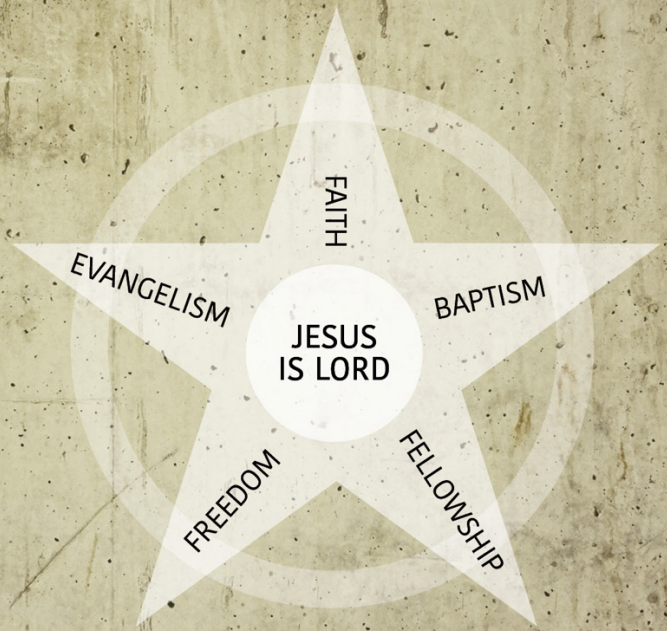
Journal of Baptist Theology
in context



Issue 12 (2025)

Baptists and Bonhoeffer: A Conversation with Craig Gardiner, Tim Judson, and Andy Goodliff[1]

Craig Gardiner, Tim Judson, and Andy Goodliff

Andy: Welcome to a conversation about Baptists and Bonhoeffer. I am joined by Dr Craig Gardiner, who teaches at Cardiff Baptist College, and Dr Tim Judson, who teaches at Regent's Park College, Oxford. They are two Baptist pastor-theologians who have read a lot of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and have written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The background to this conversation is that British Baptists have been engaging with Bonhoeffer for a long time. I want to highlight two Baptist ministers in particular. Edwin H. Robertson,[2] who in the 1960s and into the 1970s was influential in making a lot of Bonhoeffer's works available in English,[3] as well as writing his own reflections on and biography of Bonhoeffer.[4]

And then from the 1980s up to the present day, there has been Dr Keith Clements, who, while he was teaching at Bristol Baptist College,[5] began to publish engagements with and dialogues with Bonhoeffer,

---

[1] This is an edited transcript of the conversation that took place on the 18th December 2024.

[2] Robertson trained at Regent's Park College and then had ministries in Luton, St Albans, Yeovil, and London.

[3] *Rusty Swords* (Collins, 1965); *The Way to Freedom* (Collins, 1966) and *True Patriotism* (Collins, 1973) were a collection of Bonhoeffer's letters, lectures and notes which Robertson edited and introduced. In addition, was a separate volume *Christology* (Collins, 1966).

[4] Edwin Robertson, *The Shame and the Sacrifice; The Life and Teaching of Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987) and *Bonhoeffer's Heritage: The Christian Way in a World without Religion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).

[5] Clements also trained for ministry at Regent's and then had ministries in Cheshire and Bristol. Clements was Tutor in Doctrine at Bristol from 1977 to 1990, before going on to several different ecumenical positions.

from the earliest being *Patriotism for Today* and then *What Freedom*? and then most recently *Appointments with Bonhoeffer*.[6] And so there has been a long history (we can talk about other names as well) of Baptists reading Bonhoeffer.[7]

This conversation is to reflect on why Bonhoeffer has been such a particular source of engagement for Baptists. Hopefully we'll tease some of that out as we talk.

Craig and Tim, who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

Tim: I'll start and then Craig can correct me. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran, a German, a pastor, a theologian. He was born in 1906 and died in 1945. He was an upper middle-class guy, one of a lot of siblings, including being a twin. He was an interesting character. He was into foraging mushrooms. He played pranks on his neighbours. He was also a very gifted musician, a keen sportsman, very close to his family. He had an interesting sort of spiritual development from the children's nanny, Maria and Käthe Horn, who were Moravian influenced, who raised them spiritually, as well as his mother, Paula. But they didn't really consider church to be something hugely important or significant. They found the church would be quite parochial, out of date, irrelevant, but there was a strong emphasis,

---

[6] Keith Clements, *Patriotism for Today: Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1984), *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1990), *Bonhoeffer and Britian* (CCBI, 2006), *The SPCK Introduction to Bonhoeffer* (London: SPCK, 2010), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015), and *Appointments with Bonhoeffer* (London: T & T Clark, 2022).

[7] Haddon Willmer, 'Costly Discipleship' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* edited by John De Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Paul Ballard, 'Camus and Bonhoeffer: Living in a Godless World', *Theology* 78 (August 1972) and 'Bonhoeffer as Pastoral Theologian', *Theology* 94 (March 1991); and Sean Winter, 'Word and World: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Biblical Interpretation Today', *Pacifica* 25.2 (2012), "'Present-ing the Word": The Use and Abuse of Bonhoeffer on the Bible', *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Australasian Journal of Bonhoeffer Studies* 2.2 (2014), 19–35, and "'With Him I Believe": Keith Clements on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Patriot and Ecumenist', *Bonhoeffer Legacy* (2017).

particularly from his mother, on a kind of Christian formation growing up.

He grew up towards the end of the liberal tradition within Germany. He was living in a particular area of Berlin that was very influenced by the arts and a lot of the liberals lived close, like Adolf von Harnack.[8] Bonhoeffer decided to become a theologian at quite a young age, which his family thought was a ridiculous idea because it was bourgeois and a waste of space. And he said, "In that case I'll reform it."

