

Bonhoeffer On Listening

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954).
Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 2010), Kindle Edition.

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

(Page 97; Kindle Edition Location 1140-1145)

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

(Page 97-98, Kindle Location 1147-1151)

There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and so get rid of the other person. This is no fulfilment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude toward our brother only reflects our relationship to God.

(Page 98, Kindle Location 1152-1155)

Moreover, the person who has really listened and served and borne with others is the very one who is likely to say nothing. A profound distrust of everything that is merely verbal often causes a personal word to a brother to be suppressed. What can weak human words accomplish for others? Why add to the empty talk? Are we, like the professionally pious, to 'talk away' the other person's real need? Is there anything more perilous than speaking God's Word to excess? But, on the other hand, who wants to be accountable for having been silent when he should have spoken? How much easier is ordered speech in the pulpit than this entirely free speech which is uttered betwixt the responsibility to be silent and the responsibility to speak!

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