



BONHOEFFER'S SEMINARY VISION

A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together

PAUL R. HOUSE

“This is the best book I have read on Dietrich Bonhoeffer the theological educator. Against great odds in the time of Nazi terror, Bonhoeffer forged a distinctive pattern of preparing faithful ministers of the gospel for the service of the church. Paul House argues convincingly that those engaged in the same work today have much to learn from Bonhoeffer’s model.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School;
General Editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“In all the writing about Bonhoeffer, few scholars focus on his work as a seminary leader. As a result, we forget that one of his most famous works, *Life Together*, emerged from such a community. Paul House dares to apply this and other Bonhoeffer works to the challenges facing contemporary seminaries. Even those who ultimately disagree with House’s argument for life-on-life education will benefit from reading his countercultural critique.”

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“While the circumstances Bonhoeffer and his students faced were very different from the challenges facing seminaries today, Paul House illustrates why Bonhoeffer’s approach to theological education and the ministry remains a model for today’s seminary leaders and their students. This is a fine, thoughtful study of Bonhoeffer’s approach to theological education and its implications for the complex, changing world of seminary education today.”

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English edition

“Paul House not only offers a primer on an often-neglected role of Bonhoeffer’s life, but also insightfully critiques much of contemporary American higher education—theological or otherwise. Reading this splendid book might not alleviate all the ills of modern higher education, but House certainly leaves educators and administrators with fewer excuses.”

Richard A. Bailey, Associate Professor of History, Canisius College;
author, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*

“The church in North America just passed the sign announcing dangerous rapids ahead. We need strong pulpits. What’s more, we need faithful theological training. Paul House draws our attention to the courageous wisdom found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We know Bonhoeffer for his classic texts and for his resistance to Hitler. But he also directed a seminary. Listen to Bonhoeffer. He will help us navigate what lies ahead.”

Stephen J. Nichols, President, Reformation Bible College;
Chief Academic Officer, Ligonier Ministries

“With clarity and verve, Paul House ably demonstrates, synthesizes, and applies Bonhoeffer’s historic insights into theological education. The result is a timely and fresh reclamation of our life together for the church and for colleges and seminaries seeking to come alongside the church in discipling future pastors. A must-read for professors, pastors, administrators, and students who want to know the what, why, and how of theological education.”

Christopher W. Morgan, Dean and Professor of Theology, California Baptist University

“Bonhoeffer’s prescription for seminary training should only be followed if we want to see a generation of ministers characterized by faithfulness, courage, and community. Otherwise, we can continue in the same path we’re on, where pastors learn to be entertainers, life-coaches, and pop-psychologists. Thank God that during this current revival of interest in Bonhoeffer, Paul House had the wisdom to focus on what Bonhoeffer knew best and did so very well.”

C. Ben Mitchell, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Union University

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To Heather

Contents

Preface	11
Acknowledgments	17
Abbreviations	19
1 Bonhoeffer's Path to Seminary Ministry	21
2 Bonhoeffer and His Seminaries	31
3 Ministers for the Visible Body of Christ: The Seminary and <i>The Cost of Discipleship</i>	55
4 A Visible Community of the Body of Christ: The Seminary and <i>Life Together</i>	101
5 Visible Faithful Witnesses: The Seminary and Perseverance	143
6 Life Together Today: Some Possibilities for Incarnational Seminaries	183
General Index	199
Scripture Index	205

Preface

My interest in Dietrich Bonhoeffer and in personal, incarnational education began in the late 1970s. Like many others of my generation, I first encountered his writings as a college student. During my final undergraduate semester I took an independent study course entitled Classics of Christian Devotion under the tutelage of Tom Padgett, the chair of our English department. Padgett assigned me works by Bunyan, Milton, and Dante. He also asked me to read Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, and even gave me a pocket-sized edition containing his own marginal notes, a volume I still cherish. At the time, the main impact *The Cost of Discipleship* had on me was to challenge me to think harder about what it means to be a Christian. Bonhoeffer's life story, as told in the introduction to the edition I had, also illustrated to me an exemplary Christian life. Padgett's example was even more important to me than the assigned reading since he showed me how incarnational Christian educators engage students. He remains one of my main models as I pursue the teaching craft.

