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Shepherds After God's Heart

By Raymond I. Hylton

Introduction: Why Shepherding Still Matters

It is a joy and an honor to be with you at this year's Theology Matters' Conference. I'm grateful for the chance to stand among fellow pastors, ruling elders, leaders, and those who are discerning a call to ministry—people who understand both the privilege and the pressure of ministry. Many of us feel the strain of what ministry has become in our time. Pastors are expected to be theologians and counselors, administrators and vision-casters, conflict mediators and fundraisers, public communicators and crisis managers, churning out opinions on the economy, immigration, and other geopolitical issues. We are expected to be present in the hospital room and persuasive in the boardroom. We are expected to lead with courage and carry on with tenderness. And if we are honest, some days it feels like we are being asked to become CEOs with a Bible.

In the midst of all of that, the question we cannot escape is this: What is a pastor fundamentally called to be?

What is the core identity beneath all the tasks? What is the vocation beneath all the responsibilities?

My claim tonight is simple, but not simplistic: Scripture gives the church a controlling metaphor for pastoral vocation: the pastor as shepherd—under the Shepherding God, under the Shepherding Christ.

The passage I want to use as a primary window into that calling is Ezekiel 34, especially verses 11 through 16:

> For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. Ezekiel 34:1–16

But before we go to the heart of my claim, I want to tell you how I came to love this image—and why I'm convinced it is not only biblical, but healthy.

Part 1: A Call I Didn't Choose

I grew up in a home that was, in many ways, half-and-half. My mother was a devout follower of Jesus, while my father was agnostic and hostile to faith in Jesus Christ. My mother read her Scriptures seven days a week. She introduced me to a devotional that she loved deeply

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—*Streams in the Desert*—a book she kept up with faithfully until her death in March of 2023.

My mother taught me the way of Jesus. She knew before I knew that I would one day be a pastor and shepherd of God's people. I remember one day she told me about a dream she had. In the dream, she saw someone handing me a book—she thinks it was the Bible—and in the dream, I refused it because I was busy playing with my toys. When she told me about the dream, something came over me and I started weeping. I remember my mother apologizing. She was worried that she had put a heavy burden on her ten-year-old child. By the time I reached my eighteenth birthday, I had this inner conviction that God was calling me to be a pastor. I didn't really know what it meant to be a pastor, but I had examples—examples that shape me to this day.

I really had just one pastor. His name was Pastor Cedric Lue. His parents were born in China, and during the Mao revolution, they fled China and over time landed in Jamaica, where Pastor Lue was born. If you met Pastor Lue, he looked Chinese. But he spoke with a thick Jamaican accent. His parents opened a general store. However, Pastor Lue was called to pastor—not to take over his parents' business.

Pastor Lue was my pastor. He baptized me. He invited me to join a group of about twenty other teenagers to meet with him on Monday nights to study the Bible, to talk about how to share our faith with our peers, to discover our spiritual gifts, to develop a love for Scripture, and to nurture a life of prayer. Over time, Pastor Lue sent us out in pairs into our neighborhoods on Saturday mornings—to invite people to church, pray for people, and share the gospel with those who did not yet believe.

What I find remarkable about our cohort is that all of us are serving the Lord today. Some are pastors. After Pastor Lue died—too early in my view—one member of my cohort became senior pastor of the congregation and has served for over twenty-five years. Others teach in seminaries, run businesses, lead major nonprofits in America and Jamaica.

I count it a profound blessing to have known Pastor Lue and his family. Through both his words and his daily walk, he modeled the true heart of a pastor—showing me how to lead with genuine humility, how to care deeply for God's people, and how to endure the unique hardships of this calling with unwavering grace.

Part 2: The Challenge I Didn't Expect

When I attended Duke Divinity School, I wrote a paper—one that I still have to this day—about a biblical model of pastoral vocation. I chose as my model: The pastor as a shepherd.

Friends, I poured my energy into writing that paper. I was proud of it. I presented it to my professor with confidence. Weeks later, the paper came back with lots of red ink. Not because of poor grammar. Not because of spelling errors. Not because of inadequate handling of the text. No—my professor challenged my use of the word shepherd as a metaphor for pastoral vocation. She urged me to be careful not to reduce God's people to passive, unthinking sheep, and to elevate myself as an authoritarian—lording it over God's people. She urged me to find a different model that promotes a healthier relationship between pastor and people—metaphors such as the pastor as Servant, Advocate, Mother, or Farmer.

I have absolute respect for my professor, but on this matter, I disagreed with her then, and I disagree with her even to this day. And what I want to do with the rest of my time is to share the basis for my conviction: The pastor as shepherd is a healthy model for all in church leadership to embrace. Now, to be clear: My professor's concern is not without merit. If the only source in Scripture for a theology of shepherding were Ezekiel 34:1–10, I would agree with her.

However, the image of the shepherd in the rest of Ezekiel 34 is replete with hope—and rich encouragement—for those called to lead God's people. Richard Baxter writes in *The Reformed Pastor* that Ezekiel 34 is the pastor's mirror. It is not a text to admire, but a text under which to tremble.[1]

Part 3: Ezekiel 34—The Shepherding God

Ezekiel 34 is one of the most important passages in the Bible on spiritual leadership. It has three movements: 1) An indictment of false shepherds (vv. 1–10); 2) A promise of God's personal shepherding (vv. 11–16); 3) A vision of a coming Davidic Shepherd (vv. 20–24).

The Indictment: Shepherds Who Feed Themselves

Ezekiel is prophesying to a people in exile. They have been scattered. They have been crushed. They have been traumatized because of their rebellion against a holy God. And God says the reason is not simply Babylon. The reason is also Israel's leadership—leaders were supposed to shepherd but instead they devoured God's people.

Ezekiel says of these shepherds:
you eat the fat
you clothe yourselves with the wool
you slaughter the fatlings
but you do not feed the sheep
you have not strengthened the weak
you have not healed the sick
you have not bound up the injured
you have not brought back the strayed
you have not sought the lost
you ruled them with harshness and force

This is shepherding as exploitation. This is leadership that consumes. This is predatory. This is what happens when ministry becomes a platform rather than a calling. And God says in verse 10: "I am against the shepherds." Such an indictment should sober every pastor in the room. In Ezekiel 34, God cares how his people are led.

