

Advent Week 4



INCARNATION

OPENING PRAYER

God of glory, in Jesus you showed us your love and your way to live anew. As we learn more about your life in human form by the Spirit's guidance and through this week's study, give us grace to understand, and in understanding, the will to act responsibly in love for your world. In Jesus' name, Amen

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. How does Bonhoeffer continue his meditations on the incarnation and its meaning?
2. In what ways does Bonhoeffer call the church and all Christians to live out the meaning of the incarnation?

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

In this final week of our Advent study, we see that Bonhoeffer deepens the meaning of incarnation. His meditations help us see the theological underpinnings of his own life and decisions.

1. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the point that in Christ God becomes "really human" and that means that "we must recognize that God wants us to become human—really human." Where "God loves real human beings without distinction," we always try "to distinguish between the godly and the godless, the good and the evil." But God does not "seek out the most perfect human... Rather, he takes on human nature as it is." (50)

2. Through Jesus Christ humans do not become God, but God changes Godself into human form “so that human beings...can become human.” It is “a question of the life of humanity itself that it recognized in Christ its image and hope.” (52)
3. Reflecting on how God’s promises are fulfilled, Bonhoeffer observes that “the great promise of God is fulfilled at Christmas.” “God had seen the misery of the world and had come himself in order to help. Now he was there, not as a mighty one, but in the obscurity of humanity, where there is sinfulness, weakness, wretchedness and misery in the world. That is where God goes, and there he lets himself be found by everyone.” (54)
4. Picking up the theme of the great reversal that turns all human arrogance on its head in the mystery of the incarnation, in this meditation, we hear that God “descends to us in the form of a child,” a child that is “born *for us*, this son is given *to us*, ...on that alone my life now depends.” In a Christmas sermon excerpt, he asks, can we receive the child in the manger forgetting “all our stress and struggles, our sense of importance...and worship the child like the shepherds and wise men?” (56-57)
5. In a dramatic reflection, Bonhoeffer states, “Nothing greater can be said: God became a child... Don’t speak; stop thinking! Stand still before this statement! ...Here he is, poor like us, miserable and helpless like us... And yet he is God... Where is the divinity, the might of the child? In the divine love in which he became like us... Kneel down before this miserable manger, before this child of poor people.” (58)
6. We are not without guidance and comfort as Christians seeking to follow Jesus. Bonhoeffer notes, “To those who recognize in Jesus the wonder of the Son of God, every one of his words and deeds becomes a wonder; they find in him the last, most profound, most helpful counsel for all needs and questions... Believe [the child in the manger] to be the Son of God, and you will find in him wonder upon wonder, counsel upon counsel.” (60)
7. In the final meditation for Advent, Bonhoeffer again becomes our theological teacher, asking, “Who is this God?” “About this human being Jesus Christ we say: this one is God.” This statement attempts to explain the concept of Jesus’ divinity *and* humanity. “It is ‘the vertical’ from above, [which] qualifies the whole human being as God... If Jesus Christ is to be described as God, then we do not speak of his omnipotence and omniscience, but of his cradle and his cross.” (62)

EXPLORING THE THEMES

In this final set of meditations, we turn again to consider Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the incarnation. Reflecting a wider Christian comprehension of the incarnation, Bonhoeffer insists that “God becomes human, really human...bodily taking upon himself and bearing the nature, essence, guilt and suffering of human beings.” (50) This is the source of redemption, life, and joy for human beings that is the heart of Advent and the message of Christmas. “That this child is born *for us*, this son is given *to us*, that this human child and Son of God belongs to me, that I know him, have him, love him, that I am his and he is mine—on this alone my life now depends.” (56)

Bonhoeffer, however, also insists that the incarnation is not only a personal affair, but also one that impacts the life of the believer *in* and *for* the world. He makes the connection directly when he observes, “[Jesus] comes in the form of the beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person you meet.” (2) When we are invited to open the

door and open our hearts to Jesus during Advent and beyond, we are asked to recognize that “Christ will walk the earth as [our] neighbor.” (2) This meaning of incarnation calls the church to Christian discipleship that helps our neighbours.

We can see the fundamentally humanly oriented nature of the incarnation throughout Bonhoeffer’s theology, pastoral concerns, and ethics.

