "think of only one thing, that you are a German, that the house of your church is on fire, that you know enough and can say what you know well enough to be able to help …"

There is a lot of talk today about Christian nationalism. Barth and Bonhoeffer were not nationalists in the sense that they absolutized or divinized nationhood, entertained romantic forms of nationalism, or thought they owed unconditional allegiance to their respective nations.[22] On the contrary, both delineated the limits of state power, and stated conditions when it could be actively resisted. Both also insisted that the church has a divine responsibility to the state and a divine obligation to acknowledge its gratitude for the state as the Barmen Declaration's Fifth Article makes clear. Moreover, both insisted that Christians have civic duties, responsibilities to one's fellow citizens, and there is a proper form of patriotism and gratitude for and responsibility to one's country.[23]

I Was Greatly Mistaken

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had asked for a "sharp word" from Karl Barth, and he got one. Yet Barth had deep affection for him, and this was not the end of their relationship but only the beginning.[24] It was also only the beginning of Bonhoeffer's journey in finding the courage to stand. Barth's letter no doubt made a deep impression on him, and it is hard to imagine it did not shake him. Indeed, he was so "impressed" that he sent Barth's letter to his father, the world-renowned psychiatrist, perhaps for analysis. And the world-renowned psychiatrist observed, "It is striking testimony to a fiery spirit."[25]

Yet that is not all he said. Do you remember that I said biographers claim Bonhoeffer's father was ambivalent toward religion, if not an "agnostic"?[26] Perhaps he was. Whether he remained so, I am not sure anyone knows. But here is what the world-renowned psychiatrist wrote to his son, Dietrich, a year or so later, on Jan 14, 1935:

> When you made up your mind to study theology, I sometimes could not help thinking that it would be a pity for you to have the quiet, uneventful life of a minister, such as I knew my Swabian uncles had … . As far as it being uneventful is concerned, I was greatly mistaken. I had no conception, with my scientific background, that nowadays there could be such a crisis in the ecclesiastical sphere too.[27]

Karl Bonhoeffer was not the only scientist or agnostic to wake up to a deeper crisis facing Germany as a consequence of the witness of his son and the Confessing Church. There were many scientists, agnostics, and cultured despisers of religion who were awakened as a consequence of the witness of the Confessing Church in the 1930s.[28] It is this witness that I would like to talk with you more about next time.

This address was delivered on March 4, 2026, at the fifth Theology Matters' conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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[1] See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision—Man of Courage* (New York, 1970), 22.

[2] The next day, Feb.1, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio talk on "*The Leader and the Individual in the Younger Generation*," in which he said that a leader could become "an idol for the masses" and that "If [the Leader] does not continually tell his followers quite clearly of the limited nature of his task and of their own responsibility … then the image of the Leader will pass over into the image of the misleader." Cited in Renate Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 66f. This last part of his radio talk, however, was cut short "allegedly because it ran over time." Furious, Bonhoeffer had his lecture published in a newspaper.

[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question" in *Berlin: 1932–1933: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, ed. Larry Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 361–374.

[4] "I have also just now been reading the *Junge Kirche* on the matter, glad of any information, but really quite distressed by the 'tread softly' and 'take it easy' attitude which holds the field. Can't anyone see that the German Christians will just laugh at opponents who speak and behave like this? God help the German church if the opposition from within the church, which is so badly needed just now, cannot get hold of other viewpoints and other principles and, above all a different language, instead of this brave and yet so fearful muddle which is all one can see at the moment." Letter from Barth to Bonhoeffer, Sept. 11, 1933, *Gesammelte Schriften* II (München: Christian Kaiser, 1965), 129 (hereafter GS II); ET *No Rusty Swords*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 233.

[5] See Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[6] Bonhoeffer to Barth, Oct. 24, 1933, GS II, 132; ET 235–236.

[7] Bonhoeffer to Barth, Oct. 24, 1933, GS II, 133–134; ET 236–237.

[8] Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 134; ET 237–238.

[9] Bonhoeffer to Barth, Oct. 24, 1933, GS II, 132; ET 235.

[10] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-62), II/1:176.

[11] Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 134–135; ET 238.

[12] Ferdinand Schlingensiepan, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 128.

[13] See *Bekennende Kirche. Martin Niemöller zum 60. Geburtstag* (Festschrift) eds. Joachim Beckmann and Herbert Mochalski (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1952), 9.

[14] Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 135; ET 238.

[15] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Life in Pictures*, 72.