The Promise: "I Myself Will Shepherd My Sheep"
The text turns, and it becomes one of the most tender passages in all of Scripture. Listen to Ezekiel 34:11: "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out." And then God describes his shepherding in a cascade of verbs:

I will search
I will seek
I will rescue
I will bring them out
I will gather
I will bring them into their own land
I will feed them
I will make them lie down
I will seek the lost
I will bring back the strayed
I will bind up the injured
I will strengthen the weak

Friends, this is not authoritarian leadership. This is not domination, or exploitation. This is the heart of God. And here is the first major theological claim of my talk: Shepherding is not first a model for pastors. Shepherding is first a revelation of God. Before it is a job description, it is a divine self-disclosure.

Part 4: The Hebrew Heart of Shepherding

The Hebrew word for shepherd is *roʿeh*, which derives from the verb *raʿah* meaning "to graze, pasture" or "tend, lead" flocks, with the participle form *roʿeh* designating a "shepherd" or "herdsman." Metaphorically, this term extends beyond literal animal herding to describe leading or ruling a people. That matters because it means shepherding is not sentimental. It is not merely rural poetry. It is leadership language. But it is a kind of leadership that is life-giving. Shepherds exist for the flourishing of the flock.

Shepherding is leadership that:
feeds rather than consumes;
guides rather than drives;
protects rather than exploits;
seeks rather than abandons.

This means when Scripture calls leaders shepherds, it is not making people passive. It is making leaders accountable.

Part 5: Ezekiel 34 Fulfilled—Jesus the Good Shepherd

Now here's the stunning thing about Ezekiel. In verse 11 God says: "I myself will shepherd my sheep." Then in verses 23–24 God says: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David. … he shall feed them and be their shepherd." So, which is it? God Himself, or David? The answer is yes. Ezekiel is pointing to the day when God will shepherd His people through the promised Davidic King. And that is exactly what the New Testament declares has happened in Jesus Christ. The New Testament transforms this imagery by applying it to Jesus and church leaders. Jesus receives the titles "Good Shepherd" and "Great Shepherd of the sheep" because his shepherding culminated in sacrificial death for his flock.

While the Old Testament emphasized geopolitical ruling, New Testament writers reframe shepherding as teaching and congregational oversight. The Greek verb *poimaino* (to shepherd) summarizes pastoral work—feeding, tending, guiding, and protecting God's people, transposed into spiritual dimensions. The relationship between shepherd and flock illustrates what God expects of those placed in church leadership, making shepherding not merely administrative but fundamentally relational and sacrificial.

In John 10, Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Do you see what Jesus does? He takes the Ezekiel 34 promise—God Himself shepherding his people—and he says: that is me. And he defines shepherding not as control, but as sacrifice. Not as platform, but as cross. Not as domination, but as love.

Part 6: The Pastor as Under-Shepherd

Now, friends, here is where vocational theology lands. Pastors are not "the shepherd." We are not the hero of the story. We are not the owner of the flock. We are not the savior of the sheep. We are under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd. In Acts 20:28, Paul Speaks to the Ephesian Elders: **"**Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son." The flock is blood-bought, and therefore shepherding is sacred.

In his biography*, John Stott: The Making of a Leader*, Timothy Dudley-Smith captures a moment of raw honesty that challenges every leader. After a service at All Souls, Langham Place, Stott was cornered by a "difficult" member—one of those people who consistently drains energy with criticism. Stott, ever the refined Englishman, responded with "ecclesiastical good manners." He was polite, poised, and professional. As the person walked away, Stott felt a momentary surge of self-

satisfaction for having "handled" the situation so well. But the Holy Spirit immediately convicted him. He realized that while his outward actions were polite, his inward heart was cold. He hadn't loved the man; he had merely managed him. He realized he was guilty of "insufferable pride," valuing his own patience more than the person in front of him. To guard his heart in future encounters, Stott began to preach Acts 20:28 to himself. He focused on the phrase: "... the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." From then on, when faced with a frustrating individual, Stott would mentally whisper to himself, "That person was bought with the blood of Christ. How precious they must be."[2]

He moved from seeing people as "interruptions to his work" to "the very reason for his work." And First Peter 5 says: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you … not domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." That is the apostolic corrective to my professor's concern.

In his commentary on First Peter, Thomas Schreiner writes about chapter five, verse two as follows:

> The task of the elders is now explained. They are to function as shepherds of God's flock. They are not to be like the shepherds indicted in Ezekiel 34 who treated their flock "harshly and brutally" (34:4), who cared only for themselves (34:8). The words "God's flock" remind the elders that the congregation does not belong to them. It is God's church, and they are given the privilege and responsibility of shepherding it.[3]

Shepherding, when done biblically, is not domineering, it is exemplary, it is accountable, and it is cruciform. Shepherding does not elevate pastors over people. It places pastors under Christ and for the people.

Part 7: Four Marks of Shepherd Vocation

Let me close with four marks of the shepherd vocation—four ways to examine ourselves, and perhaps to reclaim our calling:

1) *Shepherding is relational presence*. A shepherd knows names. A shepherd stays close. A shepherd does not love in abstraction. Pastoral ministry is not merely delivering content. It is sharing life.

2) *Shepherding is feeding*. The first task of a shepherd is nourishment. This is why preaching and teaching are not optional add-ons. They are shepherd work. Not performance. Not branding, but feeding. Preach and teach the word in season and out of season.

3) *Shepherding is protecting*. A shepherd guards the flock from wolves. From false teaching. From division. From spiritual danger. Protection is not harshness. It is love that refuses to abandon.

4) *Shepherding is seeking*. This is perhaps the most convicting. God says: "I will seek the lost." Shepherding is not just caring for those who show up. It is pursuing the straying. It is leaving the 99. It is refusing to let absence become invisibility.

Conclusion: The Shepherd Has Scars

Friends, I want to end where Ezekiel 34 ultimately ends—with hope. God does not abandon His flock. God does not ignore His scattered sheep. God does not tolerate abusive shepherds forever. God says: "I myself will shepherd my sheep." And He has. He came. And the reason shepherding can never be authoritarian is that the Good Shepherd wears scars. Brothers and sisters, the church does not need more religious executives. She needs shepherds. Men and women who reflect: the heart of God in Ezekiel 34, the cross of Christ in John 10, the humility of Peter in I Peter 5, and the tenderness of the Spirit who appoints overseers to care for the flock. May the Lord give us grace to shepherd well.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. God's people say, Amen.

This address was delivered on March 3, 2026, at the Theology Matters conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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[1] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974). See, for example, Section 2: "The Use of Humiliation," 133–172,

[2] Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: The Making of a Leader; Volume 1: The Early Years 1921–1960* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1999), 301.