After taking an MA in English, I began seminary studies. My seminary had three thousand students. The teachers were excellent lecturers, which was important given the generally large sections they taught. But they turned over all grading and general course administration to doctoral students and, despite being generally approachable, did not always seek to spend time with students. The numbers certainly made such personal contact difficult, though not impossible.

In my last year, I took a course in twentieth-century European church history, led by Penrose St. Amant, who had studied in Edinburgh and taught in Switzerland. There were ten of us in the course, the smallest class I attended during seminary. St. Amant assigned me a paper surveying Bonhoeffer's writings, so I read *Creation and Fall*, *Temptation*, the then most recent edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Life Together*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and the first edition of Eberhard Bethge's biography, among other things. I recall St. Amant asking me to please figure out what "religionless Christianity" meant. I was not very helpful on that issue, but my Bonhoeffer reading expanded.

St. Amant also took a personal interest in me and in Jim Dixon, a close friend of mine who was in the same course. On one memorable evening Dr. and Mrs. St. Amant took our wives and us to one of the best restaurants in the city, certainly the best one I went to while a student. After the waiter brought the women roses at the end of the evening, I asked to help with the check. He replied, "Don't worry about this, House. I am very wealthy." I learned from another professor that the St. Amants were indeed moneyed people. He taught because he felt called to and liked doing so, and because he enjoyed spending time with interested students. Like Padgett, he was an educator in the incarnational mold.

When I became a college teacher, I kept reading Bonhoeffer's works. I assigned *The Cost of Discipleship* in New Testament survey classes and recommended *Creation and Fall* in Pentateuch courses. In my first ten years in teaching, I served an institution deeply involved in shaping students. Over the years I was able to baptize, counsel, discipline, marry, and even help bury some of our students. Yet it was also at that institution that I first encountered nonembodied, impersonal extension work and the largely financial arguments for offering it. Church work expanded my efforts to care about people in a local context. Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* were particularly helpful as I tried to integrate faith, learning, and service of the church. During these

years I supplemented what I had learned from Bethge's biography with other good treatments of Bonhoeffer's life.

Since those first ten years, I have been involved in seminary teaching fourteen of the last seventeen years. One seminary I served was large and not particularly personal. While there I tried very hard to invest in students that I could get to know. The seminary had no structural intentionality that helped this effort. The other two seminaries I have served, including Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, where I now teach, are smaller and intentionally personal in purpose and practice, though the first of these was instituting online classes. Through these places and through visiting and teaching at comparable ones in Europe, Australia, and Asia I think I have come to understand better what Bonhoeffer describes in *Life Together*.

For six years I supervised academic affairs, admissions, and student life at Beeson, which helped me gain perspective on how the parts of a seminary fit together. To try to do my work better I read several histories of individual seminaries and about thirty biographies of persons involved in seminary work. I strived to formulate a more thoroughly theological understanding of how seminary work ought to operate. Regular talks with my supervisor and dean, Timothy George, included the biblical-theological basis of what we were trying to do with our students, staff, and faculty. As part of this quest I examined Bonhoeffer's seminary work more closely, particularly through the growing number of volumes in the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* and the new (and even larger) edition of Bethge's biography.

The Hodges Chapel at Beeson is a marvel in many ways, not the least of which is the way it depicts the global scope of the gospel and the human price that has been paid for its extension. For instance, it houses six busts of martyrs, one from each inhabited continent. Bonhoeffer represents Europe. For this and other reasons Dean George fairly regularly focuses our community's attention on Bonhoeffer and the era in which he lived. For example, in 2012 we

had a special spring semester emphasis on Bonhoeffer, which was preceded two years earlier by a series on the Barmen Declaration. It seems natural for me, then, to consider Bonhoeffer's views on seminary education in our setting.

It also seems natural to think about personal, incarnational education because of the nature of Beeson itself. Established in 1988, it determined to limit enrollment to 180 students from the outset and to give these students personal attention and intentional shaping for ministry. A good endowment helps realize this vision, but so does ongoing support, long-term leadership, a carefully chosen and dedicated faculty, teachable students, fiscal responsibility, a home at a university, and self-control that makes adding programs, buildings, and other earmarks of personal agendas unimportant. People can and do matter at such a place.

