

More of Bonhoeffer on Reading and Teaching the Bible

Bonhoeffer – Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy

By Eric Metaxas

Pages 268 ff

(My Comments in Green)

I struggled to *read* the Pathwork Lectures for classes I took in the Pathwork Program at Sevenoaks. I struggled to *teach* the Pathwork Lectures for classes I taught in the Pathwork Program at Sevenoaks. Part of this I suppose is that I am a slow reader, maybe even one with dyslexia. Another reason, however, was that I was simply overwhelmed by the material – it was like sitting at a banquet table where 300 pounds of delicious food was set before me. In my overwhelm I did not know where to start.

It would be like getting the assignment to read the books of Genesis, Psalms, the Gospel of John, and Paul's Letters to the Ephesians and Romans before the next class in three months and get much of what they offered. How could I possibly tackle this either as a student or as a teacher?

Often I solved this problem with reading or teaching Pathwork Lectures by systematically looking for themes or what the Guide calls "Keys," outlining the lecture, and listening to it several times, etc. This approach of listening to the lecture while driving and working-out was one of the motivations for my recording of the Pathwork Lectures. But somehow this always seemed like I was not getting the nourishment that was set before me. As if I were *naming* the foods on my plate, *organizing* them by food groups, etc., but not really taking small bites and savoring and experiencing each one.

I had the same problem in reading the Bible and teaching Bible classes in church and elsewhere in the third and fourth decades of my life. Once in my late thirties I taught the Gospel of John in the Sunday morning Bible class at church. It was a class of 20 or so, and I went verse by verse in the class each Sunday. I paid no attention to time, and it turned out that the class ended up being two years long! We read, talked about, and shared applications and what the verses meant to each of us. This worked for me and seemed to work for most of the class.

I now see that Dietrich Bonhoeffer struggled and came to teach in this same way – applying a few verses from the Bible each day. His teaching and sermons were intended to make short passages come alive. It was as if he was teaching his parishioners and ordinands (his seminary students intending to become pastors some day) how to read the Bible.

And so it seems to me that since this phrase-by-phrase way is how I relate to the Pathwork Lectures, my task for my own growth and for that of my workers and students would be to model **how to read the Pathwork Lectures and apply them every day in our lives**. In a way my blog serves this purpose.

I am not making “My Way” of approaching the Pathwork Lectures “Right” and other ways “Wrong.” Rather, I am simply being faithful to what works for me after my struggling with this matter for years.

The German theologian that Bonhoeffer most respected was Karl Barth. Barth approached theology more systematically, looking for underlying dogma as primary over against the more devotional verse-by-verse application approach Bonhoeffer was using. Barth told Bonhoeffer that he disagreed with Bonhoeffer’s approach, thinking it too pietistic. Nevertheless the young Bonhoeffer stuck by his convictions in this matter. So each of us must find what works for us, both in working with the Pathwork Lectures in our own lives and in teaching these materials to others.

Here is some of what Eric Metaxes, biographer of Bonhoeffer, writes that resonates with me ...

Page 268 – concerning the daily routine that 29-year-old Bonhoeffer used at the seminary he founded and headed in 1935 at the request of the Confessing Church. The upstart renegade seminary began in Zingst, a remote municipality on the peninsula of Zingst in Northern Germany, a peninsula jutting out into the southern shore of the Baltic Sea. There, and soon afterwards in a vacated estate in Finkenwalde not too far away, Bonhoeffer led his class of 20 or so ordinands preparing to become new pastors in the Lutheran Church in a *Life Together*. Here is some of what Eric Metaxes says and quotes...

...[One ordinand remembered the daily routine in Finkenwalde as follows] ... “‘Then came breakfast, which was very modest. Then came half an hour of meditation. Then everybody went to his room and thought about the Scripture until he knew what it meant for him today, on that day. During this time there had to be absolute quiet, the telephone couldn’t ring, nobody could walk around. We were supposed to concentrate completely on whatever it was that God had to say to us.’

One meditated on the same verse for an entire week, a half hour each day. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann recalled that they were not allowed to look at the text in the original language or to consult reference books or commentaries. They must deal with the verse as though it was God’s word to them personally. ...”

Page 271 [A letter Bonhoeffer wrote to his dear theologian friend Karl Barth in response to Barth’s concern that Bonhoeffer was heading his ordinands at the seminary in the wrong direction. Bonhoeffer explains himself as follows.] ... “A leading man in the Confessing Church recently said to me ‘We have no time for meditation now, the ordinands should learn how to preach and to catechize.’ That seems to me either a complete misunderstanding of what young theologians are like today or culpable ignorance of how preaching and catechism come to life. The questions that are seriously put to us today by young theologians are: How do I learn to pray? How do I learn to read the Bible? If we cannot help them there we cannot help them at all. And there is really nothing obvious about it. To say, ‘If someone does not know that then he should not be a minister’ would be to exclude most of us from our profession.” ...

Pages 272-273 [Bonhoeffer's thoughts on sermons and teaching] "... But as with so much else, Bonhoeffer knew that the best way to communicate what he thought and felt about homiletics (giving sermons) was by doing it. Delivering a real sermon during an actual service was infinitely better than giving a lecture on homiletics. The ordinands must see in him someone who lived what he meant to teach them, just as Jesus did. The teaching and the living must be two parts of the same thing.

Yet even when he was not preaching, but merely talking about sermons, he wanted to communicate practical things to his ordinands. [Ordinand] Bethge remembered some of Bonhoeffer's advice: 'Write your sermon in daylight; do not write it all at once. 'In Christ' there is no room for conditional clauses, the first minutes on the pulpit are the most favorable, so do not waste them with generalities but confront the congregation straight off with the core of the matter, extemporaneous preaching can be done by anyone who really know the Bible.'

[Earlier,] in 1932 [when Bonhoeffer was 26] he told [his dear friend] Hildebrandt: 'A truly evangelical sermon must be like offering a child a fine red apple or offering a thirsty man a cool glass of water and then saying: Do you want it?' At [the seminary in Finkenwalde] he effectively said the same thing: 'We must be able to speak about our faith so that hands will be stretched out toward us faster than we can fill them ... Do not try to make the Bible relevant. Its relevance is axiomatic ... Do not defend God's Word, but testify to it ... Trust to the Word. It is a ship loaded to the very limits of its capacity!'

He wished to impress upon his ordinands that when one truly presented the Word of God, it would undo people because it had the innate power to help them see their own need and would give the answer to that need in way that was not larded over with 'religion' or false piety. The grace of God, without filters or explanation, would touch people.

... Real faith and love were identical for him. Here was the very heart and core of the existence of this highly intellectual Christian. We felt it in the improvised prayers of the morning and evening devotions, they sprang from the love of the Lord and of his brethren."

While I resonate with Bonhoeffer on these points as it relates to my relationship with the Pathwork Lectures, I am far from taking my stand on these methods, either in my own life or in how I teach or share with others. I seem unwilling to share my feelings on these matters with other Pathworkers. Oh to be as courageous as Bonhoeffer! Leading a class where the Pathwork Lectures would be explored to their root and applied to the root of us hearers would be my Joy. Perhaps as close as I come are some of my blog entries.

Gary