

Bonhoeffer

as

Youth Worker

A Theological Vision
for Discipleship and Life Together

Andrew Root

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To Owen,
who is so much like the ten-year-old
who lost Mr. Wolf

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Preface

Books are always written for someone. Usually the best books are written for the author. Especially theological books, I believe, need to be written for the author by the author. The reader is blessed by participating in the ministry of the theologian who is brave enough to wrestle with God for faith as he or she writes. The very classic theological texts of the Christian tradition like Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Luther's *Freedom of the Christian*, and even Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* seem to be written first and foremost for the author.

This book you hold promises none of the impact of those listed above. Yet this book too was written first and foremost for me. This book comes out of great joy. It allowed me to sketch out something that I had seen in the life of Bonhoeffer that no other Bonhoeffer thinker had directly addressed. In this project I devoted the time and concentration to dive headlong into the history of Bonhoeffer, a story that has intrigued me for nearly two decades. It also allowed me to show something about Bonhoeffer's life that I deeply hope is a blessing to many ministers out in the day-to-day struggle of standing with and for young people.

So it is true that books are for the author, but they must also be let out into the world to become books for others as well. This book is first for the youth worker, the minister to youth. It is a book that explores how Dietrich Bonhoeffer—the great theological mind of the twentieth century that lived his faith all the way to death—was a youth

minister himself. As a matter of fact, this book shows that there is nearly no time between 1925 and 1939 (the core of Bonhoeffer's life) that he was not doing either children's or youth ministry. My great hope is that this book is a gift to youth workers, showing them that their calling stands on the broad shoulders of Bonhoeffer. In these pages they will not only see Dietrich's own youth work, but I hope they will also be inspired as I seek to tease out the ramifications of Bonhoeffer's thought for their own ministry today.

So while this book is first for the youth worker, it is also for Bonhoeffer scholars. While for youth ministers I offer the encouragement of revealing Bonhoeffer as one that goes before them, to Bonhoeffer scholars I hope to reveal a lacuna in Bonhoeffer discourse. There has been no thorough examination of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's youth work, and often conversations about it have been presented in order to make other points. For instance, discussion of his Sunday school leadership in Harlem has not engendered conversations about why this young man always chose youth ministry over other forms of ministry. I offer this book as just such a study of the centrality of Bonhoeffer's youth work.

When books move from being for the author to being for others, there are usually intermediaries, or even midwives, that help this move to occur, checking on the health of the project to make sure it is fit for the world. I have been blessed with such people in relation to this project. Dirk Lange, my colleague at Luther Seminary, was so kind to give time from his sabbatical to read through this project. Dan Adams, an American pastor ministering in South Africa, also took the time from writing his own thesis on Bonhoeffer to read this project. I've been blessed in the last seven years to travel often and to meet so many faithful ministers of the gospel across the world. Dan was one of these people, and his insight as a budding Bonhoeffer scholar and youth minister was rich. I would also like to thank Bob Hosack at Baker, who saw the vision for this book. Robert Hand at Baker also provided significant help in making this project more readable. Thanks also to Erik Leafblad for the hard work on the index. But finally, my biggest thanks goes to Kara Root, who is *always* the first to read anything I write and provide insight on argument, style, and direction. I first studied Bonhoeffer in seminary with Kara, so it only makes sense that in this full-length book, her fingerprints would be all over it.

Youth Ministry and Bonhoeffer

Finding a Forefather

The room was packed with youth workers, and I knew their presence had nothing to do with me. I was brand new in the youth-ministry-presenting world, and, for the most part, these youth workers had no idea who I was. I had already done an earlier breakout session at this big conference, on a topic directly related to youth ministry, like “Caring for Hurting Teenagers” or something similar. During that session, my room, ready to receive hundreds, saw only a trickle of twenty or so skeptical participants walk in, spreading themselves from one end to the next as if it were a competition to always keep a dozen chairs between them. The largest collective stayed near the door, comforted that if things went lame they could make it down the hall to another presentation before long.

I was expecting pretty much the same for this second breakout session, and my inner forecaster expected the drought of participants to not only continue but worsen. After all, the first presentation had been more directly on the practice of youth ministry, on the *practical*.

And if there was anything that the youth workers at this conference wanted, it was the know-how of the practical.