[16] "With your splendid theological arsenal and your upright German stature, should you not perhaps be almost a little ashamed at a man like Heinrich Vogel, who, wizened and worked up as he is, is just always there, waving his arms like a windmill and shouting 'Confession! Confession!' in his own way—in strength or in weakness, that doesn't matter so much—actually giving his testimony?" Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 136; ET 239. Barth's admiration of Vogel grew. Two years later he dedicated his lectures on the Apostles' Creed, *Credo*, to Vogel, Niemöller, Hans Asmussen, Hermann Hesse, Karl Immer and "all who stood, stand, and will stand."

[17] Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 135–136; ET 238–239

[18] "Don't you see yet that an age of completely undialectical theology has dawned, in which it just won't do to keep oneself in reserve with a 'Perhaps—but again, perhaps not!'? Don't you see that any Bible verse you like formally cries out to us that we, lost and condemned sinners, should now simply believe, believe, believe?!" Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 136; ET 239.

[19] For more on this topic, see William H. Willimon, "Why a Pastor Should Not Be a Person," *Theology Today* 50:4. (Jan. 1994), 580–585. See Bonhoeffer's, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 92–99, esp. the reference to Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* in 92N2. See also Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:222–285 (¶45).

[20] Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 136; ET 239.

[21] Barth to Bonhoeffer, Nov. 11, 1933, GS II, 136–137; ET 239–240.

[22] Carys Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[23] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *True Patriotism. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1939–45* from the *Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, vol, 3, ed. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden. "[I]f 'patriotism' means an awareness and love for the reality of one's national heritage, then on this count alone Bonhoeffer would earn the title of 'true patriot'" Keith Clements, *A Patriotism for Today: Love of Country in Dialogue with the Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1986), 87.

[24] For more insight into their relationship, see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

[25] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie* (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1967), 380; ET *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 326.

[26] Owing to Karl Bonhoeffer's "austerity," Renate Wind speculates: "It is hard here to tell how much imagination and emotion Dietrich learned to suppress in himself as an adolescent," Wind, *Spoke in the Wheel*, 23. However, this is not how Karl Bonhoeffer's children describe his influence.

[27] Eberhard Bethge, *Costly Grace*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 26.

[28] Bonhoeffer discusses this phenomenon in *Spiritual Care*, trans. Jay C. Rochelle (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 48f.

Evangelism

By Raymond I. Hylton

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. My sisters and brothers, the Lord is with you! It's truly an honor to be with you at your inaugural PFTK conference.

The Holy Spirit is moving and bringing new life in many ways and in many places, and Presbyterians For the Kingdom is, in my view, a sign of what the Holy Spirit is doing, bringing hope to the Presbyterian Church, and to mainline bodies that have lost their way. My prayer is that this will be the first of many conferences to come.
Prayer: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, We gather under Your authority and in Your mercy. Purify our hearts in holiness. Steady our minds in what is good and true. Strengthen our resolve as we persevere in the faith once delivered to us. And awaken in us passion and boldness for evangelism. Open your Word to us now. Reorient our fears. Reignite our love. Send us not as managers of outcomes, but as witnesses of Your reign. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, and the Holy Spirit. One God, now and forever. Amen.

I want to begin with a confession. If you say the word evangelism in many Presbyterian or mainline circles, the emotional temperature drops several degrees, and anxiety and consternation spike.

As Rebecca Manley Pippert observes in *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*: Christians and non-Christians have something in common: We're both uptight about evangelism.[1]

Why is that so? For many of us, it stems from a heavy sense of guilt or simple fatigue. For others, it's the fear of saying the wrong thing. Often, it's a more fundamental gap: a lack of training or the kind of deep discipleship formation that turns a duty into a natural overflow of the heart. Many are unwittingly influenced by Origen's unorthodox, universalist view of salvation: When universalism takes root in a denomination or movement, you can expect:

Decreased emphasis on conversion.
Reduced missionary sending.
Less clarity about repentance and faith.
Greater focus on social ethics than proclamation.
Evangelism reframed as dialogue rather than summons.
Or out of suspicion.

Finally, we struggle with the E word because all of us feel the weight of cultural resistance.
We live in a world that feels less like Jerusalem and more like Galilee—pluralistic, skeptical, spiritually crowded, politically tense. A world where faith is tolerated privately, but contested publicly.
And yet it is precisely in Galilee that Jesus gives the Great Commission. That is not accidental.

I. The Context

If you have your Bible with you, let's turn to Matthew 28:16–20 "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.""