- It is evident starting with his understanding of human nature. For Bonhoeffer, “Among the most basic of Christian concerns is the nature of humanity: what does it mean to be human? For Bonhoeffer, the answer is clear. Human beings exist only in relationship to, and responsibility for, other human beings.”¹¹
- Further, this understanding of the incarnation is shaped by the Gospel itself. “[It] was a great discovery for Bonhoeffer to find that the only Gospel in the Bible is a Gospel turned toward the whole world. This world is, even though at enmity with God or far away from God, still the world that God loves.”¹²
- From that understanding of the Gospel, the incarnation impacts the nature of faith. “Faith is participating in this being of Jesus...a new life in being there-for-others, through participation in the being of Jesus. Transcendence is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation. God in human form!”¹³
- Faith is thus linked to how Christians conduct their life. “The life of discipleship is marked by being-with-others, and in this very being-with-others, Christ is present.”¹⁴ Here is where care for the neighbour is rooted in Bonhoeffer’s pastoral practice. As well, this incarnation theme picks up the idea of the great reversal in shaping how Christians actually live their lives and make decisions. “[We] must join in the action that is taking place and be drawn into this reversal of all things ourselves.” (42)
- All of this, finally, impacts how Bonhoeffer understands the community that Christ creates—the church. “Where [God’s Son] is, there we are too, in the incarnation, on the cross, and in his resurrection. We belong to him because we are with him. That is why the Scriptures call us the Body of Christ.” (77) One scholar describes it this way, “It is Christ’s action that provides the model for life in community, and life in community that presents—to the world—the ever renewed incarnation of Christ.”¹⁵

These elements of his incarnational theology were not just words for Bonhoeffer, but the principles that guided his life and shaped his decisions, and eventually led to his death at the hands of the Nazis. The most poignant examples are, as we have seen, his decision to lead the churches in resistance to the Nazis and to participate in the conspirators’ plans to assassinate Hitler. These were his affirmation that the incarnation leads to responsible Christian action.

I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose he needs men who make the best use of everything. I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to help us to resist in all times of distress. ...A faith such as this should allay all our fears for the future. I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are turned to good account, and that it is no harder for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds. I believe that God is not timeless fate, but that he waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible actions. (79)

SCRIPTURE READING

Deuteronomy 24:17-22

These laws in Deuteronomy focus on ethical behaviour towards one's neighbour in need, creating the ancient equivalent of a social safety net for those not able to rely on extended family connections through the patriarchal structures of ancient Israel. Orphans, widows, and aliens or sojourners lived at the mercy of the wider community. Beyond the practical injunctions, these laws make evident their theological grounding in the redemption accomplished by God for the people—a redemption they were enjoined to “pay forward” in how they treated the vulnerable with the same mercy they had received.

SUGGESTED SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Journaling: These questions might get you started:

- What of Bonhoeffer's writings in this chapter clearly spoke to your heart? Why?
- How does Bonhoeffer's understanding of incarnation that implicates Christians in living out responsible actions in their own time and for their neighbours impact your sense of discipleship? How does it inspire your further reflections about God's calling in your life?

Lectio Divina: Choose any of the biblical texts suggested by the Advent devotional, the biblical text suggested in this study Guide, or any portion of Bonhoeffer's words from the daily reading.

Music as Spirituality: For this week's theme of incarnation, read or sing Hymn 649, “How clear is our vocation, Lord.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you engaged in any of the spiritual practices this week, share your thoughts about that with another person during the week, or with your gathered study group. Consider how others found spiritual riches through the practice they chose. What do their practices add to your own spiritual engagement?
2. This week the study guide extended our understanding of Bonhoeffer's ideas about the incarnation. However, there are other ways to consider the writings in this fourth chapter of *God is in the Manger*. What did you find most helpful in the readings for Week 4? Why were those elements of the Advent readings helpful for you?
3. Bonhoeffer's understanding of the incarnation impacts his understanding of faith, the Christian life of discipleship, and the church. What do you find most helpful in this set of ideas for your sense of living as a follower of Jesus? What is most challenging about these ideas for you?
4. Identify one thought from the readings this week about incarnation that might have a positive impact on the life of the church and the life of your congregation. What do you find most helpful about it? In what ways might you encourage others through living out this idea from Bonhoeffer?