As I readied my computer for this second presentation, shifting cords and moving keynote slides, a trickle of youth workers already began to enter the room. Soon the trickle became a steady stream that surged to become a flood. Now youth worker after youth worker sought seats before they disappeared into the humanity of one another, sliding by each other to grab a chair in the middle of rows. All these practical, thirsty-for-know-how-and-new-ideas youth workers were cramming themselves together, coming to hear something promising no practicality at all; they had no idea who I was or how this topic would help them. Nevertheless they came—and only because my title read, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Youth Ministry.”

As I concluded my fifty minutes of rambling, youth worker after youth worker lined up to talk to me. Yet almost none had a question; rather, they stood to give a confession, saying to me, “Hey, thanks; Bonhoeffer is my hero,” or “I came because I just find Bonhoeffer so interesting.” I stood for nearly an hour hearing one after another confess how this German man had impacted them. Many explained in shameful candor that they actually knew little about Bonhoeffer, but that the little they knew drew them in deeply and impacted them significantly.

Bonhoeffer and Youth Ministry

It was clear that day that youth workers were not unlike so many others who find intrigue and inspiration from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer ranks high on nearly every list of influential Christians; and across very distinct groups (whether liberal or conservative, mainline or evangelical, youth worker or senior pastor),¹ nearly all include Bonhoeffer in either their formal or informal pantheon of impactful leaders.

Yet it just may be that youth workers have a particular (and so often unexplored) connection with Bonhoeffer. Youth workers, as my experience highlights, have an admiration for Bonhoeffer, but hearing their confessions that day, none articulated (or seemed to know)

1. Stephen Haynes discusses this list in his interesting *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

how Bonhoeffer was connected to them through a shared calling to minister to young people. It seems, in fact, that most Bonhoeffer lovers (not to mention scholars) have forgotten or overlooked the amount and depth of youth ministry that encompassed his life and work. It may be even fair to say (as I'll try to show below) that a central way to understand Bonhoeffer is as a pastor to youth and/or as a talented thinker who constructed some of the most creative theological perspectives of the early twentieth century with young people on his mind. Youth workers, like so many others, feel drawn to Bonhoeffer, but few have seen the links that connect them to Bonhoeffer, feeling he's just a theologian they like rather than a forefather to their very calling. This forefather may stand at the beginning of a slowly evolving movement in youth ministry itself.

A Forefather to a Movement

It can be argued that youth ministry is a post–World War II North American phenomenon.² This, then, would make it quite strange to call its forefather a German man who was killed in 1945. Actually, as we'll see in the chapters below, Dietrich Bonhoeffer more than likely would have been strongly against many of the forms American youth ministry has taken since its inception. Bonhoeffer, after all, was against overly exuberant ministerial endeavors like the Oxford Movement³ and had certain disdain for the entrepreneurial spirit of American religion and its desire to always be *doing* without thinking (and confessing) the faith.⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in intellectual pursuit

2. Of course there were many youth-oriented or youth-directed ministers prior to the middle of the twentieth century, but youth ministry as the professional phenomenon that it is today can be seen as beginning to take shape post–World War II in North America. For more on this history, see Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007); Mark Senter, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992); and Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

3. Bonhoeffer came into contact with the English Oxford Movement during his time at Finkenwalde. It was assumed that this English ministry and Bonhoeffer's own seminary community overlapped. But Bonhoeffer saw none, having harsh words to say about their exuberant displays of spirituality.

4. See, for example, his piece *Protestantism without Reformation* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 15:438), as well as the many letters to Max Diestel back in Germany in 1930–31 about his experience of the American church. Bonhoeffer was no fan.

and personal disposition, was far from the stereotypical image we have of the contemporary youth worker.

So it would not be right in any way to call Dietrich Bonhoeffer the forefather of North American–like youth ministry. But it would also be a great oversight not to see how central ministry to youth was for Bonhoeffer. Therefore, when I call Bonhoeffer a forefather to a movement, I mean to disconnect youth ministry from its post–World War II North American phenomenon and link Bonhoeffer with what Kenda Creasy Dean and I have called “the theological turn in youth ministry” (something we see as more global and reflective than post–World War II North American youth ministry).⁵

Dean and I have noticed, and sought to foster, a slowly evolving movement of youth workers that have taken what we’ve called a theological turn. These are youth workers who, in response to their previous ministry or the larger ethos of American youth ministry’s “industrial complex,” have sought to move into the theological. They have turned to the theological not for the sake of the academic or the intellectual but for the sake of the ministerial. They believe that turning theological can give them frameworks and direction in doing ministry with and for young people.

