

Title: *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together*

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*Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision* arises out of the author's theological reflection over nearly two decades of seminary involvement, in both teaching and administration. Paul House writes concerned for the shift in seminary education, from face-to-face teaching in a community context to online distance learning. He is convicted that "a biblical theology of pastoral formation makes face-to-face community-based seminary education a priority, not a preference" (15). Online education may be reserved for true emergency cases, but must not become the norm. House is at pains to show that the quality, content *and* form of education matters.

Enter Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Biographers and scholars writing about Bonhoeffer highlight his various roles as a pastor, ecumenist, theologian, and Resistance member, yet they rarely mention the fact that he was a seminary director and teacher for five years (1935–1940)—longer than he served consecutively in any other job. Indeed, it was his calling to seminary life that brought him back to Germany in 1939, despite the safety of year studying in America.

*Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision* contains 6 chapters. Chapter 1 is introductory, explaining why this aspect of Bonhoeffer's life has perhaps been neglected. Chapter 2 traces Bonhoeffer's path to seminary ministry, and introduces the reader to his students, settings, and daily life together. House situates Bonhoeffer's seminaries in the conflict between the Confessing Church and the German Church, seen most clearly in the Barmen and Dalhem declarations. Candidates for ministry in the Confessing Church no longer wished to study at established seminaries or serve in state-supported churches.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the influence of Bonhoeffer's two best-known works—*The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) and *Life Together* (1939)—on his seminary vision. House stresses that these books cannot be properly understood, unless they are located in the seminary context in which they were written. Both books became badges of distinction for the seminaries. Taking his cue from the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer demonstrated how grace is costly, seen in the call and commitment to follow Christ, and in Christian ministry where sheep require a shepherd. Bonhoeffer also touched on the church community in the visible world. His view of the church impacted his conception of seminary life. It was not a place where "abstract doctrines of religion simply get passed along from one mind to another without human interpersonal contact. It is not a place of disembodied communication"; rather, seminary is "a place where communion between believers occurs, where the concrete acts of Christ and the apostles are reenacted daily" (85).

House draws various lessons for present-day seminaries from his reflections on *The Cost of Discipleship* set within Bonhoeffer's seminary life. Seminaries should only admit committed students, tightening up on their open enrollment policies. Required residence on site ensures a certain level of commitment. The shift toward cheap and accessible online learning should be resisted, because it bears "no resemblance to the commitment Christ asks of persons he calls to ministry" (94); instead, seminaries should focus their energies on becoming more biblical in their mission as they endeavor to be more financially responsible and viable. The lessons for teaching faculty are equally relevant. They must reject the careerist mind-set, and avoid any desire to "market" or "brand" themselves. Committed faculty will sacrifice time for students, knowing that they are there first to shape students in class rather than write books in their offices. Bonhoeffer's seminary model calls for committed shepherds. He trained pastors to develop disciplines necessary for the hard work of ministry: daily Bible reading, prayer, praise, confession, and meditation, as well as community life. Finally, seminaries should take on an "incarnational" model for seminary training, one which reflects the visible body of Christ.

Chapter 4 focuses on the influence of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* in his seminary context. Whereas *The Cost of Discipleship* expressed what sort of students and faculty should constitute seminaries, *Life Together* describes what Bonhoeffer wanted these communities of Christ's body to do together. Bonhoeffer believed that seminary was a time for students to learn how to lead a faithful Christian community, and this was best learnt in participating in such a community. Seminaries, for Bonhoeffer, were precious communities of the visible body of Christ, in which individuals learned to embrace solitude within community and practice service and listening. For House, some lessons naturally follow: if forming seminary communities is a conviction and not just a preference, then it ought to shape everything a seminary does, from admissions and curricular development to chapel and student life. Moreover, seminaries should aim to send out Bible-formed shepherds, not self-absorbed visionary leaders; they should provide a visible example of the body of Christ.

Chapter 5 traces the theme of perseverance in relation to Bonhoeffer's seminaries. During the years of Bonhoeffer's seminaries, the Confessing Church faced various challenges, not least the oath-to-Hitler controversy and the legalization controversy, in which seminarians past and present were pressurized into becoming "legalized" ministers. Reflecting on Bonhoeffer's perseverance with seminary life, House encourages faculty to remain in contact with former students in their current ministries, rather than simply fare welling them with a graduate certificate. Long-term sacrifice is also required on behalf of all who work at a seminary or support it. Those seminaries that do persevere in incarnational ministry offer a visible testimony to others to do likewise.

The final chapter, "Life Together Today", describes some possibilities for modern incarnational ministries. House starts by answering three main objections to the necessity of embodied pastoral formation: (1) the epistles are a model for distance education; (2) the "body-of-Christ" language is unsuitable for seminaries; and (3) stressing face-to-face education inhibits world missions. House then applies Bonhoeffer's seminary vision to various seminary contexts: large and small seminaries, seminary enrichment programs, University theology department enrichment programs, and church-based internship programs. He concludes with a

plea not to go down the route of distance learning. “In the end we must do the right thing, not because it will succeed as we wish, but because it is the right thing” (196).

*Bonhoeffer’s Seminary Vision* is an informative and challenging read in the shifting sands of current theological education. In an Internet age that presses seminaries to embrace the new, accessible, cheap-but-profitable forms of learning, House’s book is a clarion call to stand firm on biblical principle. Some critical evaluation of Bonhoeffer’s theology at different points would have been beneficial, especially in relation to the application of incarnational theology and ecclesiology to seminaries. More reflection on the appropriateness of terminology like “incarnational ministry” and seminaries as “visible bodies of Christ” is needed. To his credit, House does state that “a seminary is not a church, whatever one’s church polity”, but *how* a seminary may reflect the visible body of Christ yet not actually *be* a local church requires further delineation. Nevertheless, as the direction of theological education increasingly moves away from face-to-face teaching and towards online distance learning, House’s concerns give us at least pause for thought. This book is relevant not just for seminary presidents and faculty, but also for board members, administrative staff, and students. Even if one demurs from Bonhoeffer’s theology in places, one can surely agree with him that “The matter of the proper education of preachers of the gospel is worthy of our ultimate commitment”.

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