



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Finkenwalde Project  
(*Monasticism Old and New*,  
pp. 19-25)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Finkenwalde Project

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's project at Finkenwalde Seminary to recover for congregations the deep Christian tradition is a prominent model for young twenty-first-century Christians. Weary of the false dichotomy between right belief and right practice, they seek the wholeness of discipleship in what Bonhoeffer called "a kind of new monasticism."

### Prayer

O God, this world is a place of your activity, a place where your light shines. But there are barren places, too. There are places where your image, which once shined like the sun, is obscured and eclipsed by those you created.

**War, hatred, and fear make deserts in your world; but so do our neglect, ignorance, and complacency. Though you came to bring light, we often sit in darkness; though you came to give life, we often walk in the shadow of death.**

We hear your call to the deserts of this world.

**Help us to answer. Show us how to seek you in the forgotten places.**

(Unison) **We pray to you, Father, through Jesus the Christ, in the power of your Spirit. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

### Meditation†

The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call people to this.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)*

### Reflection

"Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) stands as one of the great saints of the Church in recent memory, a saint who died at the hands of the Nazi government. One of his crimes, it would seem, was the formation of a community that sought to live out his conception of a *new monasticism*," explains Will Samson.

Bonhoeffer was not raised in a religious family. Yet in his college studies of philosophy and theology, and his encounter with the rich liturgy and community life of the Roman Catholic Church during a visit to Rome, the young Bonhoeffer began to reflect on the relation of theology to social practice. In his first dissertation, written when he was twenty-one, he calls the Church "the physical manifestation of Christ on earth" and "Christ existing as church-community."

Yet the situation in Germany was far from this ideal after the Nazi takeover. The Nazis "created a new national church, the German Evangelical Church, prohibited Jewish and non-Aryan clergy, sought to purge all non-German elements from the liturgy, and even went so far as to remove the Old Testament from the Bible," Samson notes. Bonhoeffer replied by supporting the *Barmen Declaration* (1934), written largely by Karl Barth, which declared that the Church is not "an organ of the state." In 1935, he accepted an invitation from the confessing church to direct an underground



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seminary that would recover the rich Christian tradition and train a new generation of church leaders in orthopraxy (right practice) as well as orthodoxy (right belief).

The seminary at Finkenwalde became a social experiment in intentional Christian community modeled on the Sermon on the Mount, “a sort of new monasticism.” Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* gives the details. It lasted but a moment: the Gestapo, the secret state police, closed the seminary in 1937 and arrested more than two dozen of its students. Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945, just weeks before the end of World War II.

Bonhoeffer’s project continues in new monastic communities in America that seek the wholeness of Christian faith in order to transform a culture-captured church. The new monastics “resist their Christian friends today – on the right of current political and theological spectrums – who would have them cleave to orthodoxy with little regard for the orthopraxy of the Church. For without that deep longing of the Church to ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness,’ or justice, how will congregations... interpret for our day the story of the Christ who calls us to transcend categories of race, ethnicity, and gender?” Samson notes. “They also resist Christian friends – on the political and theological left – who embrace a social gospel that has, over time, lost touch with the rich theological heart of the Christian message. Certainly, when social action is understood through and motivated by the orthodox witness of the Church, congregations can engage the culture in response to Christ’s call to lay down our lives. But when they lose this theological foundation, how will they maintain their commitment to live in radical service to others?”

### Study Questions

1. What did Bonhoeffer mean by “a kind of new monasticism”?
2. Discuss Will Samson’s point: “Bonhoeffer thought and lived outside of the categories that currently divide Christians into opposing political and theological camps. He did not check out from the hard work of redeeming society. Neither did he bless activities that clearly violated Christ’s call to justice.”
3. How does Frederick Jackson join right belief with right practice in “Master, We Your Footsteps Follow”? Do you agree that following Jesus requires both?

### Departing Hymn: “Master, We Your Footsteps Follow” (vv. 1, 2, and 3)

Master, we your footsteps follow, we your word obey;  
hear us, your dear name confessing, while we pray.

Now into your death baptizèd, we ourselves would be  
dead to all the sin that made your Calvary.

Rising with you, make us like you, in your love and care,  
in your zeal, and in your labor, and your prayer.

*Frederick A. Jackson (1867-1942)*

*Tune: STEPHANOS*

† Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer (January 14, 1935)

# The Finkenwalde Project

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To recall the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the social context that led to the formation of the confessing church seminary at Finkewalde.
2. To articulate the Finkenwalde Seminary's project to recover for contemporary congregations the deep and rich Christian tradition of both orthodoxy and orthopraxy.
3. To interpret Bonhoeffer's call for "a kind of new monasticism."