And I think in a lot of ways he did seek to reform the church. He was originally going to become a musician, but sensed a kind of calling to the life of a theologian. It's interesting now, because I think people often don't necessarily equate a calling with being a theologian. We often talk about having a calling as a minister or a pastor or whatever. Bonhoeffer, throughout most of his life was a pastor in different ways, some conventional, some illegal, but from a very early age, he had sensed a calling to become a theologian.

Craig: I don't want to do a kind of pop psychology on him, but there is a sense in which his home life was split between a fatherly figure who was scientific, who was a doctor and neurologist, and a mother who had much more of that spiritual side of things. And I don't like putting the scientific and the spiritual at odds with one another, but I think there was a tension within that. I think that somewhere in Bonhoeffer's life, it was as if he had a need to resolve that tension. When one of his brothers, Walter, died — he was killed in the First World War — the family had a year of hiatus in which his mother moved next door, and all family activities ceased. It's at this same time that he moved out of the room that he shared with his twin sister, Sabine. I wonder if it is that sense of fragmentation in family life that leads Bonhoeffer to long for community, to seek out a place where

[8] A prominent liberal Lutheran church historian of early Christianity.

people connect and belong. And in part, that's bringing together those worlds of science and of faith. Later in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, very famously, he writes about a 'religionless Christianity'. He writes about 'a world come of age'.[9] And it's very much about how we bring together these two worlds that I have inhabited in my early family life, and how do I talk to my brothers who have gone off into those kinds of careers. How do I say to them, 'I was called. I am called. The church that has been, can be reformed'. So later on in his life, just before he goes to lead the seminary at Finkenwalde for the Confessing church, he writes to his brother Karl-Friedrich and says, what we need is a new monasticism, not like the old monasticism, but one which is solidly rooted in uncompromising engagement with the Sermon in the Mount, but works into a worldly engagement.[10] And I think that's what he's doing in this and all his life is trying to bring those worlds together.

Andy: I guess Bonhoeffer is remembered for his theological works and because of what happens to him in the Second World War, which we will come to in a moment.

But it's interesting Craig that you just talked about the fragmentary parts of his life, because one of the things that I'm aware of is that he spent time in Barcelona, he spent time in London, he spent time in Harlem in New York. And then obviously comes back to Germany. So is there perhaps a rootlessness or maybe it was just job opportunities. He's travelling, in his 20s into his early 30s, around different places, which all feed into his theological work of being a pastor and then the choices that he makes at the beginning of what became the Second World War.

---

[9] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*. DBW Vol 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 482.
[10] Letter to Karl Friedrich, dated January 14, 1935, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933-35*. DBW Vol13 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 285.

Craig: Yes, so part of that is where Tim was talking about those sense of vocations. He had a strong sense of vocation to the pastorate, but he trained as a theologian. He did a doctorate — don't listen to this, anyone who's keen to do one — but it was all done and dusted by the time he was 21. At that point he was too young to be ordained as a pastor, so some of it wasn't so much job opportunities, as you must do something between now and when you're old enough to be ordained.

And I think his best friend, Eberhard Bethge, famously breaks down his biography[11] into three sections. The first section is being a theologian where he writes and articulates those early foundations of what the theology is going to be for the rest of his life. And then he has a — it's not a road to Damascus experience — but he does have a time when he says at that point, I was consciously Christian, in a personal devotional sense rather than merely an academic sense. Bethge sees that as a crucial move between being a theologian and becoming a Christian, but one does not negate the other, which is good news for some of us. And then finally, when, because of the conditions of Germany at the time under the Nazis, when he's unable to either teach and write as an academic or pastor within the Confessing church, when those two opportunities are banned, he becomes what Bethge calls 'a man for his time', a contemporary kind of human being. And all of that is again about how you hold the fragments of your life together when the context is so rapidly changing.

When he was writing the early drafts of *Ethics*, he asks what hope do we have of writing a magnum opus? Because he knows our lives are now but fragments. And different scholars have spent many hours writing on what holds it all together, Christology as a key theme, and there's the longing for community I've mentioned. I have a penchant for his idea of a vicarious responsibility — how you live responsibly in the world. But all of that is asking, what is it that holds the different

[11] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000 [1970]).

fragments of this man's life together, both his sense of vocation, as a theologian, as a pastor and even maybe as a musician, too. I think later in life, he becomes reconciled that the two, the music and the theology, just like the family of science and faith, need not be at odds. All of that is a focus on how do we hold these different fragments together?

Andy: And there's this big moment in his life where he could have stayed in America, sat out the coming war, but he decides to go back to Germany. I wonder whether you might speak to that decision.

Tim: This was after his second visit to America. He went to America for a year for a kind of research fellowship in 1930 to 1931. Reggie Williams, who's an African American Baptist and Bonhoeffer scholar, makes a very good case that, among Bonhoeffer's experiences during that first visit of experiencing Christian pacifism through his friend, Jean Lasserre, and also experiencing something of the kind of social justice dynamic of people like Paul Lehmann who he meets,[12] that really the main sort of formative experience that Bonhoeffer has is his experience within the African-American church, the Abyssinian Baptist Church,[13] where in contrast to the kind of the white churches and the white sermons that he experiences, he finds the black church seem to be living as a gospel community that take sin and salvation seriously and the Bible seriously.