[3] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter & Jude: New American Commentary* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Broadmen & Holman Publishers, 2003), 233.

Presbyterian Identity?

by Joseph D. Small

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary gathered a 2024 Warren Lectures symposium to address the issue of Presbyterian identity. Four of my symposium colleagues delivered thoughtful comments on traditional markers of Presbyterian identity—theology, polity, confessions, and freedom of conscience. Each of them provided historical, theological, and ecclesial insight into the development of these markers in American Presbyterianism. I was given the task of responding to what had been said in whatever way I thought appropriate to the subject at hand. It seemed to me that bringing together speakers, alumni, faculty, and students to spend a day talking about Presbyterian identity was evidence that our traditional ecclesial characteristics had become both nebulous and contested. What follows is a lightly edited and expanded version of my remarks.

A Category Difference

There is a category difference between the deep Reformed and Presbyterian tradition that developed theological, confessional, organizational, and moral markers and the current identity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "Identity" implies observable characteristics, the ways in which contemporary Presbyterian denominations develop or distort the tradition. I say denominations (plural) because the past ninety years have seen a fracturing into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. Presbyterian identity now includes its shattering.

I am not competent to address characteristics of denominations other than my own, except to say that none of us is immune to the consequences of our partitions. None is Presbyterianism pure and undefiled. What I am able to say is that the present identity of my PCUSA reveals characteristics that belie the story that we like to tell about ourselves … that we are a theologically serious church, with a confessional basis that grounds us in the one holy catholic apostolic church, a constructive polity designed to pursue fidelity to the gospel, and freedom of conscience consistent with truth and goodness.

Our reality is that these markers are crumbling. Serious, sustained attention to the faith of the church has been replaced by management techniques, conflicts about moral and ethical matters, religious slogans, and neglect. The Book of Confessions is in danger of becoming a sanitary landfill, with only the most recent deposit visible. The Book of Order has become a locus of ideological and idiosyncratic dispute while lived polity has been reduced to administrative oversight of organizational business. "God alone is Lord of the conscience has become "I alone am lord of my conscience." The crumbling is endemic, evident among evangelicals and progressives, ministers and members.

You may think I am being harsh or simplistic, yet we know that we are here today because all is not well in our theological, confessional, and ecclesial life. Presbyterian identity is in disarray. Perhaps this should not surprise us because we are one of many American denominations in the same situation. How are we to understand the current diffusion and discord that is evident among us? Understanding is difficult because we are not detached observers. We are all living *within* this season of our discontent; we are part of it. So, I would like to take an oblique run at this by addressing some features of American culture that can help us understand why we are where we are, and a hint of how we might go about finding another way to live out our calling.

A Thought Experiment

A thought experiment: Let's assume that clarity and conviction about who and what we are, what we believe, and what we resolve to do would be unanimously agreed upon by a general assembly and ratified by a positive vote of the presbyteries. Fantasy, I know, but let's play along. What would that consensus mean in the life of Presbyterian congregations, their ministers and members?

As a way of beginning to answer that question I want to draw attention to the work of Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher known through his books, especially the magisterial *A Secular Age*. In that book Taylor tells a nine hundred page story that ranges over five centuries of philosophical and social development to deal with a straightforward reality: there has been "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed quite unproblematic, to one in which [belief in God] is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[1] Think of the difference between the sixteenth century and our own. God and the church were once taken-for-granted features of everyday life. Today the fastest growing "religious"

cohort in Europe and North America consists of people disengaged from the church and its God.

At the risk, even the certainty of oversimplification, I want to focus on two characteristics of this secular age that Taylor calls "authenticity" and "the buffered self." I am lifting these two elements from Taylor's richly complex thought because I think they are especially relevant to our question of Presbyterian identity, to the reality of its vagueness and disarray.

"Authenticity" is a way of talking about a turning point in the long, historic journey from human lives that were constricted by limits of geography, caste, servitude, gender, and race, to the present possibility of choosing and shaping one's own path, pursuing and fulfilling one's own aspirations. Authenticity, says Taylor, means that "each of us has our own way of realizing his/her humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own [identity], as against surrendering to conformity imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority."[2] Simply put, authenticity is the assumption that to be fully human is to be true to myself, to live my life in fidelity to my own path of discovery, guided by my inner sense of truth, by what is right and wrong for me.

If you doubt it, look at popular culture and its continuing advice to "do your own thing," while singing "I did it my way." Advertisers recognize the power of self-authorized freedom with slogans such as, "Be all that you can be"; "Just do it!"; "You get this … I can!" Colleges market themselves with catchphrases: "A place to belong, a person to become"; "We're not for everyone, but then maybe you're not everyone"; "It all begins with you." Or look at the vast self-help industry with its books, videos, conferences, retreats, and therapies, all designed to help each one of us become our own best self. Driving all of this is the culture's moral imperative of self-fulfillment.

Taylor does not view this culture of authenticity in an entirely negative light. A self that freely assumes responsibility for its own life is a moral advance beyond a self that must submit to imposed place and role and goal in life. "The land of the free" is not simply a nation free from foreign domination, but a land of persons who are free to find themselves, release themselves, and realize themselves.

But Taylor is also fully aware of authenticity's vulnerability to the degradation of intellectual and moral subjectivity. Self-determined freedom, pushed toward its limit, doesn't recognize boundaries, anything that one must respect in in the exercise of self-determined choice. This is evident in the way that "rights" language has expanded. Beyond traditional, constitutional, and legal rights, individually asserted rights have become warrants for personal preferences. Rights proliferate because they are claimed as *human* rights, leading to endless moral and legal assertions and contentions. French philosopher Pierre Manent notes that "there is nothing under the sun or moon that is not susceptible of becoming the occasion or matter of a human right."[3] Rights are *my* rights.

The debasement of authenticity can be seen in a second feature of Taylor's thought that bears upon Presbyterian identity: "the buffered self." Taylor contrasts this feature of contemporary life to "the porous self." Whereas the *porous* self is open to other selves, to traditions, experiences, ideas that help to shape a journey toward personal fulfillment, the *buffered* self is closed to what lies beyond myself, my experiences and preferences. Taylor describes the buffered self this way: "My ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined by my responses to them."[4]

The buffered self is evident in the cultural suspicion, resistance, even hostility to institutions, elites, and experts presuming to tell us what we should think and do. It is also evident in various ways of being "cafeteria Christians," picking our way through the traditions, doctrines, and social teachings of the church in deciding what of it we will believe and how we will act. We are resistant to ecclesial attempts to shape us. As buffered selves we develop our own spirituality, which may or may not have space for Scripture, tradition, the church, or even God. Within the church, among ministers and members alike, we take in what is consistent with our self-determined beliefs while closing ourselves off to ecclesial traditions, doctrines, and moralities that may differ from our own.