These are youth workers who have shifted from seeing youth ministry as a technical pursuit that seeks the functional ends of solving a problem, like getting young people religiously committed, entertained, or morally and spiritually safe. Instead, they see youth ministry as a concrete locale to reflect upon and participate in the action of God.⁶ They have turned theological as a way of directing the very shape of their ministries.

Or we could say it this way: American youth ministry, since its inception in the mid-twentieth century, has been engendered with a technological mind-set; North American youth ministry has been a *technology*. It is no surprise that the age of the technological—the age in which American society was gripped by a consumptive drive for the

5. See Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).

6. See also my series A Theological Journey through Youth Ministry; the four titles are *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); and *Unlocking Eschatology and Mission in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

new and better (that only a technological society could provide)—was the age of contemporary American youth ministry’s beginnings.

Technology is science used for functional ends, to achieve or solve some problem that will result in increased capital.⁷ Youth ministry was created as a technology, needed to solve the problem of adolescent religious apathy, and thus it existed for functional growth, as all technologies do. Youth ministry was created to increase capital by solving the technical problem for which it was created. This functional problem was low religious commitment (kids didn’t like church) and immoral behavior (kids were doing drugs, having sex, and not reading their Bibles). As a technology created to functionally solve these problems, youth ministry could only be judged by its increased capital; if *more* kids were coming to church or youth group on Sunday and Wednesday, and if more kids were sober and sexually pure, youth ministry was successful—it was meeting the functional end it was created for. And as a technology, its good (its reason to exist at all) was only for accomplishing its functional end by expanding the desired capital.

This technological ethos has begun to feel like a noose around the neck of many youth workers. Tied up in this technological ethos, it feels as if their ministry is always in search of the next big program, model, or idea. In other words, it’s looking for the next big technological breakthrough that will finally help them exponentially increase their capital (yielding a big youth group filled with virgins). Some youth workers have begun to wonder if there is not more to ministry, or if ministry is even something different altogether than managing technologies to increase religious capital. They are wondering about God, and God’s action in youth ministry, or whether such deep thoughts and reflection are sucked dry by youth ministry’s technological addictions. It is those that have taken the brave step away from the technological and sought the action of God in their ministries with youth that have taken *the theological turn*.

I was shocked at the attendance of my Bonhoeffer presentation at the conference because the topic (and, as I hope to show, Bonhoeffer himself) stood opposed to the binding of (youth) ministry to the

7. This capital could be social, cultural, or much more. But most often this capital is economic. Innovation often happens or is sponsored because of the money it might make, because of the increases it might bring.

technological. In fact, it may be in part this very different starting point of Bonhoeffer's that attracts so many to him. We hear something different in Bonhoeffer, something that moves us away from our addiction to ministry technology, something that turns us to place our ministries on the revelation of God.

Turning to the Forefather

Dean and I have noticed and sought to perpetuate a turn of youth ministry from the *technological* to the *theological*. We have tried to encourage youth workers to see youth ministry not for solving a functional problem that, when resolved, will increase capital (the technological), but instead to see youth ministry as a locale to encounter the revelation of God next to the humanity of young people themselves (the theological). Youth ministry, we believe, seeks to reflect deeply on the action of God in and through the lives of young people who are both within and outside the church.

But I need to be precise and say that the turn to the theological is not, and is different from, a turn to *theology*.⁸ To turn to theology is to turn solely to doctrines and traditions, believing that if you can get such information into young people's heads that you've met your goal. A turn to theology would risk a retreat away from the concrete and lived experience of young people.⁹ Rather, we call this a *theological* turn because it seeks to explore the very concrete¹⁰ and

8. This is similar to an argument Mark Lewis Taylor makes. Though my thoughts and his are very different in many ways, I find his distinction between theology and the theological helpful here. See *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

9. Here Bonhoeffer, in his own words, points toward the theological: "Theology is the interpretation of the confession from particular viewpoints and the ongoing testing of the confession against the scriptures. Faith arises from the preaching of the word of God alone. It does not need theology, but true preaching needs the confession and theology. Faith, which arises from preaching, in turn seeks its confirmation in scripture and the confessions and thus itself does theology" (*Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006], 16:494).