Over the past twenty years all of us in seminary education have increasingly encountered new technology delivery systems. At first the goal was to use these to enhance courses offered on campus. Then classes began to be offered online, as they had been in old-style correspondence courses. I have seen the tide gradually shift from seminaries having to give a reason to administrators, constituents, and accrediting agencies for offering online courses to giving a reason for not doing so. As church contributions have waned and costs risen, I have seen seminaries look longingly to the web to solve their financial troubles. However, when I have queried others about the theological basis for online education, I have usually gotten blank stares or some statement about how technology is the future and will help seminaries balance their budgets. Once or twice someone has used the Bible's epistles or a rather broad definition of "missions" as a theological rationale for various forms of electronic courses for credit. Speaking to me confidentially, some academic deans have said that they and their seminaries' teachers do not prefer online classes to in-person ones, yet have come to accept online courses as a necessary evil of sorts. Several professors have conveyed the same sentiments to me. However, I have also met many administrators

and teachers who take on this task with goodwill and hopefulness. It did not surprise me, then, when a few years ago degrees offered completely through electronic means were accredited.

Our seminary has not offered online courses and currently does not plan to do so, which has made us somewhat unusual in our guild. I have taken this changing situation in seminary education as more incentive to continue working toward a clearer theology of seminary education. I have sought to discern what makes education offered face-to-face, electronically, or through a blended version of the two more or less biblical, and I have continued to seek the best way to express a theological basis for the sort of personal education that impacted me.

As I considered these issues, it occurred to me that Bonhoeffer was a seminary director and teacher for a very eventful five years. Some of his most influential books emerged out of and were about seminary theory and practice. So I have turned to his writings once again, this time to try to discern his theology of seminary ministry and to consider if or how to apply his theology and practice to our current situation.

As this book will show, I find that his biblical analysis makes it inescapable to link seminary education, and all fully Christian ministries, to the New Testament's incarnation principle of the body of Christ, which fits the Old Testament's presentation of all sorts of education as a face-to-face intergenerational enterprise. Thus, I believe that a biblical theology of pastoral formation makes face-to-face community-based seminary education a priority, not a preference. (I also believe that the same is true of a Christian liberal arts university, but that is a subject for another time.) Online education for degree credit (at per-credit fees) may be reserved for true emergency cases, but must not be accepted as normative or used regularly for pastoral formation. Focusing on this incarnational priority will help us find solutions to the problems we face or lead to new patterns altogether. Regardless, it will not leave us drifting toward practices that are not inevitable unless we allow them to be.

I am not a Bonhoeffer specialist. I am an Old Testament theologian who has spent a few decades in the church, in the university, in the Scriptures, in the seminary, and in Bonhoeffer's works. Based on my training in historical and exegetical studies I have tried to do viable work by offering close readings of primary sources and a faithful exposition of their historical setting such as I would try to do when interpreting Old Testament texts. I am not a Bonhoeffer hagiographer; he was a man with flaws, as he well knew. In short, I am a Bonhoeffer reader seeking biblical-theological understanding of my vocation for the sake of the church, the body of Christ. I am grateful to the people who have written about Bonhoeffer, translated his works, and kept his example of personal education alive. Their labors have enriched my life. Bonhoeffer might not agree with my interpretation of his works in this book, but I am quite certain he would think I am right about one thing: we must think theologically, not just pragmatically, about the training of pastors, a task he described in 1942 as "worthy of our ultimate commitment."

Acknowledgments

Memory and gratitude are among God's finest gifts, particularly when experienced together. Writing this book provided me many such moments. It gave me the privilege of remembering Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge, and their lesser-known faithful colleague Fritz Onnasch. It reminded me I could only do so because Victoria J. Barnett, H. Gaylon Barker, Mark S. Bocker, and other scholars have made essential material on Bonhoeffer's seminary ministry accessible. It also occasioned memories of my teachers, living and dead, who gave me mannerisms, ideas, and practices I use daily. They showed me why the quality, content, *and* form of education matter. Thus, I am grateful for Minnie Weems, Kenneth Shippy, Larry Hymer, Burney Johnson, Don Johnston, Don Bogle, Gerald Cowen, Tom Padgett, Betty Gipson, Penrose St. Amant, and John D. W. Watts. I am also accountable to them.