A Way Forward

So, returning to our little thought experiment, any definition of Presbyterian identity that could be set forth (perhaps especially by a general assembly!) would be resisted, dismissed, or ignored by both ministers and members as inconsistent with their own self-determined beliefs and journey of faith. This is the situation in which we find ourselves. No attempt to define and promote a Presbyterian identity, no matter how faithful to the deep contours of Christian faith and our own Reformed tradition, could gain widespread acceptance in a culture of self-discovery that assumes freedom from teachings, ideas, perspectives, experiences that might challenge my beliefs or shape my identity.

Does this mean that our time together is an exercise in futility? And are we left with nothing more than critique? Fortunately, Taylor provides us with hints of a possible way forward. He acknowledges that modern freedom and autonomy center us on ourselves and that the ideal of authenticity requires us to discover and articulate our own identity. But he goes on to say that while our goals

and aspirations are self-referential it does not mean that their *shape* and *content* must be self-referential, buffered from possibilities outside of myself. "It does not mean," says Taylor, "that my goals and aspirations must express or fulfill my desires and aspirations *as against* something that stands beyond these."[5]

What it does mean, says Taylor, is that it is possible to find personal fulfillment in something that is larger than myself. I can discover myself as I see my goals and aspirations within a broader, deeper reality. Indeed, Taylor suggests, "we will find genuine fulfillment only in something … which has significance independent of us or our desires."[6] Authenticity need not confine life to a smorgasbord of raw materials for our personal projects. "If authenticity is being true to ourselves," says Taylor, "then perhaps we can achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole."[7]

Does this not describe a central feature of Christian faith and life? We are invited into God's holy drama that spans time and space. It is a journey that is longer than and has goals that extend beyond my personal projects. We are invited into a community in which we in which we can willingly participate together with others. For the PCUSA—its congregations, ministers and members—this would mean an end to focusing on ourselves, relying on management techniques and consumer-oriented survival strategies that promote a religion of individual well-being. Instead, it can mean claiming and proclaiming a larger vision, in which our confessions connect us to a grand company of those who have lived and died the Faith before us, where our theology invites us into a deeper exploration of life in Christ, where our polity joins us with others in shaping a faithful future, and where freedom of conscience is exercised in light of purposes that transcend us all.

I am a lover of the Reformed tradition and a loyal child of my mother, the Presbyterian Church, that brought me to faith, educated me, called me to ministry, and gave me opportunities to serve. But I also know that our tradition is but one expression of the deep Christian Tradition and our church is subsumed within the one holy catholic apostolic church. We have our own way of living that out, of course. But anyone on the outside who might look at us, is less interested in our anxieties, disputes, and regulations than the way we present a faith and life that is larger than the narrow confines of self, congregation, and denomination.

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That is the way my remarks at Dubuque ended. If I had been given more time, I might have said something like this: The good news is that the gospel itself points to the way beyond our self-confinements. We are all familiar with the Greek word *koininia*, often translated as "fellowship." Yet fellowship is not a strong word in English; it conjures up images of church coffee hours and other casual get-togethers. A far more appropriate English equivalent is "communion." Nevertheless, since Greek vocabulary is tiny compared to English, every Greek word must do a lot of work. The NRSV provides nuance and shades of meaning by translating *koinonia* seven different ways: communion, fellowship, participation, partnership, sharing, contribution, and taking part. All are appropriate, but what we miss is that New Testament uses *koinonia* with reference to Trinity, Holy Spirit, Lord's Supper, church, reconciliation, mission, and collection of money. We do not realize that these seemingly unrelated realities are interrelated expressions of *communion*—deep, intimate, abiding relationships

The unified vision of koinonia in the life of the church entered English vocabulary by way of its Latin equivalent *communio*: concrete *community* and dynamic *communication*. To be in community, to communicate, says Oliver O'Donovan, "is to hold some things in common, to make it a common possession, to treat it as 'ours' rather than 'yours' or 'mine.' The partners in a communication form a community, a 'we' in relation to the object in which they participate."[8]

"We-ness" is at the heart of the church—overcoming distance, ending partition, ceasing detachment, dwelling in mutuality. The gospel leads us to spoken and enacted relationships within and among ministers in specific communities, spoken and enacted relationships among congregations and their sessions.

If markers of faithful Presbyterian identity are to be recovered, it will not happen from the top down. Ecclesial culture is formed from the bottom up. Presbyterian identity is shaped and re-shaped by ministers, elders, deacons, and the congregations they serve. The plural "s" is not merely conventional, but is intended to indicate that individual ministers, sessions, and congregations, apart from others, are insufficient. It is only as forms of we-ness are lived out that churches begin to break out of their contented introversion.

So, let's conclude with another thought experiment: What might happen to Presbyterian theological identity if five Presbyterian ministers in every presbytery met once a month to discuss a serious book of theology, biblical interpretation, history, or ethics? How might our understanding of confessions be altered if five congregations in every presbytery engaged in an annual study of a selected portion of one or more of the confessions, focusing on its relevance to the congregation's faith and life? Or imagine that sessions of five congregations in every presbytery would use a half hour of every meeting to work through the Book of Order's section on the Foun-

dations of Presbyterian Polity in one year (F-1 through F-3); Councils of the Church the following year (G-3); and the Directory for Worship's sections on ordering Christian Worship during the third year (W-3 and W-4)?

Fantasy, I know. But it could happen in *your* presbytery, *your* congregation, *your* session. It would only take some ministers, congregations, and sessions to undertake continuing commitment to serious, sustained, broadly theological work that would embody the reality of freedom within commonality. Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* encompassed doctrine, polity, confessional identity, and piety. He understood that in doing theological work, "we are called to a knowledge of God: not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart."[9] Theology is not only doctrine nor an esoteric pastime. Neither is it a solo flight. Theology is a group undertaking, a communal endeavor that opens us to God and God's Way in the world. Its purpose is deepening the life of faith and strengthening the life of discipleship. This is the calling of all Christians, every congregation, every minister, every denomination. Yet fidelity to this calling can only be lived out ecclesially in local patterns of mutual relationships.