But it's through his experience at Union Theological seminary that he gets this opportunity to go back later in 1939, just as everything starts kicking off in Germany and he's really worried about being conscripted because, through his theological thinking at this point later in life, he's really wondering what's going be happening to him. He wants to get a bit of space really, and so he goes to America, gets this opportunity, but it's turmoil for him. I mean, he writes in his journals about the fact

---

[12] Lasserre and Lehmann were both students at Union Theology Seminary at the same time as Bonhoeffer.

[13] Reggie Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016).

that he's reading his Bible verses, Moravian watchwords every day,[14] and finding them really helpful, but sensing just such an unease in his gut, in his visceral being with what's happening and his reflections there are very, very open, very poignant. And he has what I think would be called a charismatic experience, really.

He's very wary of the way in which human intuition can sometimes be a bit presumptuous regarding our discernment, that we claim to have heard from God or that God has revealed himself in a way that is beyond the word of God revealed in Christ as attested to in the scriptures. But he is reading his watchwords and he suddenly has this moment where something just jumps out from the Bible to him, when Paul asks Timothy to 'come before winter' (2 Tim 4.21) and he hears that as a word from God, as in, 'Come back to Germany before winter'. And he takes that and it's a little bit sensational in the sense that he doesn't have those experiences very often or at least we don't think he does, but he has this real experience from his daily devotion to the scriptures, a disciplined reading of prayer and the Bible and meditation, and he really senses that Christ by the Spirit through the Scriptures is speaking to him, and he goes back to Germany.

Some people have suggested that it's such a shame because Bonhoeffer was a sharp mind. He was just an absolute genius and creative and some people think, 'oh, what a waste for him to go back'. But then other people would suggest that it wouldn't have been that big of a deal if his story didn't pan out the way it did, in a manner that is frankly more inspiring than most theologians.

So he goes back to Germany and agrees to lead a theological seminary in Finkenwalde.

Craig: It's interesting that Andy said that Bonhoeffer is known for his theological writing, but I think he's probably more known for his

[14] Moravian Watchwords (*Losungen*) were a set of daily devotional bible readings that Bonhoeffer used.

biography. That's what captures people often straight away. And certainly, when I teach this in university, quite often it's difficult to get people away from the story and into the theology because they get fascinated by the events of his life.

One of the things in that story, is how he's apprehensive about being conscripted into the army. The reason why he is concerned is not because he's fearful for himself, but because if he refuses to fight, then all his friends might also come under suspicion of being pacifists which was not an acceptable position under the Nazi Regime. So the decision is never about weighing up matters of his personal safety, but about the possible repercussions does this have for others? And that's why, again, I think he comes back to Germany from America, because he feels he can't take part in the rebuilding of my nation if he is not there at its most critical moment.

Andy: We will move this on to the theology in a moment, I wonder whether we might finish the story. So, he ends up in prison. Take us through the final years of his life.

Tim: What a lot of people maybe don't realise is that he was not arrested for an attempt on Hitler's life. He was arrested because he was involved in the illegal smuggling of Jewish people out of Germany. Something called Operation Seven, which I think actually involved smuggling 14, originally seven, people being illegally smuggled out of Germany, and the documents that implicated him in that initiative were discovered after an attempt on Hitler's life. It was those documents, I believe, that implicated him, in this attempt to get some people out of Germany. He was arrested because he was seeking to save lives, not primarily because of his involvement in a conspiracy against Hitler.

So another example of Bonhoeffer living out of a sense of responsibility to and for and with others, which is why he got arrested. It was after a later attempt on Hitler's life that then led to some findings that implicated Bonhoeffer in that, which led to his execution

at Flossenburg concentration camp on the 9th of April 1945, just a couple of weeks before it was liberated by Allied Forces. And what is really interesting about Bonhoeffer again, which a lot of people don't know, is that while he was in Tegel prison in Berlin, an opportunity that arose for him to escape. One of the prison guards whom he become quite good friends with, who would sort of smuggle various things in or out for him to friends and family, like letters and things like that, offered to help him escape. There arose this opportunity for him, and they had planned it, but then they found out that Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, was going to be implicated or his fate would be worsened if Bonhoeffer had escaped. So, Bonhoeffer made the choice to not take his own freedom for the sake of limiting the impact that could have on someone who he cared for. Staggering, staggering prospects. Not only did he return to German to the danger and the turmoil of that, and the precarious nature of being someone who is committed primarily in his allegiance to Jesus Christ, but also when he gets arrested and put in prison, he has an opportunity to escape and to go and hide, but he doesn't because of the impact that might have on those who he cares for, and then that leads to his eventual execution.

Andy: Craig, I think you're right. His life is remembered partly because of his circumstances. And he's remembered as a martyr. You can find his statue alongside other modern martyrs above the Western entrance to Westminster Abbey.[15] But I guess what makes his life more than just an example of Christian 'sainthood' is that, and this goes back to your earlier point, is he wrote so much of theology quite early on. Now, most of theologians might not get round to writing until their late 20s, if not later than that, but he published a number of works, bigger and smaller ones,[16] which means that he's not just a martyr

[15] https://www.westminster-abbey.org/history/explore-our-history/modern-martyrs/.
[16] *Sanctorum Communio* (1930), *Act and Being* (1931), *Discipleship* (1937), *Life Together* (1939) and *The Prayer Book of the Bible* (1940).

whose life is exemplary in some ways. He's a theological voice that continues to speak.

I want to ask you both, how did you both get into reading Bonhoeffer? Was it that someone said you must read this or was it you just accidentally came across him? Craig, can you remember reading Bonhoeffer for the first time?

Craig: I can, and it was somebody who said you must read this, but it wasn't because they were all excited necessarily. It was a third-year module in university in 20th century theology, and the tutor had this wonderful pedagogical technique of saying, here are ten people and there are 20 people in the class, so everybody pair off and come back with a presentation, and I got handed Bonhoeffer, and it was completely random.