Notice how Matthew gives us geography before command. Jesus started his ministry in Galilee: Matthew 4:15–16: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Matthew says, this was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus, the Light of the World, began His ministry in Northern Israel—a region scarred by the Assyrian conquest of the eighth century BC. What was once the heart of the kingdom had become 'Galilee of the Gentiles,' a crossroads of foreigners, ethnically and culturally blurred. It was a polyglot of competing religious and pagan practices—and under the weight of Roman oppression, a land simmering with political instability. Into this very darkness, the Light dawned. For faithful Jews, Galilee was not the center of purity and power; we are talking about the margins. Messy, mixed, and morally unpredictable.

Jesus started his ministry, and now he launches his disciples to continue his ministry from this region. And then notice Matthew's stunning line in verse 17: "When

they saw him, some worshiped him; but some doubted." Some were hesitant, uncertain, given all that transpired with the arrest, crucifixion, and now resurrection of Jesus. But here's the hopeful thing: The Great Commission is not given to spiritual elites. It is given to worshipers whose faith is still trembling. That alone recalibrates how we think about evangelism. Evangelism does not flow from certainty. It flows from allegiance.

II. **Authority Before Activity**

In vs. 18: Jesus comes near and says, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Before command, comes coronation. Before strategy, there is sovereignty. Evangelism does not begin with charisma, programs, or persuasion. It begins with this reality: We are not trying to install Jesus as King. We are announcing that he already reigns. And so orthodoxy anchors evangelism here. If Jesus has all authority, then witness is not salesmanship. It is testimony to truth.

I want you to notice what Jesus does not do. He does not remove their doubts, he redirects their gaze. Their confidence is not located in their psychological stability. It is located in his cosmic authority. That my sisters and brothers is HOPE. Jesus reigns!

III. **What Exactly is the Command?**

Look at Matthew 28:19–20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

You know this, but it is worth repeating: The force of the command is not to make converts, but while going, Jesus says, make disciples. This is the church's perennially incomplete task. In case you are wondering, disciples are apprentices of the King. Baptism is public allegiance to the King. You tell the world you belong to the King. Teaching is sustained formation. That's why orthodox teaching in our congregations is essential to the task of discipleship and formation. Obedience is the visible shape of loyalty to the King. For pastors, church leaders, and seminary professors, this matters profoundly to the future of healthy, vibrant, disciple-making congregations.

Friends, the Great Commission is not merely about increasing decisions, or adding names to the membership roll. It is about forming communities of embodied obedience. If we reduce evangelism to an altar call, but neglect apprenticeship, we truncate the Commission. This is important. The gospel is not just how you get saved; it is how you make sense of all of life. Evangelism is not simply about helping someone pray a prayer. It is inviting them into a completely new way of being human under the reign of King Jesus. The Church does not exist to produce spiritual consumers; it exists to cultivate surrendered disciples who make disciples, who make disciples. That is evangelism in its full biblical weight.

IV. **Two Traps in Galilee of the Nations to Avoid**

When Christians face a pluralistic, pagan culture, we tend to fall into one of two traps:

1. **Avoidance**

And we heard that yesterday in Sarah's helpful message, didn't we? In an effort to maintain what we think is holiness, we retreat into safe subcultures, or Christian bubbles, with Christian jewelry, Christian plumbers, and Christian restaurants. Sure, we preserve orthodoxy, but we lose proximity.

2. **Assimilation**

We blend so thoroughly into culture, worship the same idols, adopt the same cultural values around sexuality, and the same passions, that our distinctiveness disappears, and we have nothing to offer the culture around us.

In both cases, the church becomes invisible and irrelevant. We lose our saltiness. But Jesus offers a third way: Engaged distinctiveness. So holiness is not retreat, nor is it dissipated by blending in. It becomes luminous difference.

In a culture ruled by consumerism, holiness looks like contentment. In a culture of outrage, holiness looks like patience. In a culture of self-creation, holiness looks like joyful surrender. And in a culture of anxiety, holiness looks like settled trust. A holy church makes the gospel visible before it is verbalized.

The late R.C. Sproul once said that the purpose of witnessing is to make something manifest that is hidden —that it is the task of the church to make the invisible kingdom visible. We do that by proclamation, yes. But also by modeling justice, mercy, and the life of God in community. That is what Jesus is forming in Galilee— not a marketing team, but a visible colony of the kingdom of God.

V. **Called to be Witnesses, Not Managers of Outcomes**

This is where evangelism often collapses for leaders. We subtly begin acting like managers of outcomes. *If I say it right. If I structure it well and memorize my lines. If I build the right program.* But Jesus has already said, All authority has been given to me. The first act of evangelism is relinquishing control.