Other memories also spark deep gratitude. Beeson Divinity School of Samford University provided faculty development funds, a working model of life-on-life pastoral formation, and a collegial environment in which to work. Dean Timothy George, Associate Dean David Hogg, and former Associate Dean Burch Barger encouraged me in different, and essential, ways. Justin Taylor, Thom Notaro, Erik Maldre, Amy Kruis, and Angie Cheatham at Crossway were helpful at every appropriate stage. Michael Moore of Fortress Press was generous when granting permission to quote from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, volumes 9–16, and helped me

secure rights from other publishers. Wendell Berry's essays, novels, poems, and example offered consistent direction, discipline, and hope. Gene Logsdon's essays and novels made me think more seriously about people and about theological education. My friends Tom Jones, Richard Bailey, Ben Mitchell, Greg Thornbury, Don West, Chase Kuhn, Grant Taylor, Kyle McClellan, James Dixon, and Scott Hafemann gave me needed advice and laughter.

Family members provided other essential physical and spiritual resources. David and Dawn Oldfield, my wife's parents, contributed a quiet rural home in which to write, memorable family gatherings, and a living example of commitment to a community. Gordon and Suzanne Kingsley, my brother-in-law and sister, completed their long service in higher education and thus modeled perseverance and hope. My parents, Roy and Lee House, continued to take interest in my writing and to provide an example of Christian people working productively long after it is convenient. My daughter, Molly Spence, her husband, Martin, and their son, Caleb, gave their love and reminded me that future generations need personal, local, and communal pastoral formation.

Most importantly, my wife, Heather, provided love, home, hope, a listening ear for my various rants, and a cautioning voice about reading depressing material late at night. I dedicate this book to her with gratitude for our shared life and the memories we are making.

Abbreviations

Bethge, <i>DB</i>	Eberhard Bethge. <i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography</i> . Rev. ed. Edited by Victoria J. Barnett. Translated by Eric Mosbacher, Peter Ross, Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
<i>DBW</i>	<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works</i> . 16 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996–2013. Translated from <i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke</i> . Edited by Eberhard Bethge et al. Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1986–1999.
<i>DBW 1</i>	Vol. 1, <i>Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church</i> . Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens.
<i>DBW 2</i>	Vol. 2, <i>Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology</i> . Edited by Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. Translated by H. Martin Rumscheidt.
<i>DBW 3</i>	Vol. 3, <i>Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3</i> . Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax.
<i>DBW 4</i>	Vol. 4, <i>Discipleship</i> . Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss.
<i>DBW 5</i>	Vol. 5, <i>Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible</i> . Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly. Translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtneiss.

20 Abbreviations

- DBW 11 Vol. 11, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*. Edited by Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker, and Michael B. Lukens. Translated by Anne Schmidt-Lange, with Isabel Best, Nicholas Humphrey, and Marion Pauck. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott.
- DBW 12 Vol. 12, *Berlin: 1932–1933*. Edited by Larry L. Rasmussen. Translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott.
- DBW 13 Vol. 13, *London: 1933–1935*. Edited by Keith Clements. Translated by Isabel Best. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott.
- DBW 14 Vol. 14, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*. Edited by H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker. Translated by Douglas W. Stott.
- DBW 15 Vol. 15, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*. Edited by Victoria J. Barnett. Translated by Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, and Scott A. Moore. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott.
- DBW 16 Vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*. Edited by Mark S. Brocker. Translated by Lisa E. Dahill. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott.
- de Gruchy, EB John W. de Gruchy. *Daring, Trusting Spirit: Bonhoeffer's Friend Eberhard Bethge*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- Schlingensiepen, DB Ferdinand Schlingensiepen. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*. Translated by Isabel Best. London: T&T Clark, 2012.

Bonhoeffer's Path to Seminary Ministry

The matter of the proper education of preachers of the
gospel is worthy of our ultimate commitment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1942)

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a seminary director and teacher for five years (1935–1940), longer than he served consecutively in any other job. This work provided the context for some of his best and best-known writings, for meeting several key persons, and for making some of his most significant decisions. It seems logical to conclude, then, that understanding Bonhoeffer requires some particular focus on his theology and practice of pastoral formation in a seminary context. Yet Bonhoeffer's biographers and scholars writing about him rarely highlight this aspect of his life and writing. They usually emphasize his roles as pastor, ecumenist, theologian, and Resistance member.