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Monasticism Old and New (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "Master, We Your Footsteps Follow" is sung to the melody STEPHANOS, which can be found in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

Will Samson notes how influential Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and writings continue to be in the new monastic communities springing up today. I found an example of this influence in Isaac Villegas's blogpost, "school of prayer: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Finkewalde, and the Psalms" (November 3, 2003; [www.rustyparts.com/wp/2003/11/03/school-of-prayer/](http://www.rustyparts.com/wp/2003/11/03/school-of-prayer/)). Villegas was a founder of the Rutba House intentional Christian community in Durham, NC, in 2003. Now he is a Mennonite pastor.

"Bonhoeffer is helping me figure out some spiritual practices for us at the Rutba house. I figure his work would be a great place to learn how to do this intentional Christian community thing since he put it into practice at his seminary community," Villegas begins. He goes on to commend Bonhoeffer's *Prayerbook of the Bible*, for he finds its defense of praying the Psalms at Finkewalde Seminary to be entirely biblical and counter-cultural (the Nazi Party had attempted to remove from the state-approved German Evangelical Church all Jewish practices, including reading and praying the Psalms). Bonhoeffer explains that in praying the Psalms we learn to use the prayer language God has given to us through Israel, the very words Jesus used in prayer.

Now here is the interesting move: Villegas not only agrees with Bonhoeffer's orthodox theology, he embraces Bonhoeffer's orthodox practice. "So how is this shaping our prayer life at the Rutba House?" Villegas concludes. "We have committed ourselves to daily morning and evening corporate prayer where we read and pray psalms together.... The morning prayer shapes my whole focus for the day and the evening prayer gives me a chance to offer up my day in thankful prayer to God. Please join the communion of saints in 'the school of prayer.'"

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:1-12 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Not just the name “new monasticism,” but much inspiration for the new Christian intentional communities in North America and Europe derive from the life and writings of the German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The central event for new monastics is his founding an underground seminary at Finkenwalde (1935-1937), and the key writings are his descriptions of the seminary’s practices in *Life Together* and *Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996). This study is not a dry history lesson, then, but a search for clues to how new monastics have recognized a pressing need to launch intentional communities that integrate historic Christian faith with radical social ministry. Bonhoeffer’s very accessible writings, by the way, are an excellent follow-up study to this introduction.

## Study Questions

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes the need for “a kind of new monasticism” in a letter to his brother, Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, on January 14, 1935. To understand the meaning of the phrase, Will Samson reviews events leading up to the formation of the underground seminary in Finkenwalde that year, and describes the form of community life Bonhoeffer instituted among the seminarians. Invite two groups to look for clues to the meaning of “new monasticism” in (1) the historical context that is briefly summarized in the study guide, and (2) the specific seminary practices that Samson sketches in his article.

The first group might mention the faithlessness in the German church, which capitulated to Nazi control, abandoning its roots in the story of Israel and the particular life of Jesus. To restore the wholeness of scriptural faith, the seminary embraced Christian resources beyond the cultural time and place. The focus on Christ’s teachings, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, is a common theme in monastic life through the centuries. The group might mention particular aspects of Bonhoeffer’s experience – his encounter with the rich liturgy and community life of Roman Catholicism, his friendship with Karl Barth, or his appreciation for the social gospel when it is motivated by orthodox faithfulness.

The second group might glean these clues from the seminary practices: students worked with their hands to build and maintain the buildings; Bonhoeffer adapted an egalitarian leadership style from the monastic tradition; they ate and worshipped together daily; they sang African-American spirituals and prayed the Psalms to emphasize solidarity with the suffering people of God across the ages; and seminarians studied without expectation of lucrative or honored posts of service in the church.

2. Samson’s observation has two aspects: (1) Bonhoeffer successfully integrated orthodoxy and orthopraxy; but (2) Christians today are divided into political/theological camps, left and right, that emphasize one of these to the neglect of the other.

Do members agree that the Christian “left” is tempted to embrace orthopraxy (Jesus’ concern for righteousness/justice) without much orthodoxy? Some social gospel leaders in Bonhoeffer’s day were slow to resist the Nazis, perhaps because they lacked a theological perspective to critique the National Socialist regime’s claims to ultimate allegiance. How is this temptation for the Christian “left” manifest today?

Do members agree that the Christian “right” is tempted to wield orthodoxy (agreement with Jesus’ theological beliefs) like a club, without much orthopraxy? Is the faith of these Christians too privatized? Do they fail to address social ills? How is this temptation for the Christian “right” manifest today?

3. Frederick Jackson prays that we will be made like Christ through the power of his resurrection (verse 3), which includes our taking on Christ’s zeal, labor, and prayer. This involves both orthodoxy (right belief) – e.g., obeying Christ’s word and confessing his name (verse 1) – and orthopraxy (right action) – e.g., acting out of Christ’s “love and care” (verse 3).

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.