Years ago, my mother tried to "manage" my father's return to faith. He had walked away. He was antagonistic toward the church. Alcohol had hollowed him out. My mother debated him, gave him books he never read, pressed arguments he resisted, invited him to church, and preached at him.

There came a point where she was exhausted. Finally, she prayed a simple prayer: "Father, I can't change Vivian. I give him back to you." She stopped managing. She stopped arguing. She started trusting. She prayed. She listened. She loved. Many years later, Judith and I were married. We have a little baby girl; my father visits us during Thanksgiving. He loves to cook. He is standing in our kitchen with Judith, and Judith gently asks him, "Papa, when are you going to surrender your life to Jesus?" My dad broke down and started weeping. You see, the Holy Spirit had been calling, wooing his heart for years, in ways we didn't see. He saw the love and witness of his children and his wife. He heard more than the gospel; he saw the gospel in living colors through our lives. And that Thanksgiving, he opened his heart, and he believed and surrendered his life to Jesus. My mother's surrender made room for God's sovereignty. Evangelism begins when we stop managing outcomes and start bearing witness to what the Father is already doing.

VI. **What Galilee-Shaped Evangelism Looks Like in Practice**

Let me tell you where I first saw this lived out. I grew up in Jamaica, baptized and discipled in a vibrant Pentecostal church. It was there I learned to pray, to read Scripture, to love people who did not yet know Jesus. Evangelism was not a program. It was not a script. It was not anxiety. It was the natural overflow of a life with God. No one pressured us into techniques. No one taught us any techniques. We were formed in worship, holiness, and prayer — and from that soil, witness grew naturally. Healthy churches make evangelism feel normal. That is what I mean by Galilee-shaped evangelism.

We see it embodied in St. Paul. In Athens (Acts 17), he walks the city of Athens before he speaks. He listens. He observes. He quotes their poets. This is presence before proclamation. To the Thessalonians, he says he shared not only the gospel of God but his own life as well. This is relational credibility. And throughout his ministry, Paul trusts the Spirit's power. He knows conversion is not something he manufactures. Faithfulness is ours; transformation is God's.

Evangelism in our moment may look less like pressure and more like prayer. Less like closing a deal, and more like listening. Less like selling and more like loving.

VII. **The Spirit's Outward Movement**

Luke tells us what happens next. Before the disciples launch into mission, Jesus tells them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses." Notice the geography and the range of their witness—Jerusalem. Judea. Samaria. Ends of the earth.

In other words, witness at home to people like you, to people you avoid. In places you fear. The Spirit always moves outward. The Spirit's power is not given to make us impressive. The Spirit is given to make us witnesses. The Triune God is already at work in your Galilee. We are not bringing Jesus into dark spaces. We are naming the light already shining in those dark places.

VIII. **Leadership-Level Application**

Let me speak directly to pastors and church leaders. What would it look like for your ministry context to become a community of witnesses rather than a vendor of religious goods? What if evangelism were not a department, but a culture? A Culture:

Where prayer for neighbors is normal.
Where hospitality is intentional.
Where questions are welcomed.
Where holiness is visible.
Where discipleship is rigorous and joyful.

If we want evangelistic churches, we must form evangelistic disciples.

James Montgomery Boice once said that the greatest hindrance to evangelism in the world today is the failure of the church to supply evidence in her own life and work of the saving power of God.[2] And he is right. The world does not need a louder church. It needs a truer one which practices the following:

Clear teaching.
Deep community.
Visible obedience.
Non-anxious leadership.

The greatest hindrance to evangelism today is not hostility from the culture. It is the absence of embodied evidence in the church. But when a community lives under the authority of King Jesus, trusts the Spirit, and loves its neighbors, evangelism ceases to feel like an intrusion. It feels like an invitation.

IX. **The Promise**

Matthew ends with this--"I am with you always, to the end of the age." Then Acts begins with the promise--"You will receive power."

Taken together: you are not alone. You are not the source. You are not the manager. You are a witness. As you leave this conference, you are walking down the mountain and back into your Galilee. In a secular culture, evangelism looks different than it did in a nominally Christian one. You cannot assume shared authority, shared vocabulary, or shared moral instincts. So the approach must be patient, relational, and clear.

Here is what it actually looks like on the ground. First, start with presence before persuasion. In a secular setting, trust precedes truth claims. Show up. Work well. Listen carefully. Be the kind of person whose life raises quiet questions. In Acts, Paul reasoned in synagogues, but he also lived among people. Credibility matters.