This tendency likely stems from the fact that these are the elements of Bonhoeffer's life his close friend and literary executor Eberhard Bethge stressed in his editing of Bonhoeffer's unpublished writings and in his magisterial essential biography of Bonhoeffer

published in 1967 and revised in 1989 (English revised edition 2000).¹ Bethge had good reasons for his choices. Bonhoeffer was not a hero in Germany immediately after World War II, even in some church circles. Many Germans thought he died as a political prisoner, perhaps even a treasonous one, not as a martyr of the faith.² Bethge could also see that Bonhoeffer's writings might eventually be forgotten. Thus, it was natural and right for him to stress his close friend's theology and describe how it led Bonhoeffer to take actions that ultimately resulted in his execution. Bethge's narrative is certainly defensible. Despite its length, it is also brisk and often quite moving.

Subsequent biographers and commentators have understandably followed Bethge's lead. After all, he knew his subject extremely well and had access to family records, in part because he married Bonhoeffer's niece Renate, who aided and participated in his historical research.³ Furthermore, as John de Gruchy, Bethge's biographer, demonstrates, Bethge was a tireless and accurate historian.⁴ Bethge did not just draw on his own and other eyewitness memories and Bonhoeffer's published works. He recovered and utilized reams of documentary material. Indeed it was largely due to Bethge's exhaustive and efficient efforts to preserve items written by and to Bonhoeffer that the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*⁵ series numbers sixteen volumes. Bonhoeffer studies as we know them would not exist without Bethge.

Interestingly, de Gruchy also observes that Bethge does not always mention the full extent of his own part in some of Bon-

¹Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed., ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000); hereafter Bethge, *DB*.

²This concern to emphasize the connection between Bonhoeffer's imprisonment and his Christian faith is evident in the title of the first American edition of one of Bonhoeffer's most studied books, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1954). Subsequent editions dropped the first part of the title.

³See, for instance, her *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Brief Life*, trans. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004); and Eberhard Bethge and Renate Bethge, eds., *Last Letters of Resistance: Farewells from the Bonhoeffer Family*, trans. Dennis Slabaugh (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

⁴John W. de Gruchy, *Daring, Trusting Spirit: Bonhoeffer's Friend Eberhard Bethge* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 112–44, 151–57, 176–94; hereafter de Gruchy, *EB*.

⁵See the table of abbreviations for German and English editions, including individual English volumes. Unless otherwise noted, all citations are from the English edition, abbreviated as *DBW*.

hoeffer's activities. He keeps himself in the background as much as possible as he tells Bonhoeffer's story. For instance, Bethge discloses conversations he observed Bonhoeffer have with others without noting he was an eyewitness.⁶ Bethge clearly wishes to introduce and validate his friend. He does not write to preserve his own legacy in the Bonhoeffer story.

Though admirable, Bethge's humility about his shared work with Bonhoeffer may result in his readers' missing Bonhoeffer's ongoing significance as a theological educator and Bethge's important collaboration in that era of Bonhoeffer's life. Bethge was part of Bonhoeffer's seminary ministry from the beginning. He was a student in the first class Bonhoeffer led as director in 1935, and afterward was Bonhoeffer's indispensable associate director until the Gestapo closed the seminaries in 1940. Bethge certainly recounts this phase of Bonhoeffer's life. But it seems to me he does so always with an eye on Bonhoeffer's continuing role in the Confessing Church and his gradual decision to enter the Resistance. The seminary work stays in the background along with Bethge.

It is also possible that Bethge does not highlight Bonhoeffer's (and his own) efforts in seminary work more fully because one could assume certain things about seminary education in those days. First, it occurred in a face-to-face, personal setting. Second, the students were generally men⁷ who had studied theology at a university and taken the first of two ordination exams. Third, the students received standard instruction in selected practical disciplines. Fourth, seminary studies were a capstone experience. They took place at the end of the educational experience and over a short period of time, only six months or so. Fifth, there is some monotony in the tasks associated with receiving and sending out seminarians over and over again. Bethge may have given the subject as much attention as he thought interesting to readers, or found interesting himself. Sixth, and perhaps most tellingly for our day, Bethge could

⁶See de Gruchy, *EB*, 153–54.