From that, though, I did the presentation, then I wrote an essay on that for my end of year essay. Then I started a Master's course and I did another essay on Bonhoeffer and then I ended up doing my dissertation on Bonhoeffer. And by then, I got the bug of thinking this is fascinating, but I've only scratched the surface, so I ended up doing another three years for a PhD. This was not a PhD on Bonhoeffer as such, but it was a PhD that heavily engaged using Bonhoeffer to kind of help shape my own thinking on a couple of things.

One of the reasons for his legacy is books like *Discipleship*[17] and *Life Together* are easily read as devotionals for an average Christian who might not want to go and delve into something like *Sanctorum Communio*, the early academic thesis. And so, Bonhoeffer again, manages to hold those two sides together. He has the academic foundations, and its robust, *and* you can see the scholarship bubbling through *Life Together* and *Discipleship*. But you don't need to go and read the deeper theology to appreciate what's going on in those books.

[17] Some English translations have the title *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Andy: Tim, likewise, how did you get into Bonhoeffer? What was the first Bonhoeffer that you read? What's your story of finding him as a voice and a life?

Tim: I was living in Wolverhampton. This was before I trained as a Baptist minister. I was leading an ecumenical pioneering ministry and *Discipleship* was doing the rounds and I was told you should read this. And I read it, and I thought, oh, yes, this is good. I found it an inspiring devotional text.

At that point I'd had no kind of theological education. To be honest, I wasn't much of a thinker. I was more of a kind of activist. I found *Discipleship* helpful. I found it inspiring.

And then I went to Bristol Baptist College to train for ministry, and I remember vividly in my first year being shown around the library and seeing all of Bonhoeffer 's works — all 16 volumes plus the 17th volume with the supplementary material — and thinking he wrote a lot.[18]

And that was that. We had a little session on different spiritualities, where in one session we looked at *Life Together* and Bonhoeffer's understanding of community, and it sounded interesting. I think the implications of what he was saying, hadn't really gone into me in the sense of making me think about what that meant for how I lived. It was just ideas. Ideas isolated from experience; I suppose.

And it was when I started my PhD thesis and I was doing about the place of lament in the church, particularly for the Western church today. I'd been influenced a lot by Karl Barth and a lot by Black theology. Barth in volume four of *Church Dogmatics* refers to Bonhoeffer quite a few times and basically just regurgitates what Bonhoeffer says in certain parts. James Cone, the father of Black theology, in one of his books, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*,[19] talks

[18] *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series*, 17 Volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996-2014).
[19] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

about how Bonhoeffer was a standout exemplar of Christian courage and solidarity in relation to the black experience in America and contrasts him to Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a very well-respected ethicist.

And it was through reading both Barth and Cone and the ideas that they were bringing and bits about Bonhoeffer 's life, that made me think maybe I should read a bit of Bonhoeffer. It was my supervisor Jon Coutts, who was sort of transitioning from being a Barth scholar[20] to a Bonhoeffer scholar, who sat down with me, and we read a few essays from *Ethics*. And something just suddenly like clicked in me and I thought, oh my goodness, I think this guy believes that God and the world are way more real than I think they are. And I started reading and I read a few things over again and what was what was wonderful for me was a sense that in which Bonhoeffer is helping me make sense of a lot of things theologically, but it was also really opening up Christian faith and church and the world and God in a way that made me just filled with such wonder, which I was longing for and I think theology should do that, but often it just doesn't. And so that really is how I kind of got into Bonhoeffer and he's been a fellow pilgrim along the way ever since.

Andy: Have you read all 17 volumes?

Tim: (*laughing*) I've read everything.

Andy: Craig, your PhD was published as *Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer's Vision, Iona's Witness*.[21] What part does Bonhoeffer play in what you are wanting to say in that piece of work?

Craig: Tim mentioned about people's saying, 'oh, it's really sad that he died so young and three weeks off from liberation from the Allies into

[20] Jon Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016).
[21] Craig Gardiner, *Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer's Vision, Iona's Witness* (London: SCM, 2018).

Flossenbürg'. And that is true, but it has led to then, to a huge Bonhoeffer industry of people saying, well, he could have gone this way or that way. The Bonhoeffer, certainly in English language, that appeared in the 1960s, stirred a lot of interest,[22] but then it was subject to a lot of subsequent revision, because when you saw something like the prison letters in isolation, without any connection with the earlier academic theology, they pointed you in a direction which might have not been where Bonhoeffer would have gone.

I guess I got fascinated by Bonhoeffer's theology of community. I was intrigued by what that it might mean for a growing number of people seeking out a new monasticism, where they try and live by a common rule of life, without necessarily taking vows or living in an enclosed community or something like that. Bonhoeffer became the launchpad for thinking about, what a new monasticism might look like and what kind of theology would they need. And so, while it began with Bonhoeffer's theology, it moved to explore the kind of people who might be implementing this. The example that drew me further in was the Iona Community. So it became a book on, Bonhoeffer's vision but Iona's practice.[23] I brought Bonhoeffer and Iona together, not seeking to say this is the only way to imagine a new monasticism today, but as one example of what how Bonhoeffer's theology might have been developed, had he survived?

And so that's where I got to with the PhD, and then with the book tried to ask, how good a theological guide is Bonhoeffer to all the new monasticisms that are popping up today?