10. Ernst Feil says, "Bonhoeffer sought God as the *concretissimum*; to him God was both concrete reality and the mystery that is close to us. In God there is true reality which transcends what is alleged to be reality understood positivistically" (*The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 39).

lived experience young people have as the location for encounter with God.¹¹

A youth ministry that turns to *theology* seeks to move young people into forms of formal knowledge (to assimilate to the doctrinal). A youth ministry bound in the *technological* seeks to increase numbers and behavior. A youth ministry that turns to the *theological* seeks to share in the concrete and lived experience of young people as the very place to share in the act and being of God.¹²

For those of us seeking to live into the theological turn in youth ministry, I seek in the pages of this project to show Dietrich Bonhoeffer as our forefather. It would be impossible to make Bonhoeffer the forefather of technological North American youth ministry. Not only will his history and context not allow for it, but his very thought and commitments stand in opposition to it. In the same way, it would be hard to make Bonhoeffer a forefather to the turn to *theology* in youth ministry. Bonhoeffer was, without doubt, conversant with doctrine and confessions, even teaching them to his confirmation students. But in the end, the very shape of Bonhoeffer's ministry to young people reveals that his desire was not for getting information into their heads but for sharing in their lives as a way of mutually experiencing the very revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

It is this theological attention, this focus on God's act in our concrete lives, that I believe makes Bonhoeffer so intriguing to so many, and it is the fact that he himself lived and died seeking to follow Jesus Christ in the concrete and lived that draws roomfuls of people to come hear his story.¹³

11. With this as its commitment the theological may no doubt, as my work has, turn to the doctrinal. I'm deeply *for* doctrine. However, following Bonhoeffer, we must be moved into discourse with the doctrinal *through* the concrete and lived. To cut off the concrete and lived is to fall into the trap of "theology" as I'm using it here.

12. This theological focus I have also called *Christopraxis*. *Christopraxis* is a perspective that has its origins in the thought of Ray Anderson, who came to this perspective through a deep reading of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Yet this theological focus also has strong resonance with more recent missional theology. It is Dean's attention to missional theology, as well as our mutually being impacted by practical theological perspectives, that moves us to see the theological as we do.

13. David Hopper explains further the importance of the concrete:

In his Chicago lectures of 1961, [Eberhard] Bethge made this motif of "concreteness" the subject of his opening discussion of Bonhoeffer's thought. He made

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I will argue then, is the forefather to those taking the *theological* turn in youth ministry. For those of us seeking to make such a turn, I hope to show how we stand on the shoulders of Bonhoeffer, and how we might claim him and learn from him as we turn theological in youth ministry. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the forefather to the theological turn because he incomparably weaves together youth work, attention to concrete experience, and commitment to the revelatory nature of God’s continued action in the world through Jesus Christ. In these pages, then, Bonhoeffer will be our teacher. We will explore the richness of his theological projects, seeing from his life and writings what we might learn for our own contemporary theological turn.

Therefore, to start this journey, we must begin where all conversations about Bonhoeffer must: with his biography. Nearly every Bonhoeffer book published has been unable to resist a chapter or two on biography. This project hopes not simply to be pulled in by the intrigue of Bonhoeffer’s story (though it is quite intriguing) but to mine his narrative and tell a piece of Bonhoeffer’s story that has been so often overlooked or underplayed: Bonhoeffer’s very work as a minister to youth. Therefore, in part 1 I will seek to tell the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the youth worker; in part 2 I’ll explore two of Bonhoeffer’s most important writings—*Discipleship* and *Life Together*—for their relevance to youth ministry today.

two points in this connection: first, that for Bonhoeffer concreteness was an “attribute of revelation itself,” and secondly, that the message of the church to the world had to also be concrete. In regard to the first point, Bethge asserted that in the early writings and continuing throughout the later, “Incarnation is . . . at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s theology. There cannot be any speculation about a God before or outside this concreteness. The incarnated God is the only one we know. We cannot even think of concreteness as an addition God put on later to his being. All we know, and this is breathtaking, is that the incarnated concreteness IS the attribute as far as we can think.” (*A Dissent on Bonhoeffer* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 64)

Part
1

The History of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Youth Worker

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Youth Worker

I made a bold statement at the end of chapter 1 that I now need to justify. I have asserted that *Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the first theological youth worker*. This statement is slightly hyperbolic, though I'm ready to stand behind it. It is hyperbolic because to say "first" is quite hard to prove. There clearly have been other pastors or theologians in the history of the church (and particularly outside Protestantism) that could be argued to predate Bonhoeffer as theologians of youth work or youth ministry, though I do think it could be very difficult to connect a figure earlier than the twentieth century with doing so. This would be difficult because our modern conceptions of childhood and, most particularly, adolescence were not nearly as present and defined as they were in Bonhoeffer's own time and after.