⁷Bonhoeffer had female students while teaching at the University of Berlin, but all his seminarians were male.

not have predicted how unusual Bonhoeffer's approach to personal theological education would become.

Other Bonhoeffer scholars have not dealt with this portion of Bonhoeffer's life for other reasons. Jürgen Henkys observes:

No period of Bonhoeffer's life and work seems more inaccessible today or more inclined to put people off than does the Finkenwalde period. Indeed, in many readers it generates genuine opposition. The academic, ecumenical, political Bonhoeffer presents a more welcoming figure to many who turn to his work than does the Bonhoeffer . . . who was confrontational and demanding in ecclesiastical matters, radically biblical, and rigorous in matters of piety.⁸

Today we can add to that list the Bonhoeffer who put so much emphasis on theological education in a personal, communal setting. Henkys adds that the trajectory of German seminary life after World War II also leads Bonhoeffer experts away from analyzing his seminary work. Seminaries in West Germany became interested in "asserting their own status and mission within the larger framework of the official college and university system," while seminaries in East Germany ceased to operate or were incorporated into universities.⁹ Thus, Bonhoeffer's seminaries have been considered simply part of a historical era instead of a direct ancestor of what remains a living witness.

These reservations are understandable, but they are not decisive. Bonhoeffer's time as seminary director deserves further specific analysis, for at least three reasons. First, by any measure it was a crucial era in his life. In fact, Bethge noted in 1954, "It was in this task that Bonhoeffer's theological and personal influence was at its greatest."¹⁰ Second, those who wish to understand Bonhoeffer as theologian and activist may wish to consider how he integrated those tasks in his seminary work. In an essay arguing for Bonhoeffer-

⁸ Jürgen Henkys, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition" (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*), in *DBW* 14:971-72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1013-14.

¹⁰ See Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God*, 8.

fer's desire to be "with" and "for" others, Samuel Wells concludes, "In this sense, Bonhoeffer's most radical step was to become an educator. In setting up the seminary at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer trained students . . . to learn to do what they could do for themselves."¹¹ He then adds, "In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer's whole attention is upon the challenge, gift, imperative, and grace of 'being with' one another. In that sense . . . we can see *Life Together* as the book that sums up Bonhoeffer's theology as well as his own life."¹² Third, current events warrant seeking resources for the renewal of theological education. Thus, closer attention to Bonhoeffer's time in seminary directorship may well help us, as Henkys puts it, "find unfinished business in what might initially seem rather alien to us, or to be motivated by something quite apart from the usual list of fashionable issues."¹³

His Most Radical Step: The Importance of Seminary Ministry in Bonhoeffer's Life

While instructing and directing seminarians Bonhoeffer published what are certainly among his most influential works, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) and *Life Together* (1939). He also delivered talks at a 1938 retreat of former students that were published in English as *Temptation*, gave a significant lecture on faithful endurance to Confessing Church pastors, published meditations on various passages, and composed meditations on Psalm 119:1–21. He developed the framework for *Psalms: Prayerbook of the Bible* (1940), which appeared after his seminary ministry ended. He made his now famous decision to return to Germany from the United States and England on the eve of World War II in 1939. The letters and diary he wrote while in England and the United States indicate that one of the main reasons he returned was to stand with and

¹¹ Samuel Wells, "Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Activist, Educator: Challenges for the Church of the Coming Generation," in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 233–34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 234.

¹³ Henkys, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," 1014.

care for his spiritual brothers by continuing his seminary ministry.¹⁴ He had told his former students in the messages on temptation, in circular letters, and in a public lecture that they should continue to follow God's call in the Confessing Church.¹⁵ How could he do less?