Andy: So that's *Melodies of a New Monasticism*, which I recommend to you to go and read. Tim, your book is *Awake in Gethsemane: Bonhoeffer and the Witness of Christian Lament*.[24] You said that you were doing some

[22] Most famously John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963).
[23] Craig has been a member of the Iona Community since 2012.
[24] Tim Judson, *Awake in Gethsemane: Bonhoeffer and the Witness of Christian Lament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2023).

work around Christian lament and then Bonhoeffer becomes the theologian that you use or reflect with. So how does Bonhoeffer help us think about Christian lament?

Tim: I think as somebody who would often lead worship, would preach, would be involved in a various streams of churches, I think I became quite concerned about the way in which there was often a real emphasis on, you know, celebrating and being thankful and praising for all that God is and all that he's done in Jesus, in a way which just didn't seem to have the dexterity to be able to acknowledge or recognise to any extent or depth, suffering, sorrow in general, or just the struggles that we have in this kind of sinful world. Was there something that had necessarily changed within the diet and the postures within our Western churches, or was there something wrong, or underemphasised?

That sent me on a long journey, exploring biblical studies, liturgical theology, systematic theology as well as historical stuff, but I think some of the real concerns I had related to the way in which we live our life, what we believe and how we practise the Christian life in explicit Christian liturgical ways, but also just in life, how like, how do these things all connect? And Bonhoeffer it seemed to me was doing that. His theology was utterly inseparable from his ethics, which was utterly inseparable from his practices in life and his liturgical practices.

Bonhoeffer seems to come at things from quite a different angle. For example, for him, the whole of our assumptions about what is good and what is evil are the heart of human sinfulness, so it's not necessarily that we think this is good, this is bad, sorted. For him that judging in and of ourselves of what is good and what is bad is the heart of human sinfulness, which actually makes a heck of a lot of sense, because, you know, say a general election happens. One party wins and loads of Christians go, 'yay, hallelujah providence of God'. And then a load of other Christians go, 'oh, no, you know, the devil's got in here'. And that's because we are constantly judging what we think is good,

what we think is bad. And for Bonhoeffer, that's the heart of the fall, so to speak in terms of his doctrine of sin.

And so that leads to huge questions in terms of what we lament and how we understand lament. I mean, something happens and do we lament that or is lament partly saying, Lord, this seems awful, but help us to be faithful, help us to understand it.

And I suppose there are so many theological trump cards that people raise about why we don't or shouldn't lament. One of them is whether lament doubts the sovereignty of God or does that undermine our own need to confess sin? Or should we actually just be happy because of new life in Christ?

I try and reframe and debunk some of those things, but really, the kind of fulcrum of my whole project is centred around Gethsemane. Hence the title *Awake in Gethsemane.* And for Bonhoeffer, you see this plumbline idea throughout his whole work, where actually to be a Christian, to be truly human, is to actually share in the life of God in Christ, which is actually a life that is totally free from my own total absorption with myself, to actually be truly free for and with others in the world.

There's a quote from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which I'll read, where he says,

> I discovered and I'm still discovering to this day that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one is completely renounced making something of one's self, whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader, a so-called priestly figure, a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person, then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness, living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes, and failures, experiences and perplexities, then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the

> suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane, and I think that this is faith, this is *metanoia*, and this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.[25]

I think he's just been really helpful for me, but not only to argue for the place of lament, but to say that actually we need to recognise that lament is something that fundamentally is our sharing in Christ's sufferings, which means that I don't lament if I feel like lamenting, I lament because I'm called to share in Christ's life, which means actually lamenting with and for others as well, not just for myself.

Andy: Bonhoeffer has been this theological voice within both of your theological thinking, but maybe in other ways as well. And both of you are Baptists, and we mentioned earlier how Bonhoeffer has been someone that Baptist in different ways have engaged with.

And so do you think there's something about Bonhoeffer's theology, maybe his life as well? He was a Lutheran not a Baptist. Why are Baptists reading Bonhoeffer? Is there something helpful there? What does Bonhoeffer have to say to us as Baptists?

Craig: I might begin by saying it's not what Bonhoeffer has to say to us as Baptists, but maybe what we as Baptists need to say to Bonhoeffer, because we need a conversation partner. I think that's what Bonhoeffer has been for me. I think maybe also for Tim and for others that you mentioned, like Keith Clements.

Bonhoeffer has proven to be a consistently good conversational partner. There is a point when you're doing research, particularly when you're doing research engaging with one particular theologian, and even more so when they have a fairly dynamic personal biography, where you need to become a bit disenchanted with the story and

[25] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Priso*n, 486.

become more critical of the theology. And you need to almost fall out of love with this person that has spent so much time in your head.

I think it's because I'm not trying to create little Baptist churches that are all Bonhoeffer-ian in nature.

It's because he offers such a deep place of conversation, that he forces me back to myself, to reflect on my own heart and mind. Bonhoeffer is like a really good spiritual director. He's not telling me what to do, but he is holding up a lens or a mirror to myself and saying, well, what do you think now?

When I was doing my research, one of my supervisors, Dr Karen Smith, would often look at what I'd written and say, 'well, you can't write that, that doesn't make sense.' And then we'd critique it. And the only way I could get to what I wanted to say was by standing up in her room and walking around and talking it out loud. Now that's maybe an external processor like me will do that. But for me, it's because Bonhoeffer is such a good conversational partner. He doesn't want to make me what he is, he wants me to become what God wants me to become. And I think that's why that's why he's still so important.