We are called to remember our past,
to be warned and encouraged by it,
but not to live it again.
Now is the time of our testing
as God's story with the church moves forward with us.[10]

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[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.
[2] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.
[3] Pierre Manent, *The City of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 139.
[4] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 23.
[5] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 82.
[6] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 82.
[7] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 91.
[8] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 242.
[9] John Calvin, "To the Reader," *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.
[10] A Declaration of Faith. PCUS. 1974.

The Courage to Stand
Bonhoeffer's Journey and Ours

by Richard E. Burnett

This is the second of a two-part essay. The first part was published in the 2026 spring edition of Theology Matters.

Bonhoeffer did not "return to Germany on the next ship," as Barth had told him to do. He returned in March 1935, about a year-and-a-half later. Therefore, he missed the Barmen Synod at the end of May 1934. He also missed much that happened before and after it. The Barmen Synod was "an extraordinarily youthful one, the average age being not more than forty."[1] So, many of his friends were there, including his best friend, Franz Hildebrandt. But Bonhoeffer was not there. He was in London, serving two German-speaking congregations.

This does not mean that he was not paying close attention to what was going on in Germany. Bonhoeffer tried to keep abreast of all that was going on in the Confessing Church, all the challenges it faced from within and without. And he addressed some of its challenges, engaged in ecumenical work on behalf of the Confessing Church, and did what he could to provide theological leadership from London. But he was busy trying to be a pastor.

Bonhoeffer as a Pastor

Barth had underestimated how much Bonhoeffer wanted and felt he needed to be a pastor. Bonhoeffer had already written a lot about the church, but he had never served as a pastor. He had preached a little, served as an intern and youth pastor to a German-speaking congregation in Barcelona, taught a confirmation class of rowdy, inner city boys in Berlin, and performed other pastoral duties. But he never had to preach, teach, and provide pastoral care every week, or to sit in meetings where people talked about such things as the boiler, who are we going to get to paint this room, pave the parking lot, or replace the gutters, and other such matters that likely never occurred

to this brilliant Instructor of Systematic Theology at the University of Berlin. His friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, said he "did not care much for parish meetings and minute taking on routine matters."[2] But he learned a lot and found the work quite demanding and time-consuming, yet also edifying in surprising ways.

He preached a series on the Sermon on the Mount, which he later used for his book, *Discipleship*. Bethge says, "His parishioners found the severe standards of his sermons particularly hard to accept. They were accustomed to the mild, folksy, pious sermons of his predecessor. Bonhoeffer's sermons, by comparison, seemed too oppressive and emphatic. Indeed, some responded by staying away." But most were deeply grateful for their young, energetic pastor.[3]

He also began while in London to think more about how to prepare pastors for parish ministry. He wrote his friend, Erwin Sutz, "I no longer believe in the university; … The next generation of pastors, these days, ought to be trained entirely in church-monastic schools, where the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship are taken seriously—which for all three of these things is simply not the case at the university and, under the present circumstance, is impossible."[4]

Bonhoeffer did not wish to back off one bit from the academic rigor of theological education. He had been appalled by the lack of it at Union Seminary, New York, which, he said, was "accelerating the process of the secularization of Christianity in America. Its criticism is directed essentially against the fundamentalists," which, he added, "is healthy and necessary. But there is no sound basis on which one can rebuild after demolition."[5] Bonhoeffer did not want to abandon critical reflection on the faith. What he wanted was a deeper integration of academic rigor with prayer, meditation, preaching, and worship.

He also thought more deeply about the crisis facing the church. When he went to London, he told Barth that he was going into "the wilderness" to get some "distance" from the German church conflict. After thinking and praying about it for a while, he believed that an even greater conflict lay ahead and the present conflict was only a "preliminary skirmish" in comparison. He believed few engaged in the present conflict would participate in the next one, which would require a "resistance unto death" and that the task would "simply be to suffer faithfully." Yet, he believed, or at least he hoped, that God would, again, speak his word through his church.[6]

The Need for Well-Trained Pastors

So, when the governing council of the Confessing Church asked him to lead a seminary to train pastors, he immediately agreed, girded up his loins, and returned to Germany in March 1935 and in April was commissioned as its director. The first site of the seminary was at Zingsthof on the Baltic Sea, where Bonhoeffer and his students sometimes gathered in the dunes for discussion. Soon however the seminary moved to Finkenwalde in the province of Pomerania, which today is in Poland. The living space was plain, the worship space simple. It was supported by voluntary gifts of the Confessing churches. Students knew they were taking a risk by attending this seminary, which at first was only clandestine but soon became illegal. Yet they knew something important was happening in it. They had all been through German universities, but they knew they needed something more if they were going to be sufficiently equipped as pastors. And so did the leaders of the Confessing Church.

It is sterling testimony to the spiritual maturity and wisdom of the leaders of the Confessing Church in Germany, it is a shining tribute to their fortitude and foresight, that amid all the chaos and confusion they faced, all the needs their congregations had, and all the burdens they carried, they recognized the need to raise up the next generation of pastors. And they not only recognized the need. They did something about it.

And it was not just the clergy of the Confessing Church who recognized the need and did something about it. It was the "lay folk," such as Erna Struwe, the *Hausmutter*, who cooked meals for these seminarians and kept order. If you look closely, you will see her in the middle of every seminary class photo. It was also Ruth von Kleist, a benefactress, who supported this endeavor sacrificially and at great risk to her and her family.

They all recognized that pastors do not fall out of heaven but must be raised up, equipped, and sent out. They recognized that they could not simply outsource this task to others but had to take responsibility for it themselves. They recognized there was nothing better, nothing greater, nothing more important they could do for the future well-being of their congregations than to help to raise up a new generation of spiritually mature, biblically faithful, theologically sound, well-trained ministers of God's Word. And in case anyone has any trouble connecting the dots, this is what *Theology Matters* is trying to do and what many of you are helping to do. And we thank you!