Yet the point of this chapter is not to debate primacy; I admit that it is hard to prove the "first" in my statement. But while the "first-ness" is hard to prove, the "theological" element of my statement is beyond debate. It would be difficult to see Bonhoeffer in any other light than a theological one. He is, after all, the author of intricate theological books like *Act and Being*, significant christological lectures, and essays

on ethics. And these are not simply works of theology, but, as almost all Bonhoeffer interpreters would agree, theological (as I defined it in the last chapter). Bonhoeffer was, from first to last, seeking to think about God's act in and through the concrete and lived. There are few, I would imagine, who would challenge the "theological" in my assertion.

Yet what is at stake in this chapter is my statement that *Dietrich Bonhoeffer is . . . [a] youth worker*. The goal of part 1 of this book is to show this point historically. But I hope to do more with part 1 than just show that Bonhoeffer did youth work. I will also make a case that Bonhoeffer's theological work was impacted by his ministry to youth, showing that his youth work (youth ministry) was central to him and formative for his conceptions of ministry.

"The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon"

Any biographical work on Dietrich Bonhoeffer comes with a danger, which is to read Bonhoeffer's biography as simply supporting one's own commitments. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has often become the mascot of many divergent groups, all claiming him as their saint.

It is quite unusual to have such rich historical material on a person (there is no shortage of long scholarly biographies on Bonhoeffer) and yet find such divergent interpretations of him. Stephen Haynes has called this reality the "Bonhoeffer Phenomenon."¹ Haynes explains that the Bonhoeffer phenomenon revolves around what I saw in my youth worker presentation in chapter 1: an overwhelming love for Bonhoeffer that is too often combined with a lack of understanding of the very biography of Bonhoeffer (the scholarly biographies are rarely read).

But who was Bonhoeffer really? What commitments shaped his thought and ministry? Part 1 not only seeks to reveal Bonhoeffer as a youth worker but also hopes to inform youth workers of who Dietrich Bonhoeffer was, helping them into the story and shape of his life.

1. See Haynes, *Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*.

The Revolutionaries

Haynes explains more in depth how three divergent groups have claimed Bonhoeffer, making a part of his biography central to justify a theological or ministerial position of their own. The first group to do this Haynes calls “the revolutionaries.” It was actually this group that ushered Bonhoeffer from obscurity to fame. Bonhoeffer, for the most part, died as an unknown young pastor and theologian. He had written some books and impressed many (including Karl Barth) with his potential. But “in potential” is tragically how he died, swallowed by the war before he could make a true impact.

Nevertheless, two decades after his tragic death, his impact came; it erupted with the publication of Bonhoeffer’s Tegel prison letters (*Letters and Papers from Prison* in English). These letters were seized by a number of English-speaking revolutionary theologians in the 1960s who were exploring an atheistic Christianity. They pounced on certain phrases and thoughts in Bonhoeffer to support their own position. Most particularly, Bonhoeffer’s conception of “religionless Christianity” caught their attention, making Bonhoeffer the face of radical (anti-)Christianity. Haynes states, “For radicals Bonhoeffer is a ‘seer’—a man born out of time who perceived the future with uncanny prescience.”²

As Haynes explains further, Bonhoeffer’s prison experience became central to who he was for the revolutionaries.³ They out-and-out ignored or spoke against the earlier confessional and theological articulations of Bonhoeffer, claiming that the Bonhoeffer in prison made a radical shift, moving beyond all that had come before, even the tight-knit conservative family he grew up in. All attention to orthodoxy,

2. *Ibid.*, 29.