I think for Baptists, perhaps there is something in the radical side of his discipleship, and the earthed sense of his discipleship, that is attractive. That's not unique to Baptists, but I think that's why many Baptists have been drawn to him; because of that radical strand within our own history, and that sense of asking the question, 'who is Jesus Christ for us today'?[26]

For me, again, I have an interest in what it means to live in a covenanted life, what it means to live in good relationship with one another. Bonhoeffer's work on what it is to be a community who live together in Christ, is deeply theologically grounded, but it's also deeply, practically engaged. I am drawn to his work in *Life Together* and in

[26] This is a question Bonhoeffer famously asks, see *Letters and Papers From Prison*, 362.

Discipleship, because it is a reflection of how the community was learning and living together in Finkenwalde.

That sense of connecting theology and church life, and then connecting both of those to the world in which we live, and find Christ present, those are the things that I think are important for us as Baptists.

Andy: There is an emphasis in Bonhoeffer on Christology and on ecclesiology, which I guess would loom large for Baptists, our way of being church, our way that we follow Christ, and follow Christ in a strongly ecclesial sense, or at least ideally we do. And so I wonder if there's something there. The other thing we might say about Baptists is we are pragmatists and activists. One of the things that Neville Clark (a former Principal of what was then South Wales Baptist College), says, talking about infant blessing, but I think it's true of Baptism probably and the Lord's Supper and everything that we do, is that we have the practice, but we remain in search of a theology.[27] And I wonder if Bonhoeffer can help us sometimes with that theology.

Tim: Yes, I think to an extent. I mean, your comment makes me think of Helen Dare's phrase of us 'being on the way, but in the fray'.[28] Each thing that Bonhoeffer writes is within a context. *Discipleship*, which comes across as extremely radical and almost polemical at times, is written to encourage and strengthen his seminarians who are on the verge of being arrested or having their stipends taken away from them. He's wanting to really bolster them to stand fast in the faith. And later on, he reflects on what he wrote in *Discipleship* and says, actually, maybe it wasn't quite complete, I should have maybe thought a little bit more about the penultimate, which is kind of the earthly existence and maybe not be quite so absolute in what I said. He's writing theology

[27] Neville Clark, 'The Theology of Baptism' in *Christian Baptism* edited by Alec Gilmore (Lutterworth, 1959), 320-321.
[28] Helen Dare, *Always on the Way and in the Fray: Reading the Bible as Baptists* (Oxford: Whitley, 2014).

for a time trying to address certain things, so he's emphasizing something. He's foregrounding something.

I do think that all theology is contextual, and I think when we don't acknowledge that, we can open ourselves up to critique. I teach Christian doctrine and I think it's really important to recognise that all the great doctors of the church have had a particular context that has framed their imagination, and we as contemporary theologians have that as well, and I think sometimes we're not actually aware of that horizon and someone will have to come along later and say, oh, well, that was influenced by this horizon and that sort of thing. I think Bonhoeffer is really trying to write for a particular time.

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran, and he is actually trying to redress a lot of Lutheranism that he considers to be pseudo-Lutheranism of the time, which has led the church into a particular direction that his really made it anaemic as far as its faithfulness goes. But Luther himself was a dissenter. He didn't want to become a new separate church, but the Lutheran Church kind of developed out of that. What's interesting is in Germany, in the 20th century, it was the state church. Bonhoeffer is really writing as a voice of dissent. When the Aryan paragraph comes out which says that Jewish believers have to be excluded from Christian churches, he is a voice of dissent and saying, how dare we go along with this? This is a matter of confession. And what he finds concerning is that you've got the liberals, who are kind of like, oh, well, you know, God could be at work in this, and we'll go along with that and maybe you know, God is it working in this sort of way, in a manner that Bonhoeffer considers to be really awful because this is fundamentally un-Christlike. But he's also really having a pop at the conservative evangelicals as well, because they're like, well, as long as you let us just, you know, do what we want in our worship services and don't bother us, we won't get involved with all of this politics stuff. And you can see this playing out today in a lot of the ways in which we think theologically.

As Baptists we see ourselves as separate from the state, but we are not utterly inseparable from state actions. I think Bonhoeffer offers a very compelling imaginative way of relating to the world in the sense that we are pilgrims for whom the world, as it is not fundamentally our home. There is something fundamentally wrong with this world as it is, but at the same time, it's the world that God created, and that God loves, and that God has reconciled in Christ. I think as Baptists, we are different potentially to Anabaptists in that respect, who may be accused of getting sometimes a bit lost in the idealism that leads them to back off from society for the sake of their own purity. Bonhoeffer is like, no, get your hands dirty for the sake of Christ. Not in a way which legitimises any of our actions, but in a way which constantly leaves us at the mercy of God's grace in a very broken yet beautiful world. I think that's one of the ways, in terms of dissent.

Also, finally what I thought, is that the sort of shape of our Union of churches at the moment, we have such a kaleidoscope, of dimensions of spirituality, of theology, of styles of worship. One of the things I find helpful with Bonhoeffer is he's got this way of having difference and particularity within different bodies, within the Baptist Union, or within different ecclesial traditions. He is very ecumenically focused.[29] But not in a way which necessarily says, that's fine and that's fine and whatever. He's got this sense of everything is rooted in the whole, which is Jesus Christ, but there might be little melodies or voices that will sound slightly different.[30] Maybe even dissonant, which are nevertheless rooted to Christ. I'm gesturing here at Craig's book where he uses this metaphor of polyphony that Bonhoeffer develops, as a musical term, that undoubtedly shapes much of Bonhoeffer's theological imagination.