Second, learn the cultural story people are living inside. Secular culture is not neutral; it has its own beliefs about freedom, identity, happiness, spirituality, and progress. Ask thoughtful questions: What do you think makes a good life? What gives you hope? What do you fear losing? Evangelism begins by understanding the longings underneath objections.

Third, frame the gospel as good news, not cultural nostalgia. The message of Jesus Christ is not "return to the 1950s." It is the announcement that the crucified and risen King is Lord. In Matthew 28, King Jesus confronts every rival authority—career, self-definition, politics. In secular culture, that will sound exclusive. But clarity is kindness.

Fourth, expect questions and don't panic. In John 1:46, Nathanael asks, "Can anything good come from Galilee?" Philip does not collapse into a debate. He says, "Come and see." You do not need exhaustive certainty to invite someone into exploration. Doubt does not disqualify witness.

Fifth, make the church visible. Secular people often distrust institutions but are moved by embodied community. Invite them to dinner before you invite them to church. Let them see repentance, forgiveness, and joy in real time. Evangelism is both proclamation and demonstration.

Sixth, be explicit at some point. Kindness alone is not evangelism. There must come a moment when you articulate who Jesus is, what he has done, and why allegiance to him matters. In secular settings, people may respect your faith for years without ever knowing what you believe unless you say it plainly.

Finally, pray for courage and patience. Evangelism in our secular age is often slow. It may take years. You are not closing a deal; you are bearing witness. The outcome belongs to the Spirit. In a culture like ours, where professional identity and influence are central currencies, evangelism often begins by quietly but visibly living under a different authority. When someone asks why you make certain decisions, forgive certain offenses, or resist certain compromises, that is your opening.

The Triune God is already there. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And God's witnesses say, amen!

Would you pray with me?

Father of all authority, we praise You that the kingdom is not fragile, and the mission is not ours to manage.
Lord Jesus Christ, risen and reigning over heaven and earth, forgive us for the ways we have tried to control what belongs to Your sovereign hands. Forgive us for fear. Forgive us for silence. Forgive us for speaking without love. Holy Spirit, You who go before us into every Galilee, free us from anxiety about outcomes. Make us faithful witnesses. Give us courage without harshness, clarity without pride, patience without passivity. Form in us churches that are luminous with holiness, anchored in truth, steadfast in perseverance, and joyful in evangelism. Teach us to pray for names, not numbers. To love people, not projects. To embody the gospel we proclaim. As we leave this place and descend the mountain, send us into our Jerusalems, our Judeas, our Samarias, and to the ends of the earth—confident not in our strength, but in your promise: "I am with you always." Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, keep us faithful until the end of the age. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

This address was delivered on March 2, 2026, at the Presbyterians for the Kingdom conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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[1] Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 15.

[2] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 112.

The Good Deposit of the Gospel

Are You Investing in the Next Generation of Leaders?

By Douglas G. Pratt

As I move closer to the finish line of my life and ministry (or, to change the metaphor, as more of my experiences are visible in the rear-view mirror than out the front windshield), I wonder more and more if my life's work will remain. Will those who follow after me care about the values I held? Will they maintain the ministries I have committed myself to help build?

During the final years of my ordained pastorate (now forty-seven years) and moving into retirement from full-time service, I am repeatedly drawn to my current favorite book of the Bible, 2 Timothy. We believe this is the final letter the great Apostle wrote. He gives us this clue in the fourth and last chapter: "The time for my departure is near" (2 Timothy 4:6).

Last words are very significant. We are drawn magnetically to the final words of our Lord before His crucifixion (the Upper Room Discourse and Prayer in John 13–17), and then the final words before His ascension (Matthew 28 and Acts 1). Final words tend to be the most important, memorable, and significant.

In 2 Timothy we find Paul repeatedly using the Greek word, "paratheke." Apparently, this was uppermost on his mind as he approached his personal finish line. The word in the New International Version is translated "entrusted." It is what a person would do with their valuable and precious possessions to ensure their protection and preservation.

This concept is of huge importance to our modern life and occupies a substantial part of our national economy. Preserving money and valuables is why we have created banks, pension funds, insurance companies, financial planners, IRAs, etc. We demand that they be reliable and trustworthy stewards of our assets. Usually, they are. But nearly a century ago we witnessed the failure of those who were "paratheke" or "entrusted," when banks collapsed during the Great Depression and families' life savings were wiped out. To prevent that from happening again the government created the Federal Deposit Insurance Company and other safeguards.