3. It was Bishop Robinson and his book *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963) that not only made Bonhoeffer’s name more fully known in the English-speaking world but also set forth the radical interpretation of Bonhoeffer. While, for the most part, this position has been seen to be problematic by Bonhoeffer scholars (most see it as a failure to take into account the full breadth and scope of Bonhoeffer’s life and thought), it remains a position. For instance, a few postmodern theologians and philosophers of religion continue to return to a revolutionary Bonhoeffer. Perhaps the most popular of these is Peter Rollins, who so deeply misreads Bonhoeffer along these lines that he admits disdain for the earlier historical and intellectual elements of Bonhoeffer’s thought.

community, and the revelation of Jesus Christ was conveniently deleted by those in the revolutionary interpretation.

This historical/theological interpretation would have been the default perspective on Bonhoeffer if Bonhoeffer's own surviving student and closest friend had not railed against it. Eberhard Bethge, the addressee of most of the letters from prison, stood against the radical Bonhoeffer interpretation, exhorting that Bonhoeffer could not be read as a 1960s death-of-God theologian (or today as a radical postmodern theologian).⁴ Bethge claimed there was no break (though there was development) in the thought and life of Bonhoeffer.

The Liberals

Haynes explains that a new group of Bonhoeffer interpreters evolved through direct conversation with Bethge—Haynes calls these interpreters “the liberals.” This group was enamored with Bonhoeffer's attention to social justice, exploring particularly Bonhoeffer's resistance to National Socialism and his advocacy for the Jews. But, Haynes explains, these historical realities are not the central biographical lens through which they see Bonhoeffer. They instead draw on the themes of resistance, advocacy, and the call for justice, centered on Bonhoeffer's experience in New York City, and particularly in Harlem in 1930–31. These mainly American liberal theologians see the historical key to unlocking a true vision of Bonhoeffer as his experience in America with pre–civil rights African Americans.⁵ And there

4. Haynes writes, “Van Hoogstraten compares Bonhoeffer's anti-metaphysical pronouncements in *Letters and Papers from Prison* with the postmodern critique of metaphysics by Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo” (*Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 25). He continues, “In a manner strikingly akin to postmodern thinkers, Thiemann maintains, Bonhoeffer sketches a theology that is ‘non-metaphysical and non-foundational, in solidarity with the powerless and suffering, and committed to righteous action in perilous and uncertain situations’” (*ibid.*, 26).

5. “For three decades Bonhoeffer's reception among religious and social liberals has foregrounded his identity as the grandfather of liberation theology” (*ibid.*, 46). Haynes continues,

According to Melano, Bonhoeffer's education in contextualized theology continued at Union Theological Seminary, where fellow student Frank Fisher took Bonhoeffer to Harlem and introduced him to “the outcasts, the marginalized and pariahs of American society.” Professor C. C. Webber's course “Church and Community” familiarized Bonhoeffer with the church's role in confronting

is no doubt that this experience had a lifelong impact on Bonhoeffer. Never again did Bonhoeffer do ministry without the Negro spiritual; he played the records he bought in New York for his confirmation class and then his young students at the illegal Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer, it seems clear, used the Negro spiritual to help his own students move into the theological, dwelling in the deep pathos of the spiritual as a way to seek for God in the concrete and lived.

It is impossible to see Bonhoeffer outside some strain of liberalism. He did, after all, take his PhD at Berlin, the bastion of liberal thought.⁶ He did, after all, attend Union Theological Seminary. And he was a dear family friend of church historian and fellow Berliner Adolf von Harnack, a giant of liberal thought (Bonhoeffer not only took the train with Harnack weekly from Grunewald to the university but was given the honor of eulogizing the great theologian at his national funeral).

Yet Bonhoeffer also took distinctive steps away from liberalism. For instance, in 1926 Bonhoeffer became enamored with the thought of Karl Barth, the theologian railing against Bonhoeffer's very teachers in Berlin and against the bankruptcy of liberal theological thought.⁷

"the problems of labor, civil rights, and juvenile criminality." Harry F. Ward, whose "untraditional approach to Christian Ethics was tinged with socialism," also left his mark. In New York, in other words, Bonhoeffer learned to see the world "from below." Melano notes that upon returning to Germany Bonhoeffer taught a confirmation class among a "restless proletariat" in the working-class district of Wedding, keeping "direct contact with the people, including the communists and the socialists." These experiences provided the raw material that would be refined in Bonhoeffer's theological writings. (ibid., 49)

6. "But if the University of Berlin was in a state of decline when Bonhoeffer matriculated, it is also true that too much emphasis in the study of Bonhoeffer has been placed upon his reaction against his teachers and too little on the great influence they exerted upon him" (John Phillips, *Christ for Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* [New York: Harper & Row, 1967], 34).