I find it as somebody who's very kind of creative, imaginative, but yet also has learned to think on the more rational sort of end, I find that a

[29] See Clements, *Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*.
[30] See Tim Judson, 'Baptist (Dis)Unity and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Socio-Doctrinal Understanding of the Church', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* 9 (June 2023): 5-29.

really helpful metaphor for understanding the Christian life, understanding Christian community, and understanding what it means to be a Baptist, in the sense that there are some different melodies within our union of churches, different emphases, different things that are foregrounded, which might seem kind of very independent from one another, but are actually dimensions of the whole, which is this work of God in Jesus Christ through the church. I find that really helpful because he makes connections but also allows tensions and conflicts. Bonhoeffer says in one essay in *Ethics* that the incarnation, the crucifixion, and their resurrection can only be unified in their conflict, and foregrounding one of those at the expense of the others means that we have an incomplete gospel really. I think that's really helpful for us as Baptists who can get a bit lost in our own sectarianisms sometimes.

Craig: I agree with what Tim's saying. Maybe another point to make is that Bonhoeffer held together this vocation of pastor and theologian. Sometimes within our Baptist Union life, we are a little bit suspicious of the academic thinkers, because perhaps they want to take longer before coming to a decision. I think it is important to ensure that we do have vocational theologians in the midst of our decision making and our discernment processes. Not that they discern better, but sometimes they might discern differently, and I think that can be helpful. I think we risk losing something when the discernment processes across the Union become smaller and with less time to deliberate.

As I said earlier, what I think Bonhoeffer does is constantly pushes us back into our own context. The question that haunts him throughout his life, but particularly in prison is, 'where is Christ for us today?' And I think that asks us to go back to that question again and again. How is Christ encountered in the different processes and structures and people of the Union. How do we find Christ in each of those? Tim's right, it's the whole of that, that is where we find God and limiting it to only one part or another perhaps limits the vision of what God is

doing in our midst. Bonhoeffer talks about God being 'the beyond in our midst'[31] and so it's about constantly looking for where is God going to and how we might we follow?

Andy: I think there's something there, the idea that Bonhoeffer is a pastor and a theologian, and he never lets one of those vocations go. He holds on to both. For Baptists, if we think most of those most of our people who end up doing theological work remain as pastors. And that's something about holding onto those twin vocations.

Craig: But there are three vocations here, because it's not just that he's a pastor and a theologian in his theology, but it's the fact that through no fault of his own, he's forced into not being able to be either and having to find another way of responding to God recognising that this 'next vocation' of a more worldly faith, in this-worldly Christianity, is equally a vocation that is honourable to God.

Andy: There's been a bit of a controversial reception history to Bonhoeffer, to the extent that one scholar has written a book called *The Battle for Bonhoeffer*.[32] How do we read Bonhoeffer well? Or are there multiple ways to reading in Bonhoeffer and that's okay?

Craig: There are multiple ways of reading Bonhoeffer but I'm not sure that it's always okay. So recently, there's a new film based on the life of Bonhoeffer that has received a fair degree of criticism for how it read Bonhoeffer. Just like when the conservative evangelical Eric Metaxas brought out a Bonhoeffer biography in 2010 and critics thought he was hijacking Bonhoeffer to make him into the patron saint of a particular brand of theology and Christian practice. That's a temptation for those on the religious right as much as it is for those on the more progressive left. For others who try to hold some ground in the middle, all you can do is engage with the primary and emerging

---

[31] A Letter to Bethge, 30th April, 1944 in Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers in Prison*, 367.
[32] Stephen R. Haynes, *The Battle for Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). See also Haynes' earlier book *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (London: SCM, 2004).

scholarship. There is a seemingly endless stream of scholarship in Bonhoeffer research. New things are being discovered and reflected upon in different ways. We need to root ourselves in that scholarship and then ask who might Christ be to me in this particular place? How do I honour that Bonhoeffer question in my midst? That involves Christians doing an awful lot of listening to where God is already in the world, as much as it does the church telling people where they think God is to be encountered. And I think that's true to Bonhoeffer's vision as well.

There is a genuine risk. The Bonhoeffer family have recently issued a statement about that new movie and about how it betrays Bonhoeffer.[33] It is fraught with tensions and how we receive it. Like everything else, we are all circumscribed by our own contexts. The wider those contexts are, the wider our relationships are, the more consciously we will seek to engage with those we *know* are different to us. We must learn to do that with respect and openness and a willingness to allow them to genuinely be Christ to us. I think that is not only a part of good scholarship, but I think it honours Bonhoeffer's legacy well.

Andy: If people want to read some Bonhoeffer, a primary work, where should they start? And if they want to get perhaps a sense of Bonhoeffer 's life, where should they start?

Tim: I would encourage people differently based on where they're at. There might be some people who listen to this who are feeling, as Bonhoeffer was later on in his life, really disappointed and disillusioned with the church, and who might just think the church is just too far compromised in whatever way to bear thinking about, which is something Bonhoeffer really struggled with in prison. He famously wrote that the church has been so much more concerned about its

[33] https://religionnews.com/2024/10/21/stop-taking-bonhoeffers-name-in-vain-scholars-warn-eric-metaxas-and-other-christian-nationalists/.

own self-preservation than anything else, which I think is a very sharp criticism that we might want to take on board as well.

If there's anyone like that, I'd recommend reading *Ethics*, which is a posthumously pieced together bunch of essays, which was potentially going be his *magnum opus*, but he didn't get to finish it.[34] The essays are put together and it's really in those essays Bonhoeffer is really thinking more broadly about what it means to be in the form of Christ, to let the form of Christ take place in the world. He's writing there in a broader sense than just the church and Christian discipleship in its most sort of sharp focused sense. There he addresses, ethical frameworks in general, public life, and what we consider to be responsible, and the relation between church and state and those sorts of things. Really thought-provoking essays. Some of which are quite easy to read and will probably provoke further questions, which is not necessarily a bad thing because it engenders a certain humility.

