

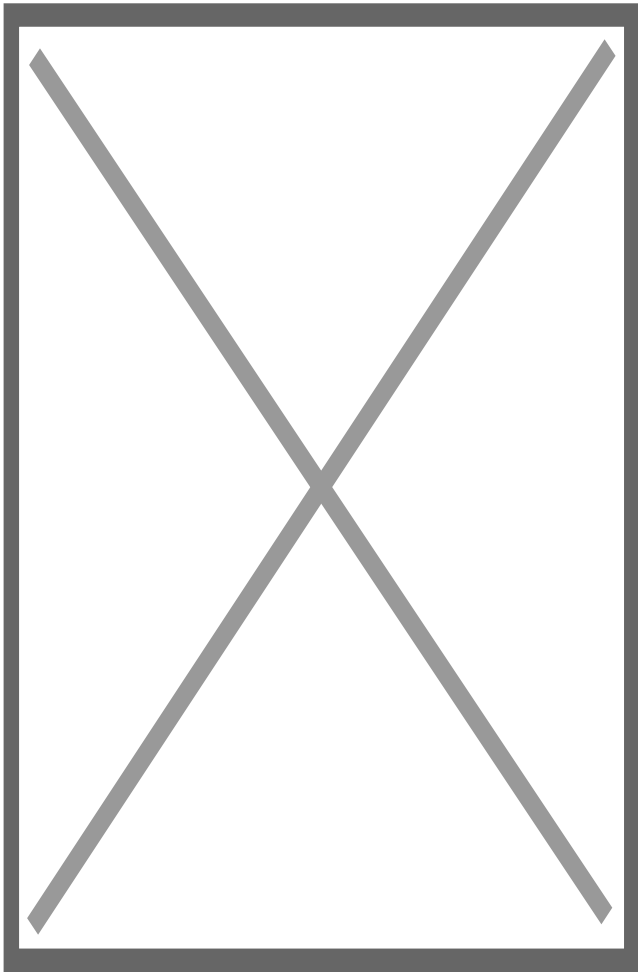
The pastor behind the myth

When Bonhoeffer stops being a symbol, he can start being a guide.

by [Liza Johnson](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue

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In Review



Bonhoeffer for the Church

An Introduction

By Matthew D. Kirkpatrick

Fortress Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Few theologians have had as profound and lasting an impact on contemporary Christian thought as the German theologian, pastor, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His legacy has been widely interpreted across Christian denominational lines and has recently taken a prominent place in political dialogue in the United States. Matthew Kirkpatrick offers a critical engagement with Bonhoeffer's theology that stands apart for its clear and necessary message for today. He asks: What does Bonhoeffer mean for the church? In an age of ecclesial crisis and theological fragmentation among Christians, Kirkpatrick provides a timely reflection on how Bonhoeffer's insights can revitalize and reshape the church's vision and mission.

This systematic treatise provides readers with a full account of Bonhoeffer in his many forms—as pastor, student, theologian, and frustrated and yet hopeful Christian. What sets this book apart from other expositions of Bonhoeffer is its scope: Kirkpatrick draws on the entire span of Bonhoeffer's works, and he lays out *Bonhoeffer for the Church* in thematic sequences that map the breadth of the theologian's life and thought. As Kirkpatrick weaves together Bonhoeffer's biography, theology, and public image, a pattern emerges: Bonhoeffer consistently urged those around him to be rooted in faith and to imitate (*nachfolgen*) Christ's work in the world.

Particularly enlightening is Kirkpatrick's exploration of Bonhoeffer's Christology through the themes of love, action, sin, and atonement. Pastoral and communal care and representative action (*Stellvertretung*) come together in the way of life modeled by Jesus, demonstrating both the "being-for-the-other" and the "being-with-the-other" that ought to shape relationships between Christians. In understanding Bonhoeffer's deep desires for and personal frustrations with the institution of the church, readers discover why the imitation of Christ became so important to Bonhoeffer in both his personal faith and his public action and leadership. Kirkpatrick grasps this pastoral impulse and hands it to his readers deftly. Bonhoeffer, who lately has become more than mythic, is in this book a complex human being—and first and foremost a pastor who cared deeply about the purpose and inner workings of the Christian community.

The centrality of the church and scripture to Bonhoeffer is clear throughout the book. As Kirkpatrick says, it was "Bonhoeffer's astonishing vision" for the life of the church and a deep orientation to the work of the gospel that propelled his life and work, even until his last moment. When read as an interpretive guide to Bonhoeffer's thoughts on ecclesial life, *Bonhoeffer for the Church* feels instantly grounded in the life of today's church. The book's accessibility to a broad range of readers makes it an excellent choice for group study in a congregational context.

The emphasis in later chapters on Bonhoeffer's refusal to polarize church and world inspired me to ask my congregation to consider how we might be able to "participate in making Christ's world real in this world" in our own context. Kirkpatrick neither provides direct answers from Bonhoeffer nor prescribes what contemporary Christian communities should do. Rather, he lays the groundwork for readers to reckon with their own relationships to church and world, and to draw from themselves the faith and ethical task to which Christ calls them through Bonhoeffer's words.

Still, Kirkpatrick does not romanticize Bonhoeffer. He acknowledges the complexities of Bonhoeffer's legacy early on and names the distinct challenges of applying his theology to different contexts. Kirkpatrick examines how Bonhoeffer's theology changed late in his life as he grappled with the fact that his astonishing vision was not reality. It is well known that he participated in German resistance and assassination attempts against Hitler, resulting in his imprisonment and death. As Kirkpatrick notes, "the tragedy for Bonhoeffer was that it was here that he found a truer sense of the church's action than in the actual church." By the time of his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer had begun to reconcile this reality with his situation. Kirkpatrick works honestly with Bonhoeffer's critiques of his own earlier work as he came to a new understanding of God's nature and movement in a broken yet alive world. At the end of a robust study of a brilliant teacher and pastor, it is a gift to be able to see Bonhoeffer as a very real human being, still struggling with the failed faithfulness of his church and still

evolving in his relationship to, with, and without God.

Kirkpatrick invites readers into genuine engagement with Bonhoeffer in his own lived context rather than offering a simplistic appropriation of his ideas into our world. *Bonhoeffer for the Church* thus issues a call: How will we engage Bonhoeffer with clarity to hear what he was saying and not only what we hope to hear? Such a critical read is necessary, particularly in our current time.

Bonhoeffer for the Church is not only a vital contribution to both Bonhoeffer studies and contemporary ecclesiology, it is also an essential read for Christians who wonder how Bonhoeffer's legacy speaks to us today. This book challenges, inspires, and points toward the shaping of a church that is both faithful to Christ and responsive to the world. It demands to be read, discussed, and lived out together, mirroring Bonhoeffer's own calling.