7. Haynes elaborates,

However, significant ironies are involved in making Bonhoeffer the sort of religious liberal familiar to twenty-first-century Christians. First, while it is not surprising that North American liberals want to cast him as an exemplar of progressive religiosity, Bonhoeffer's own experience made him severely critical of American theology. Bonhoeffer was immersed in American liberal Protestantism during his yearlong sojourn in New York, and he was unimpressed. The humanistic language, the privileging of the social gospel, the "philosophical and organizational secularization of Christianity," the lack of concern for

Bonhoeffer was receiving from his cousin Hans-Christoph von Hase some of Barth's earliest lectures. Von Hase had gone to Göttingen to study medicine but was converted to the study of theology after one Barth lecture. Now, taking every lecture Barth gave, von Hase would handwrite, word for word (something not uncommon for German students at the time), each lecture and mail it to his cousin in Berlin.

Even in New York in the classrooms of Union, Bonhoeffer was standing against liberalism. He spoke so vigorously for Barth (whom few knew at the time) in New York that the great Reinhold Niebuhr (whom Bonhoeffer took classes from at Union) would mistake Bonhoeffer for decades as a Barthian acolyte. Bonhoeffer was disturbed and shocked when in these classes he spoke of sin and all the liberal Union students laughed, finding his confessional language so backward as to be ridiculed.

Even after Bonhoeffer's time in New York City, even after teaching Sunday school to the Harlem youth at Abyssinian Baptist Church (which we will return to below), Bonhoeffer's intrigue with Barth and his prophetic message against liberalism only deepened. Immediately upon Bonhoeffer's return to Europe from New York in the summer of 1931, he went to Bonn to hear and dialogue with Barth (all set up by his fellow European companion at Union, the Swiss national Erwin Sutz, who had studied with Barth).

The Conservatives

The Bonhoeffer phenomenon is deepened, as Haynes explains it, not only because of Bonhoeffer's adaptation by revolutionary and liberal theologians but, most shockingly, by conservative evangelicals, especially in the last few decades.⁸ As the revolutionaries are intrigued

doctrine, and the "unbearable" sermons built around quotes from William James all contributed to Bonhoeffer's dismissal of liberal Protestantism as vapid humanism. (*Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 59)

8. Haynes states:

The most scientific evidence for Bonhoeffer's warm reception among evangelicals comes from surveys of evangelical opinion. At the end of the last decade, the editors of *Christian History* magazine (published by Christianity Today, Inc.) asked readers and historians to list the five most influential Christians of the twentieth century, as well as the five well-known Christians who had been most influential for them personally. When the results were published in the

by “religionless Christianity” and liberals by justice for the oppressed, so the conservatives embrace with firm grip the ideas in *Discipleship*.⁹ It is the directness of the call into risk for faith that captures their imagination, Haynes believes.¹⁰

And these ideas are centered on the biographical last days of Bonhoeffer and his death at Flossenbürg as a martyr for his faith. Bonhoeffer is a hero for conservatives because he not only *spoke* boldly of following Jesus but also *did so*—into the hands of his executor. Haynes explains that it is these last days and words that become the central biographical lens that frames their interpretation of Bonhoeffer. It has led even the likes of James Dobson to herald his love for Bonhoeffer.¹¹

magazine’s winter 2000 edition, Bonhoeffer ranked tenth among both scholars and readers on the “most influential” list, and fifth on the most “personally influential” lists of both groups. Bonhoeffer was not only the highest-ranked theologian, but was one of only six figures who finished in the top ten in all four categories (the others being Billy Graham, C. S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and Francis Schaeffer—all preachers, activists, or apologists). (ibid., 69)

9. When this book was originally translated into English, it took the title *The Cost of Discipleship*. However, more recent translations have returned to the title that more closely connects with Bonhoeffer’s original: *Discipleship*.