In the ancient world of scripture there were no banks or other institutions. If a person was going on a trip, they needed to "paratheke" or "entrust" their assets to another individual who would be reliable. It was a significant concern—and, in a spiritual sense, very much on the mind of Paul. Entrusting our assets and our legacy is also a natural concern for anyone approaching the end.

In the space of a few verses of 2 Timothy we find the concept of "entrusting" used in three separate ways:

(1) In 2 Timothy 1:12, Paul has confided that he has *entrusted* his own most precious assets—his immortal soul and his life's work of building the church—to the keeping of God. And he is totally confident in the Lord's trustworthiness (which gives us an even greater security than the U.S. government can provide).

(2) Then, having entrusted what is of greatest value to God, Paul tells us two verses later in 1:14 that God has *entrusted* to us that which is of greatest value: the Gospel the spread of His kingdom. This is why serving the Lord is the highest of all possible callings—of even greater importance than governing a nation, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, etc. (And when I have the opportunity to talk with young men and women wrestling with career decisions, I challenge them to see their life's work through a spiritual prism).

(3) After a few words about some individuals to conclude chapter one, Paul returns to his primary theme of "entrusting" at the beginning of chapter two. The essential strategy for how followers of Christ can fulfill the sacred trust of the Gospel is spelled out clearly in verse 2: "the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, *entrust* to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." Put simply, the only way the church can survive from generation to generation is if we raise up, teach, equip. and support those who will follow us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great twentieth century German martyr, is a powerful role model. In opposition to the Nazi government and the corrupted state church, he labored to teach faithful young German pastors who

would not bow the knee. He is quoted as saying, "A righteous person is one who lives for the next generation."

In my own final years of ministry, I have felt the growing concern within my heart to do what I can to help raise up another generation of Christian leaders. It has been proven repeatedly that churches and ministry organizations can only flourish up to the level of their leaders. And because of our mortality, even the best leaders only have a short tenure. Whatever our job title might be, we are all actually just Interims.

Cultural headwinds are blowing hard against the church in the western world (especially since the decline and in some places collapse of the moral consensus of values we refer to as "Christendom"). The task of raising up new leaders is even more crucial than in previous years and deserves more intentional planning and effort by the church. We cannot take for granted that the places of those of us who are retiring or departing as leaders will automatically be filled by equally or more competent replacements.

Specific tactics we need to employ will include:

1) Recruiting and motivating young people to take up the cause of the Gospel for their careers. We need the best and the brightest to embrace the highest of all callings—even though we face competition from other professions that may seem more lucrative or have higher social prestige.

2) Supporting financially and personally students who undertake the high level of education and training needed to equip excellent leaders (especially in a climate where the cost of formal education has soared way beyond inflation, and where crushing student debt loads can become a severe personal handicap).

3) Mentoring (both prior to and during the critical early years of ministry).

4) I am greatly encouraged to see *Theology Matters* involved in extensive networking with others across the Reformed community to further this timely vision. My prayer is that many current pastors and church leaders will embrace the priority of the raising up and equipping of our next generation of men and women—to whom we may "entrust" the life-changing Gospel.

Christian author Ernest Campbell reminds us of the God-ordained rhythm of life with these words:

> To be young is to study in schools we did not build; to be mature is to build schools in which we will not study.
>
> To be young is to swim in pools we did not dig; to be mature is to dig pools in which we will not swim.
>
> To be young is to sit under trees we did not plant; to be mature is to plant trees under which we will not sit.
>
> To be young is to dance to music we did not write; to be mature is to write music to which we will not dance.

This address was delivered on March 5, 2026, at the fifth Theology Matters' conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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Many know that theology matters. Some know that it is important. Yet relatively few know that good theology does not simply happen. Theology requires time, talent, energy, and resources to nurture, cultivate, produce, and distribute. Would you please help us "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:12)? Would you make a gift today?

Please visit our website: www.theologymatters.com/give.

Why Study Theology?
From Doctrine to Devotion

By Jonathan Sundermeier

What is the purpose of theology? Put differently, what is doctrine for? I have found myself returning to that question after completing my first year of seminary and preparing to continue my theological education this fall at a new institution. As I anticipate another year of lectures, papers, books, and classroom discussions, I cannot help but wonder: What is all this theological education meant to produce?

Is the answer simply to acquire knowledge about God? Is it to prepare for ministry? Perhaps it is the more noble goal of interpreting the Scriptures correctly and defending the Christian faith against error? Or is it merely a rung on the ladder to earning further academic credentials, to become a better preacher or teacher, all the while satisfying our intellectual curiosity?