The end of his seminary ministry and other setbacks were factors in Bonhoeffer's joining the Resistance. He was banned from lecturing at universities in August 1936. He was denied a military chaplaincy by February 1940.¹⁶ The government closed down his last seminary site in March 1940. In September 1940 he was banned from speaking in public, and in March 1941 banned from publishing. Most of his former and prospective students were drafted into the German military by 1940, and some had already been killed in action. His public ministry options were almost down to zero, and he did not wish to be a regular soldier in the German army for several reasons. Thus, he had few options, a point that needs to be recalled when analyzing why he took the steps he did afterward. He became a member of the German secret service by 1940 and was involved with a Resistance group until his arrest in 1943.

Some Unfinished Business: The Importance of Bonhoeffer's Seminary Ministry for Today

Clearly, there are historical reasons to examine Bonhoeffer's seminary ministry. But there are other reasons too. Through his writings from these years he left rich resources for all of us involved in "seminary education," a term I use in this book to include any institution preparing persons specifically for pastoral ministry. These works provide a theological basis for seminary education as a ministry of the visible body of Christ. They portray a seminary as a community of faith and state how that community may live for Christ and for one another. They offer encouragement to former students who have entered the sometimes-harsh world of church ministry. His example from this era demonstrates the need for sacrificial teacher-

¹⁴ See, for example, *DBW* 15:215–26; and de Gruchy, *EB*, 41.

¹⁵ *DBW* 15:386–415, 60–62 and 81–85, and 416–37.

¹⁶ According to a letter sent to his parents dated February 27, 1940. See *DBW* 15:297.

pastors in seminary education, given the inherently personal, incarnational, and visible nature of ministerial preparation. Finally, Bonhoeffer's seminary ministry stresses the importance of educating the next generation of pastors. Bonhoeffer believed the German church's future rested in the quality and commitment of its pastors. He went to great lengths to safeguard this future. Frankly, he could not stem the tide. His efforts to do what was right in the face of what he eventually saw as temporarily impossible odds should hearten those of us who face hardships that pale in contrast to his.

To aid seminary education, it is important to read Bonhoeffer's writings from 1935–1940 in their original historical context. Millions have benefited from reading these books and shorter pieces as general guides for individual and corporate life. These works certainly aid believers and Christian communities of various types in living for Christ and with one another before a watching world. Yet they had a more specific context when they were written, and that context was the life of a director of a seminary and what he hoped this ministry could achieve.

These works were presented to and written about seminary students, seminary supporters, and seminary alumni. Thus, it is right to examine them with that context in mind for our current situation's sake. They will not provide every answer to current problems, and one need not always agree with all Bonhoeffer's theological formulations and ideas about seminaries in that day. Still, some sustained interaction with these writings may help us in an age when theology is regularly replaced by marketing strategies and financial plans, and often by flawed ones at that.

To be even more frank, in my opinion seminary educators desperately need these theological underpinnings and this example of determined personal education today. Financial concerns that have been building for decades have recently been made more acute by dwindling church support for seminary education and by worldwide economic troubles. At the same time, electronic devices have made online credits and degrees that require little or no personal

time with teachers or other students feasible. Accreditation policies have adapted to these options because the institutions that constitute the associations and the governments that approve them desire such programs. The seminaries often believe these programs will help their budgets. Government entities want as many credentialed (though not necessarily educated or spiritually formed) persons in the work force as possible. To fuel interest, seminary advertising campaigns use terms like “online community” as if one may have communion without actual physical presence. I recently saw a seminary advertisement that had the audacity to call online degrees “personal” because there could be a voice on the phone, a potential letter in the mail, and a hand to shake on graduation day—surely a minimalist definition if I ever saw one.

It is likely that seminary education has entered a new phase in the United States and elsewhere. The phase of proving that theological traditions of various types can produce a viable academic setting through good faculty credentials and an enduring physical plant has passed. So has the phase of proving that seminaries can govern themselves and set and reach reasonable, assessable goals and objectives. It appears we have now entered a phase that will focus on *the form* of theological education, what more industrially oriented persons call “delivery systems.” The biblically based, centuries-old belief that theological education should occur in person through mentors with peers in communities in communal places is no longer necessary for every seminary degree’s accreditation. Many educators have expressed to me privately that they think that impersonal education through credit and/or degree-granting online or hybrid means (mostly electronic delivery supplemented by students’ having brief times with teachers) is simply inevitable, even if they do not think it is desirable or theologically viable. Thus, many existing seminaries need courage for sustained work and for renewal.