Leaders of the Confessing Church also recognized that ministers are made in communities. Yet they are formed not just in any community but a community under God's Word. Students at Finkenwalde were entering a life, they were told from the start, that "demands a life under the word of God. Every day must stand under the discipline of this word." So, students were primarily engaged in interpreting the Bible at the highest level, with all the "scholarly aids" available to them as well as devotionally. A student was also expected to have "thorough

acquaintance with the confessional writings of his church and be completely accountable with regard to them." In addition, each student "was to have spent some time as an apprentice with a fellow pastor who prayed with him and guided his work."[7] Again, this is what *Theology Matters* is seeking to do in providing pastor-mentors for students in our M.A. program in Reformed Theology.[8]

The program at Finkenwalde involved daily prayer, meditation, worship, study, discussion, table fellowship, and recreation. It was, above all, an opportunity for students to experience Christian community. Some say features of it were a bit idealistic, but the basic premise was not. The basic premise was simple: Pastors ought to know what it means to be part of a Christian community before they try to lead one.[9]

Bonhoeffer completed his two most famous works at Finkenwalde, *Discipleship* in '37, and *Life Together* in '38. These books show that he never aspired to be a mere academic theologian but always sought to be a church theologian, a theologian *of* the church and *for* the church. They also show that he was always fascinated by the concrete reality of the church.

The Visible Church

Bonhoeffer's dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio: A Dogmatic Inquiry Into a Sociology of The Church*, defends the thesis that the church is both a theological and a sociological reality at the same time, and must be understood as both and not merely as one or the other. Just as Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human at the same time, so the theological and sociological natures of the church may be distinguished yet must not be separated. In other words, the church *is* the Body of Christ and as such is both a truly divine and a truly human reality; a spiritual as well as a concrete, social reality; an invisible as well as a visible reality in this world. It is this conviction that Bonhoeffer continued to develop with increasing clarity throughout the 1930s.[10]

What does this mean? It means one cannot come away from *The Cost of Discipleship* or *Life Together* with an idealistic or triumphalistic view of the church. Bonhoeffer sets out to shatter any such view or any "visionary dreaming" about the church. Some of you will remember, as I do, how convicted you felt the first time you read Bonhoeffer on the temptation of the "wish dream":

> Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.
>
> God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly.[11]

Bonhoeffer pulls no punches when it comes to describing the concrete, human, social, and visible reality of the church "with all its unhappy and ugly aspects," he says. Rather the church, notwithstanding her Lord's promise to overcome these aspects, is subject to the same brokenness, corruption, weakness, fragility, and messiness as any other human community. Bonhoeffer was trying to overcome what is called "ecclesiological Docetism." Docetism, some of you will recall, comes from the Greek word δοκέω, which means "to seem" or "to appear." Docetism was an early *Christological* heresy which claimed that Jesus Christ only seemed or appeared to be human but, in fact, he was only divine in his essence rather than divine and human at the same time. So, *ecclesiological* Docetism is the belief that the church only seems or appears to be human but is really only divine in its essence rather than divine and human at the same time. Ecclesiological Docetism, in other words, is a false spiritualization of the church. It is the refusal to embrace the essential *human*, *visible* reality of the church, and it is as popular today as ever.

We see it in the reticence of many to participate in embodied worship. We see it in the rise of "Cyber Christians." We used to call them "TV Christians." Now young people call them "Larpers"—Live Action Role Players, who play at being something they are not. ("larping"). We see it in the lack of commitment to regular corporate worship. We see it in the wish to be "spiritual not religious." We see it in the reluctance of many to become members of the visible church, that is, to identify formally and officially with it.

The Flight Into Invisibility

Of course, the temptation of "forsaking the assembling" of ourselves (Heb. 10:25) has been with the church from the beginning. And spiritual reasons have always been given for it and for refusing to identify with the visible church. We've all heard "the church is full of hypocrites" from those who do not seem to realize that there is always room for one more. Or perhaps you have heard those who say, "I don't mind Jesus. It's organized, institutional religion I can't stand" or "I like Jesus. It's his Bride I can't stand." Or how about the preacher who says, "I love the ministry, it's the people I can't stand"? Or, as my middle son recently cited to me from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, "The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular."[12]

The visible, concrete particularity of the church has always been an offense in this world, at least when properly understood. That weak, broken, confused, fragile human beings, such as we are, could be called the Body of Christ and be used to accomplish his work on this earth is offensive. It is a scandal. We know that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ the Son of God was offensive and a scandal in this world. But why wouldn't the church also be a scandal if it is his body?[13] Some say they are willing to bear the scandal of the cross, but they are not willing to bear the scandal of the church. Bonhoeffer makes clear that if we claim to love Jesus Christ, we can no more be ashamed of the visible church than we can be of him. Nor can we refuse to identify with it.[14]

As the price for identifying with the Confessing Church in Germany rose throughout the 1930s, increasing numbers of Christians embraced a more docetic understanding of the church. Rather than embrace the *visible* reality of the church, they saw the church as essentially invisible. It was easier. It was safer to think of the church as essentially invisible. But Bonhoeffer says in *The Cost of] Discipleship*: "To flee into invisibility is to deny the call. Any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows him."[15]

Bonhoeffer says the Body of Christ "takes up space on earth. That is the consequence of the Incarnation."[16] Because Jesus Christ took on our flesh, uniting us with his Body, we now, the Body of Christ, take up visible space in the world. We are a visible community in the world. We do not retreat from the world. We take up visible space *in the world for the sake of the world*. Bonhoeffer says this is what Jesus meant when he said: "*You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand*" (Matt. 5:13–15). So, it matters *that* we take up visible space and *how* we take up visible space in the world. We do not hide ourselves. We do not retreat into the invisible or live under a bushel. We let our light shine—like a lamp on a stand, like a city on a hill. And if I understand them correctly, this is what many young people today want to see the church do again. How else will the world come to know who Jesus Christ is apart from the concrete reality of the visible church?

Bonhoeffer expressed these convictions in early 1937. By August, the Finkenwalde seminary was declared illegal. On Sept. 28, two dozen of his students were arrested. In 1938, after learning through family members about Hitler's plans for world domination, Bonhoeffer decided to be involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. I do not have time to elaborate, but suffice it to say, Bonhoeffer's life became complicated. Friends and colleagues at Union Seminary in New York, including Reinhold Niebuhr, knew his life was in danger, and they devised a plan to bring him back to America, and he departed in early June 1939. But from the time he boarded the ship, Bonhoeffer had grave misgivings about leaving Germany. He agonized about forsaking "the brethren," his students and fellow pastors. Two weeks after arriving in America on, he decided that he could not stay.