For those people who are really dialled into the church in its current form and maybe involved in Christian ministry in a conventional sense, I totally recommend reading *Discipleship*. It's a Christian classic. Having come back to it later on, having done some theological study, trained for Baptist ministry, and exploring it for my PhD, I was struck by — you know how you watch a Disney film as a kid and then you watch it as an adult and there are loads of jokes and things that you just didn't pick up as a kid — I think it was like that. I'd come to it again and think, oh my goodness, what he's saying here is massive and it would cause me to ponder and to reflect and see.

In terms of secondary stuff reading about his life, there are numerous biographies. The most established one really is the one written by his best friend Eberhard Bethge, which is over 1000 pages. I'd recommend

[34] Dieterich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DWB Vol 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). It should be noted that in the UK, SCM Press have also recently republished *Ethics* (London: SCM, 2024), *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 2017), *Life Together* (London: SCM, 2024), and *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 2024).

though two books. One which is written by Renate Wind, called *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel*, which was published in 1991.[35] A really interesting story about his life and a bit of his own personal experience as well. The other is by Christiane Tietz and called *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.[36] Tietz has written more extensively in Bonhoeffer scholarship as well, but gives a kind of concise backdrop to the historical background of what's going on, why Bonhoeffer says what he's saying, what's going on around at the time, and the different events, and his theological thinking, how it developed at that time as well.

So, both really good and I'd say accessible texts, if you want to get a sense of Bonhoeffer's life without having to waste your time too much.

Craig: Another short and accessible book is Stephen Plant's book, simply titled, *Bonhoeffer*,[37] and we referenced earlier, some of Keith Clements's writing. Maybe if you want to read Bonhoeffer through the eyes of another Baptist scholar picking up some of Keith's work is particularly good, and especially his most recent book,[38] which offers insights into the valuable contributions of Christian living from Keith as well as into Bonhoeffer.

In terms of reading Bonhoeffer, I'd agree with Tim, it depends where you're at, as to where you want to start. There is something wonderful about reading other people's letters, particularly when they weren't intended to be published. There's a module waiting to be written or a book waiting to be written, on people's letters and the spirituality that is revealed as they unpack their soul in correspondence with a close confidant rather than the neatly polished stuff that comes for the publication. And so maybe starting with *The Letters and Papers from*

---

[35] Renata Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (London: SCM, 1991).
[36] Cristiana Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Fortress, 2016).
[37] Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London: Continuum, 2004).
[38] Clements, *Appointments with Bonhoeffer*.

Prison gives you a sense of who the man is, what preoccupies him, and what his focus is in his most challenging times.

I want to mention *Discipleship* and agree with Tim there, but maybe from the other side, and even shorter, but just as radical, is *Life Together*. This is the little book that he wrote about what it is to live with other Christians, what it is to live in a community. It seems to me that there are so many occasions when our witness in the church, in our Baptist Union, or within a local congregation, is jeopardised, because we just don't love one another, and we haven't learned how to practise living well together with one another. And so I regularly return to *Life Together*. It's a short little book, that has wonderful phrases that can stop you in your tracks and say 'that's a sentence I can to live my life by'. It's about a balanced life that nurtures a personal individual spirituality but also is accountable to those around you. It's about how we do community living well. It is also where Bonhoeffer talks about the 'deed that interprets itself',[39] as an act of witness. And the deeds that interpret themselves before a watching world very often are simply how do Christians behave. It's by our love that we're supposed to be known, that's our greatest witness. But if we cannot love one another, and if we cannot live well together in accountable and responsible relationships, then we compromise our witness, we compromise anything else we might dare to say about Christ.

Life Together is one of the few books that I read at least once a year. It continually throws up something — and, not that I'm recommending that people should underline things in their books — but if you do, then *Life Together* continually challenges me when I find a phrase that I underlined last year, but it's the very next sentence that jumps out at me this time.

Tim: It's a bit, particularly that first chapter on community, it's almost like Bonhoeffer the mystic there, isn't it? I think we can sometimes

[39] 'The Nature of the Church' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*. DWB Vol 11 (Mineapolis: Fortress, 2012), 314, fn.329.

think, he's a German systematic theologian, he's written two doctoral theses, but there is a very kind of contemplative, mystic side to him, which comes out, you know, particularly later in life, which I think is very interesting. You should write that book next, Craig, I think.

Andy: if there are any listeners to our conversation, hopefully you've had a rich engagement with Bonhoeffer. There are rumours that every night before his children go to bed, Tim reads them a passage of Bonhoeffer to his children so that they will, you know…

Tim: …go to sleep.

Andy: I know for Craig that there are other theologians, but for Tim, there is no other theology, but Bonhoeffer. I guess a small plug here is Tim's got another book out in 2025 called *The White Bonhoeffer: A Postcolonial Pilgrimage*,[40] and so Tim is continuing to engage with Bonhoeffer, as I'm sure Craig is in other ways as well.

What a wonderful conversation we've had with Craig and Tim. Thank you both. They've given lots to think about and go on and read if you want to do more with Bonhoeffer. And I'm sure that Bonhoeffer will continue to be a theologian and a life that speaks to Baptists, and long may that be so.

Notes on Contributors

Craig Gardiner is Tutor in Doctrine at Cardiff Baptist College. Tim Judson is Lecturer in Ministerial Formation, Regent's Park College, Oxford. Andy Goodliff is Lecturer in Baptist History, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

[40] Tim Judson, *The White Bonhoeffer: A Postcolonial Pilgrimage* (London: SCM, 2025).