On a more positive note, many seminaries are trying to refresh and continue face-to-face education. Also, I believe that new forms of personal seminaries and related ministries will arise in response

to impersonal approaches. Meanwhile, current and hoped-for expansion of Christianity around the world creates the continual need for pastoral formation. Thus, new seminaries will be needed as part of this training. These new seminary expressions will arise in all kinds of cultural settings. It is important, then, to understand the biblical-theological bases on which they should be established.

Bonhoeffer's life and writings can help us ask the right questions about the future of seminary education. It is hard to conceive of a person less likely to accept the notion that current trends are unavoidable or that past practices are inviolable. Rather, his approach to theological education reminds us of the necessity of determining what is right and then following that course of action. His writings remind us that like all Christian work theological education needs grounding in *theology*. We cannot simply accept nontheological means of education as our norm. So he reminds us that the right questions are, What sort of education fits the Bible's vision of ministerial preparation? and What sort of minister does the church need? and What is the right thing to do in complicated times? They are not, How do we give our constituents whatever they want? Or, How do we sell degrees like any other commodity? Or, What brand of education pays well in a hurry? Or, How do we fit into the newest trend of educational technology? Or, How do we survive at all costs?

This book attempts to do two things. First, it tries to examine Bonhoeffer's theology and practice of theological education in their original context. Second, it endeavors to assert the biblical necessity of personal, incarnational, face-to-face education for the health of pastors and churches. To try to achieve these goals I will first sketch briefly how Bonhoeffer became a seminary director and note the settings of Bonhoeffer's seminaries. I will then focus on selected writings from 1935–1940 and on his daily and seasonal work as a seminary director. I will quote generously from Bonhoeffer's works, both because his prose is often so telling and because, though I hope my observations about him and his writings are well

founded, they are not infallible. In each chapter I will also analyze selected current methods of theological education and suggest alternatives to simply repeating the past or accepting the next wave of education innovations. Finally, I will discuss some objections to the incarnational imperative and suggest ways Bonhoeffer's views can be implemented today.

Bonhoeffer has been utilized on a number of subjects to good effect. Clearly, this subject was close to his heart. It makes sense, then, to converse with his views to think about how to provide theological education for church renewal. My own reflection on Bonhoeffer's ideas and commitments have led me to conclude that we must take the narrow way of personal, incarnational theological education. We can do no less if we believe the church is the visible body of Christ that follows Jesus on the narrow path of faithfulness in all seasons of life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is best known for his role in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler and his subsequent execution at the hands of the Nazis. However, most of us are less familiar with his tireless work educating seminary students for a life of pastoral ministry—a role that occupied him for most of his adult life.

Anchored in a variety of influential lectures, personal letters, and major works such as *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*, this book attempts to recover a largely unexamined part of Bonhoeffer's life, exploring his philosophy and practice of theological education in his original context. It then builds on this foundation to address the drift toward increasingly impersonal educational models in our own day, affirming the value of personal, face-to-face seminary education for the health of pastors and churches.

"This is the best book I have read on Dietrich Bonhoeffer the theological educator. House argues convincingly that those engaged in the same work today have much to learn from Bonhoeffer's model."

Timothy George, *Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School; General Editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

"This is a fine, thoughtful study of Bonhoeffer's approach to theological education and its implications for the complex, changing world of seminary education today."

Victoria J. Barnett, *General Editor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, English edition*

"House not only offers a primer on an often-neglected role of Bonhoeffer's life, but also insightfully critiques much of contemporary American higher education—theological or otherwise."

Richard A. Bailey, *Associate Professor of History, Canisius College; author, Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*

"This book is a must-read for professors, pastors, administrators, and students who want to know the what, why, and how of theological education."

Christopher W. Morgan, *Dean and Professor of Theology, California Baptist University*

PAUL R. HOUSE

(PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) has been a pastor-teacher in churches, Christian colleges, and seminaries for over 30 years. He has served as a department chair at Taylor University and Wheaton College, and as academic dean at Beeson Divinity School, where he currently teaches. He is a past president of the Evangelical Theological Society and an active member of the Society of Biblical Literature.