It grieved him that his American friends and colleagues had practically moved heaven and earth to bring him to America. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr on June 22:

> I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. … Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or of willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of the alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make the choice from a position of safety.[17]

Protestantism Without Reformation

In the weeks before he returned, he wrote an essay about Christianity in America that he had been reflecting on since his visit ten years earlier. One wonders: Why write it now with everything else facing him? Perhaps it was because he did not know what awaited him in Germany and, therefore, wanted to get his thoughts down on paper. Perhaps it was because he wanted to thank his American friends and colleagues by doing what German scholars do—by giving them his frank, critical assessment of the matter. In any case, there is a burden, an urgency in this essay that goes beyond mere scholarly assessment. He entitled it, "Protestantism Without Reformation."[18]

Bonhoeffer did not believe that America had ever experienced a reformation. He claimed, "God has granted American Christianity no Reformation. He has given it strong revivalist preachers, churchmen and theologians, but no Reformation of the church of Jesus Christ by the Word of God." He recognized, of course, that the churches of America had exercised enormous influence on the culture, and he believed: "The decisive task for today is the dialogue between Protestantism without Reformation and the churches of the Reformation."[19]

He believed the churches of the Reformation in Europe and the churches without the Reformation in America could learn from each other. Bonhoeffer had been overwhelmed by the incredible plurality of churches in America. On the one hand, he said: "It has been granted to the Americans more than any other nation of the earth to have before their eyes the multiplicity of Christian insights and communities." On the other hand, he said,

"It has been granted to the Americans less than any other nation of the earth to realize the visible unity of the church of God." The lack of visible unity of the church in America concerned him. And he said, "The concept of the invisible church cannot be far away," that is, the temptation of ecclesiological Docetism.[20]

Sanctuary for Victims of Religious Intolerance

Bonhoeffer was also struck by the phenomenon of denominationalism in America. In contrast to the state churches of Europe, Americans tended to see denominations as voluntary or "private associations" of individuals, as "a free association of Christians on the basis of definite common experiences." He was surprised by the "influence" and "power of the free Church associations which are not linked to denominations," that is, parachurch organizations. He noted that some denominations, such as the Presbyterians, had exercised great influence on America, and spoke as if they still did. But what troubled him was the "incredible picture of fragmentation" that the American church represents. He said, "The unity of the church of Jesus Christ is to American Christianity less something essential, originally given by God, than something required, something which ought to be. It is less origin than goal"—and, seemingly, not a terribly urgent or pressing goal. After a decade of reflection, he came to what he believed was a key insight:

> The history of the church of Jesus Christ in America is distinct from the histories of all other churches on earth by virtue of the fact that from the beginning America has been a refuge for persecuted Christians from the European continent. Since the seventeenth century, America has been the sanctuary for victims of religious intolerance, for those who wished to live in freedom for their worship.[21]

The earliest settlers fled Europe because of confessional intolerance. They did so in order "to serve God in quietness and peace." So, "the Christian right to flee" has long been considered sacred in America. It is one reason the impulse to retreat (or "retreatism") runs so deep. But there is a deeper problem: "In the sanctuary there is no longer a place for strife" over confessions. The children of those who fled confessional intolerance do not wish to be considered confessionally intolerant themselves. So, they began to think not only that struggling over a confession was no longer necessary but no longer good. Eventually, they forgot why their forbears came in the first place. They came to think that their forbears came because they wanted peace, not because they wanted to live according to some creed. And then this happened:

> The struggle over the creed, because of which the fathers took flight, [became] for the sons something which is in itself unchristian. Absence of struggle becomes for them the normal and ideal state of Christianity. … Thus for American Christianity the concept of tolerance becomes the basic principle of everything Christian. Any intolerance is in itself unchristian.[22]

Does this sound familiar to you? The creed, the confession, and the question of truth are no longer decisive. The concept of tolerance is the basic principle of everything. "Any intolerance is in itself unchristian." This, Bonhoeffer claims, is a primary source of America's secularization. But there is another.

An Enthusiastic Doctrine of the State

In the past, the churches in America were so powerful that they could more or less dictate to the state what it should or should not do. In the nineteenth century, for example, Bonhoeffer relates, "The denominational influence still dominated the life of Christians so completely that the help of the state could be refused" when it came to public education. But Bonhoeffer recognized in 1939 this was no longer the case. The officially "religionless state" was now pushing back hard against the church. The churches in America had long embraced what Bonhoeffer calls "an enthusiastic doctrine of the state" wherein "The church proclaims the principles of social and political order, the state merely provides the technical means of putting them into effect." This order no longer prevailed. But the churches still fancied that they were in control and had all the answers or at least many of them and could still tell the state what to do with respect to all manner of "social, political, and economic questions."[23]

Fancying it was still in control and had not only the right to be heard but the right to be taken seriously, Bonhoeffer marvels, for example, at all the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) was demanding that the state do in 1939. The state should demand that Uruguay not "limit religious freedom. … a new marriage and divorce law is demanded, as is vaccination legislation and female suffrage. A stand is made against games of chance, lotteries and horse racing … The government is asked to recognize Liberia as an independent republic"—as if the Presbyterian Church had its own State Department! "Further demands are made for better race relationships, old age pensions, and unemployment assistance, and for a simplification of legal procedure in civil cases," as well as statements about "the International Court of Justice, disarmament, naturalization laws, and so on."[24]

Please make no mistake, Bonhoeffer was not sanctioning silence on all these matters. He writes at length about "the race question," the need for better race relations, and the clear betrayal of the church, baptism, and the Gospel that racial segregation represents. With respect to this and other matters, he believed the church "calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled," as Barmen's Fifth Article states. So, Bon-

hoeffer was, to be sure, by no means advocating for any "spirituality of the church" or Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine wherein the realm of the church and the state remain neatly bifurcated—as if responsibilities in one realm could always be so cleanly divided or hermetically sealed off from the other. He admits what an unmitigated disaster this had turned out to be in Germany. He says: "the secularization of the church on the continent of Europe arose" precisely from this "misinterpretation."[25]

Nevertheless, he says, "American secularization derives precisely from the deficient [*mangelnden*] distinction of the kingdoms and offices of church and state, from the enthusiastic claim of the church to universal influence on the world"—as if the church had an unlimited reservoir of wisdom, resources, and expertise to address all the world's problems, as if the task and vocation of the church and the state were more or less the same, "as though," as Barmen's Fifth Article says, "the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State." Bonhoeffer worried that American denominations were in danger of becoming organs or tools of the state if they continued to confuse the church's special commission, vocation, and tasks with the state's, and he warned: "the American denominations today must learn the necessity of this distinction, if they are to be rescued from complete secularization."[26]

Is this not where we are today? Are we not in need of rescue from complete secularization? Are we not more enthusiastic or eager to embrace social and political agendas than to fulfill the church's tasks and vocation? Have not so many of our churches become organs or tools of the state—whether as witting or unwitting mouthpieces of the political left or the political right?