We can characterize the above responses to the opening question as *partial* answers. All of them are worthwhile aims. Theology certainly teaches us, equips us for ministry, guards us from error, and helps us to read and to interpret Scripture. But I would argue that none of these are theology's highest end. Doctrine has a greater purpose: It is meant to cultivate piety—piety for the sake of God's glory.

This is the position that John Calvin, the great sixteenth century Reformer, sets out in his magnum opus: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin insists that any doctrine we study "must enter our hearts and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us."[1] In fact, as Ellen Charry, former Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes: "If we take doctrine and piety as belonging to two separate fields, one academic and the other pastoral, we will never understand John Calvin."[2] If Calvin's understanding of the inseparability of doctrine and piety is correct, then every lecture attended, every commentary read, every doctrine learned is meant to shape a life of reverent love toward God.

Today, the word *piety* often carries negative connotations. It can evoke images of judgmental religiosity, hypocrisy, or hollow, performative virtue. Yet Calvin means something altogether different. For Calvin, piety is not equated to "pietism." It is not hypocritical, excessively religious, or merely private spirituality. Calvin defines piety as:

> that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him (I.2.1).

Calvin's definition of piety is remarkably dense, so it will do us well to unpack it slowly. Calvin's definition begins with *reverence*. Reverence is the fitting response to God's majesty, holiness, sovereignty, and glory; and the more clearly we perceive his holiness, majesty, and authority, the more we are drawn toward humility, worship, and submission; and the less inclined we are to place ourselves at the center of reality.

Yet reverence alone is insufficient. Calvin immediately joins it to *love*. God is not only the sovereign Lord before whom we bow; he is also the gracious Father who has reconciled us to himself in Christ. "True godliness [*pietas*] consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as father as much as it fears and reverences him as Lord, embraces his righteousness, and dreads offending him worse than death."[3] Therefore, true piety is not coerced obedience born of fear but affectionate devotion born of grace.

The heart of Calvin's definition of piety seems to be found in the phrase, "the knowledge of his benefits induces …" What does the knowledge of God's benefits induce in fallen humanity? Reverence and love. In other words, piety is a grateful response. It is never self-generated. Humanity recognizes creation, providence, redemption, and every other good gift from God, and in return responds with grateful worship.

This understanding of piety puts up guardrails against legalism because it insists that God acts first and we act second. Our obedience, therefore, is not an attempt to earn God's favor but a joyful response to the favor we

have already received. As Calvin himself observes, only when we recognize that we owe everything to God will we "yield him willing service."

Calvin's last sentence, "unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him," serves as the overlooked, beautifying phrase of his definition. Calvin is often caricatured as a cold theologian concerned only with divine sovereignty and predestination. But in this final sentence, Calvin sounds nearly Augustinian. The human heart is always searching for fulfillment. In Augustine's most famous words, "our hearts are restless until they rest in [God]."[4] For Calvin, piety reaches its fullness when we recognize that every created good ultimately points beyond itself to God, who alone can satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart. This is far richer than some abstract idea of duty. God is not simply the one we obey; he is the one whom we can joyfully and completely give ourselves to *because* he is the one in whom we delight.

The movement we find in Calvin's definition of piety almost reads like a progression through the spiritual life. Knowledge of God's goodness awakens gratitude; gratitude deepens into reverence and love; reverence and love express themselves in joyful obedience; and joyful obedience culminates in a heart that rests in God. Piety is not an emotion or a behavior. It is an entire orientation of life that begins with God's gracious initiative and culminates in the believer's wholehearted devotion.

Let's get practical now. Why does doctrine produce piety? How does theology lead to devotion? To answer this question, we have to examine how Calvin understands "the knowledge of God." Calvin's understanding of the knowledge of God can be summarized as follows: To *know* God is to be *changed* by God. For the Reformer, knowledge is not the possession of correct information. True knowledge is relational and transformative; it changes the knower. Calvin presses the point with a rhetorical question:

> For how can the thought of God penetrate your mind without your realizing immediately that, since you are his handiwork, you have been made over and bound to his command by right of creation, that you owe your life to him?—that whatever you undertake, whatever you do, ought to be ascribed to him?" (I.2.2).

Knowing God reveals something about ourselves. To behold the Creator is to recognize ourselves as creatures, wholly dependent upon him and therefore called to live for his glory. If you truly know God, you know you belong to him. You know you owe him everything. If you know Jesus, your whole life is transformed into one of worship. Doctrine, then, is never an end in itself. It leads us beyond understanding to joyful obedience, reverent worship, and a life lived before God.