10. Haynes makes an interesting point here: “The major figures of twentieth-century European theology—Bonhoeffer’s rough contemporaries Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Karl Barth—are typically regarded by American evangelicals as something less than ‘true’ believers whose theologies are all the more dangerous for their apparent orthodoxy. Yet today, when it is difficult to find a positive mention of any of these men in evangelical publications, Bonhoeffer (who had much in common with them and was a product of the same church and university systems) is honored by a broad array of evangelical authors, publications, and institutions” (*Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 69).

11. Haynes reports,

The most influential evangelical leader to identify Bonhoeffer as a paradigm for Christian cultural engagement is James C. Dobson, founder and president of Focus on the Family. In a series of articles published between 1999 and 2002, Dobson offered Bonhoeffer’s life as a case study in Christian activism at a time when the evangelical obligation to shape society was being called into question. In a *Christianity Today* article titled “The New Cost of Discipleship,” Dobson responded to the charge that Christians have wasted their time opposing abortion, homosexual marriage, pornography, and the assault on traditional values. Citing Bonhoeffer’s failed activism, Dobson asked: “Since when did being outnumbered and under powered justify silence in response to evil?” Bonhoeffer took a stand against the Nazi regime and paid with his life. Would those endorsing Christian isolationism suggest that he should have accommodated Hitler’s henchmen because he had no chance of winning? (ibid., 74)

It is Bonhoeffer's devotion and commitment to faith against a hostile, anti-Christian society that draws conservative evangelicals to embrace him as a hero, for they, too, feel the need to commit to a faith they perceive to be under attack by a corrupt (anti-Christian) society. Haynes states, "For evangelicals, discipleship . . . connotes the countercultural demands of Christian faith, which beckon believers to choose the narrow path of authentic Christian living over the broad way of participation in culture-defining institutions."¹²

My Lens

I'm sure that as you read my own account of Bonhoeffer below you'll see ways that I may, at times, look through one or more of these above lenses, though you will also notice that I find none of these three interpretive lenses conclusive (and at times find one or more distorting). For instance, I will lean heavily on the biographical work of Eberhard Bethge. I'm not shy in stating that in my mind Bethge's thousand-page biography is unmatched, and it only takes a little looking to see how it has been an ur-source for so many other pieces. Yet my following of Bethge's historical account will not force me into wearing a liberal interpretive lens. Bethge himself would be uncomfortable with a solely liberal interpretation of Bonhoeffer.¹³

The many different biographies have a tendency to interpret Bonhoeffer in generally one of these three ways. But while it is impossible to draw from a Bonhoeffer biography and not be pulled into this or that interpretation, I will seek to avoid foreclosure on any one interpretation (for example, I'll draw from Schlingensiepen as much as Bethge) so that I might be free to make my own (new) case for interpreting Bonhoeffer.

My own lens for interpreting Bonhoeffer will focus on what is often glossed over in other historical accounts, whether those historical

12. *Ibid.*, 78.

13. In the same vein, you will see *no* reference to Eric Metaxas's Bonhoeffer biography, which I find so flawed and earnest to paint Bonhoeffer as a conservative (not possessing the openness of Bethge's work) that I cannot follow him in any way, for to do so would be to foreclose on one of the above interpretations.

accounts have their origin in the revolutionary, liberal, or conservative interpretations of Bonhoeffer. These glossed-over experiences are Bonhoeffer's shockingly consistent ministry to and with young people. These experiences begin in 1925, when Bonhoeffer was but nineteen years old, and continue until the outbreak of the war in 1939. Through nearly all the central biographical events and periods that are used by other interpretive lenses, it was ministry to youth that was consistent to Bonhoeffer's direct ministry experience. For example, as the liberal lens makes central Bonhoeffer's time in New York, it often fails to attend to Bonhoeffer's teaching Sunday school in Harlem. And where the conservative interpretation hones in on *Discipleship*, it fails to take into account Bonhoeffer's confirmation class in Wedding and ecumenical youth work while in London. The revolutionary interpretation overlooks how even in prison Bonhoeffer's thoughts turn to his confirmands, fellow younger prisoners, and former students called to the front and dying.

Therefore, the pages that will follow seek to present not a revolutionary, liberal, or conservative Bonhoeffer but a youth worker Bonhoeffer, a Bonhoeffer busy with many things, yes—things like speaking for the oppressed, shouting for his church to obey and confess, and reimagining Christianity for a world come of age—but in and through all these endeavors, I hope to show, a Bonhoeffer doing youth ministry and doing it *theologically*.