I know there is much more that could be said here. I know this is all more complicated than I have made it sound. But let us be clear about one thing: The church has its own "special commission." "It trusts and obeys the power of the Word of God by which God upholds all things." This is what the Barmen Declaration's Fifth Article says.

Bonhoeffer believed, like Barth, that the church does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the world. But the church exists for the sake of the world not by being the world but by being the church and not the world, by living in solidarity with the world without conformity to the world. Why solidarity without conformity to the world? Because Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13–14).

Bonhoeffer worried about the secularization of the American church, and he wanted his friends and colleagues to know why—even though he had plenty of other things to worry about in the summer of 1939. When he returned to Germany, nearly a thousand pastors were in prison. Some were his friends. Many were tortured. Hundreds would die. Half the students he taught would be killed, many on the Eastern Front. He went to Sigurdshof where there was no inside plumbing and only a handful of students. He taught there until March 1940. And most of you know, I trust, what eventually happened to him. He was hanged.

Bonhoeffer's Journey and Ours

So, what does Bonhoeffer's journey have to do with ours? What does the journey of his students and fellow pastors have to do with ours? Perhaps not much. We are not facing what they faced. No one is threatening to arrest us, to put us in prison, to torture or to interrogate us and our family members. Sure, we face opposition and feel pressure. Who doesn't? Yes, many of us have had to deal in our congregations, classrooms, or elsewhere with censors who have tried to restrict our speech. But we are still free to speak God's Word and let the chips fall where they may, are we not? Yes, it may cost us our jobs, and for some it already has. But this is a price that many Christians have been willing to pay throughout the centuries.

Owing "to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions," as Barmen's Third Article puts it, there has been pressure on many of us for quite some time "to abandon the form of [the church's] message and order," especially many of us in the Presbyterian Church (USA). And now some would seek to exact from us an oath of allegiance to the god of tolerance. At least that is what one recent amendment amounts to for some of us. Since so many are still so unaware—genuinely unaware—that the god of tolerance is a jealous god and is anything but tolerant but supremely intolerant, we do not know what will happen to us. We do not know what the courts or higher governing bodies of our church will do with us.

We cannot betray our ordination vows to be under the authority of Scripture and be guided by our confessions. We cannot bless or sanction what God has not blessed or sanctioned in his Word. We live by "the power of the Word of God by which God upholds all things." We cannot allow our conscience to be bound by any authority other than God's Word. It may be that some of us will be forced to walk the plank, so to speak. If so, we will do so, I hope, decently and in order, as Presbyterians, albeit not silently and not without sadness, but also not without joy.

And perhaps here our journey does have something to do with Bonhoeffer's. What an opportunity we have today to bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ in this world! What a joy to be called by Jesus Christ to be his disciples, to be commissioned and sent by him. What a privilege to serve his church and to be part of his body, both visible and invisible. What an honor to follow him, the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep.

What a blessing to see so many young people among us who, rather than fleeing from the visible church like so many in their generation—and, frankly, like so many in their parents' and grandparents' generation, too—they are coming back to it and calling others to do the same. Rather than being bored by the church's tradition, they are curious about it. Rather than thinking they already know enough about the Bible and theology, many are hungry to learn more. And some are asking us to teach them and to equip them for service in the church. What an opportunity we have. What a responsibility, too.[27]

These young people are not seeking to retreat from the world. They understand perhaps better than any previous generation that there is no escaping or retreating from the world. Rather than retreating from the world, they want to be the church *in* the world. And they want our help. They want us, above all, to be salt and light. They want us to live in solidarity with the world without conformity to the world. They want us to hold our posts and to stand faithfully for the faith. "Therefore," as the apostle Paul tell us,

> Take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:13–17).

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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[1] Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1962), 137.
[2] Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*, 384; ET 330.
[3] Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*, 384f.; ET 330f.
[4] Letter to Erwin Sutz, Sept. 11, 1934 in DBW 13:217.
[5] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936 from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer vol. 1* (London: Collins, 1965), 91.
[6] Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*, 380f.; ET 326–327.
[7] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *DBW* 14, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2013), 171, 173–174. For further reading, see Paul House, *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015).
[8] Through a partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Theology Matters has offered since 2023 a Master of Arts program in Reformed Theology. It is a 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. For more information, please go to: https://theologymatters.com/institute/#ma-program or contact us at admin@theologymatters.com or 1-864-378-5416.
[9] The seminary was an effort at communal living where students stove to live out, as Bonhoeffer put it, "the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ." See letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, Jan. 14, 1935 in *DBW* 13: *London (1933–1935)*, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 273.
[10] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* (Berlin: Trowitzsch & Sohn, 1930; ET: DBW 1, *Sanctorum Communio: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
"[I]t is in the totally visible being of the community that the totally invisible calls for manifestation and declaration in the totally visible" Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936–62), IV/3.2:726.
"What [the Church] is invisibly wills as such to become generally visible, and it has the promise that one day it will do so" Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2:728.
[11] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27–28.
[12] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Lowell Press, 1912), 57.
[13] "It would not be His community if offence could not be taken at it too" Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2:724.
[14] As Karl Barth later put it, "We should be inhuman where God is human, we should be ashamed of Jesus Christ Himself, were we willing to be ashamed of the Church. . . The Church is not too mean a thing for Him but, for better or for worse, sufficiently worthy in His eyes to be entrusted with His witnessing and thus His affairs in the world—yes, even Himself. So great is God's loving-kindness" *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser (Richmond: John Knox Press), 64
[15] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 113/*The Cost of Discipleship*, 118.
[16] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship,* 248.
[17] Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Reinhold Niebuhr, June 22, 1939, cited in Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*, 736; ET 655.
[18] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism Without Reformation" in *No Rusty Swords*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), 94ff.
[19] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 117–118.
[20] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 94–95.
[21] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 101.
[22] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 103.
[23] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 107.
[24] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 109. Part of Bonhoeffer's surprise derives from the fact "that in this case we are dealing not with enthusiasts, but with Presbyterians, who are reformed in their doctrine of church and state."
[25] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 108.
[26] Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 108.
[27] "Presbyterians for the Kingdom," a group of young people dedicated to the concrete reality of the visible church and to theological renewal in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), attended the Theology Matters' conference where this address was given and held their first conference immediately before it.

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
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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
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>
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