Calvin's insistence on the inseparability of doctrine and piety can be helpful for the Christian today. As I prepare to enter another year of theological education, Calvin's vision is both encouraging and convicting. It reminds me that every lecture attended, every theological debate entered, every paper written, and every page read should, if received rightly, deepen my love for God and conformity to Christ. Of course, this warning is not exclusively for seminarians. It extends to every Christian seeking to know God more faithfully.

Regardless of our calling, we face the same temptation: to separate what God has joined together. We can mistake theological mastery for spiritual maturity, defend sound doctrine while neglecting holiness, or pursue religious experience without allowing Scripture to shape our minds. Theology is not an academic exercise detached from the Christian life, nor is piety an emotional spirituality unconcerned with truth. Right doctrine is meant to cultivate right worship, and true devotion is nourished by the truth of the Word of God.

The temptation seems to be thinking we can know God truly without being transformed by that knowledge. Calvin's challenge is that every doctrine we confess should make us more humble, more grateful, more obedient, and more captivated by the God who has first loved us. Theology reaches its true end when our whole lives become, in Calvin's words, "a sort of practice of piety" (III.19.2).

Jonathan Sundermeier is a student in the Master of Arts in Reformed Theology Program at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. He plans to complete his Master of Divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary, the alma mater of his father, mother, and grandfather.

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, translated Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.7.4. Book, chapter, and paragraph hereafter cited in the text.

[2] Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 199.

[3] John Calvin, *Catechism of 1538, section 2)*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles in I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 8.

[4] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 2nd edition, 2006), I.1.1.

The Institute for Theological Education

Theology Matters has established The Institute for Theological Education. Our goal is to equip the next generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological instruction that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and we begin by offering three programs:

1. A Master of Arts in Reformed Theology in partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (for more details, see below);
2. A continuing education program that offers seminars and retreats for pastors, elders, teachers, and other congregational leaders; and
3. An adult education program that offers courses, lectures, and seminars to all interested in the subject matter, whether for academic credit, a certificate in theological studies, or as auditors.

Master of Arts in Reformed Theology

In August 2023, Theology Matters and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary launched a Master of Arts in Reformed Theology. We have had two strong cohorts, and we are beginning to recruit a third. Focusing on classic texts and practices valued by the Reformed tradition, this program offers instruction from pastor-scholars whose knowledge has been tested in the academy and significant pastoral ministry. The M.A. in Reformed Theology is a fully accredited, 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. In-person instruction will be held at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Required Courses

Introduction to the Reformed Tradition
Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Interpretation of the New Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Reformed Theology I
Reformed Theology II
Capstone Project in Reformed Theology

Elective Courses

Early & Medieval Church History
Reformation & Modern Church History
Presbyterian History and Confessions
American Puritanism through Edwards
The Theology of Augustine
The Theology of John Calvin
The Theology of Karl Barth
The Theology of T.F. Torrance
and many more on *Worship & Preaching*

"I believe that faithful Christian leaders today must be formed within an alternative educational culture that is seldom available through most mainline theological seminaries today but is possible with innovative strategic partnerships that authentically recognize that the way to human flourishing remains an ever-present need and our calling as participants in a Great Commissioning."

Dr. Jeffrey Bullock, President
University of Dubuque & Theological Seminary

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to equip, encourage, and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416, at this email address, admin@theologymatters.com or at our website: www.theologymatters.com

Theology Matters
P.O. Box 50026
Greenwood, SC 29649

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Please help us to raise up a new generation of pastors!

> "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest*." Matt. 9:38
>
> *"And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" Rom. 10:14*

We seek to identify, to attract, to recruit, to gather, to train, to educate, and to help raise up the next generation of pastors and leaders for the congregations where we all worship every Sunday morning. And we need your help.

Two Ways You Can Help

Please recommend qualified students to us: students who have faith in Jesus Christ, desire to be his disciples, and seek to understand God's Word; who exhibit intellectual and moral courage; are spiritually curious and eager to learn; have a solid Bachelor's degree, strong academic record, serious work ethic, good recommendation from a teacher and pastor or church leader, and growing sense of call.

Please give generously to help provide scholarships for these students. To give by check, please make it out to Theology Matters, write Scholarship Fund on the "For" or "Memo" line, and mail it to: Theology Matters, P.O. Box 50026, Greenwood, SC 29649-0018. To give electronically, please go to our website at https://www.theologymatters.com/institute/ and click on the "Donate Now" button.

For more information, please email us at institute@theologymatters.com or call us at 1-864-378-5416. **We thank you for your prayers, support, and encouragement.**