

ABSTRACT

*Communio*

A Meditation on the Theological Transformation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Harlem

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The following is a thesis outlining the creative influences, research, methodology, and resulting production of a short documentary entitled *Communio* about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological transformation in Harlem.

*Communio: A Meditation on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Spiritual Transformation in Harlem*

by

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A Thesis

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## DEDICATION

To Luiz and Marta Oliveira  
Without your love and support, none of this would have been possible.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *Introduction*

What follows is an analysis of the themes, academic and theological influences, and aesthetic choices that went into the creation of the documentary short *Communio* that I wrote, directed, and produced as part of my master's thesis at Baylor University. This thesis serves as an in-depth examination of the project and its influences, as well as a reflection on my own creative process.

#### *Background*

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem has been at the forefront of my mind since the fall of 2016. I first encountered Bonhoeffer's theological writings as a freshman in an undergraduate leadership course at Baylor University, but it would be a few years before I dove deep into his life story. The gap between my first encounter with Bonhoeffer and my discovery of his time in Harlem, however, lent significance to that story. Immediately after earning my Bachelor's Degree in May of 2016, I began reading Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, a dense, challenging book that immediately made me question what it meant to be a faithful disciple of Christ. Then, towards the end of 2016, I would read a biography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer that referred to Bonhoeffer's two semesters in Harlem. The moment was barely a page in what amounted to a massive biography, but for me that moment was the most significant part of the book. The idea of a German aristocrat undergoing a theological transformation in the streets of Harlem scratched my brain in a way that I could not shake.

To give context to why the story caught my eye, 2016 brought with it a radical restructuring of my thoughts on race, identity, and what it means to be an American. During the course of the 2016 election cycle, I found myself deeply disturbed with the tone of American politics, particularly the divisive rhetoric of politicians on both sides of the aisle and the willingness of evangelical Christians (a label which I take for myself) to support political views that blatantly harmed minorities and those who scripture might aptly describe as “the least of these.” In early July, a trio of events spanning consecutive days would put me on a trajectory that would open up my heart to be moved by Bonhoeffer’s Harlem moment. Two of these incidents – the police shootings of Alton Sterling (July 5, 2016) and Philando Castile (July 6, 2016) - were accompanied by viral videos that I watched, much to my horror. These senseless killings of innocent individuals – and the subsequent acquittals of the officers directly responsible for their murders - shattered the illusion in my mind that America was a place where justice and equality prevailed (*After 9 High-Profile Police-Involved Deaths Of African-Americans, What Happened To The Officers?*). My father emigrated from Brazil to the United States at age 17, and he had taught me that hard work, adherence to rule of law, and faith in God could get you anywhere in life. Furthermore, I was taught to believe that the police were here to protect and defend me, not murder defenseless citizens in the street. These events, however, showed me that the same system that had treated me so well could perpetuate gross injustices against others. This was not an easy fact to accept, and it broke my heart.

The straw that broke the camel’s back came on July 7, 2016. At a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest in Dallas, Texas (one that had sprung up in response to the killings of the previous two days), six police officers were killed by a U.S. military veteran as an act of retribution for the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police. I had grown

up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and had returned there at the time, so I found it especially traumatic to see footage of police being gunned down in my own city. Furthermore, I found it incomprehensible that the violence I had seen used against African Americans would then be considered a justifiable means of retribution. I was shaken by all of this racial tension, and my only response was to dive deep into the discomfort I felt. As James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced” (*AS MUCH TRUTH AS ONE CAN BEAR; To Speak Out About the World as It Is, Says James Baldwin, Is the Writer’s Job As Much of the Truth as One Can Bear - The New York Times*). I found solace in the words of musical artists like Sho Baraka, Leon Bridges, and Kendrick Lamar, whose music lent humanity, intellect, and soul to the black perspective. I read James Baldwin and watched films that dealt with race, and in the summer of 2017 I would have the privilege of visiting the Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham, Alabama. The incidents of summer 2016 and my subsequent exploration of perspectives that were vastly different from my own would intersect with my interest in Bonhoeffer in a way that led me to the production of this film.

### *Personal and Professional Goals*

Bonhoeffer’s story has personal significance to me. In many ways, my theological shift over the last few years closely resembled Bonhoeffer’s. I had come to find myself passionate about issues plaguing the church and about issues of social justice. I had lost hope in all of the political institutions in my nation and had come to believe that real change only comes through the daily effort of individuals working outside of government jurisdiction. I had also come to believe in the importance of white evangelicals such as

myself in facing up to their biases and the hand they play in systematic injustice.

Evangelicals, like their more liberal counterparts, must face the fact that their actions often have an impact on the very people Jesus described as “the least of these” in their society. Bonhoeffer had to face this reality on the streets of Harlem, and that is what appealed to me about his story.

I felt a sense of obligation to tell this in a manner that white evangelicals can relate to their own lives and to the present state of race relations in America, but in no way is this story limited strictly to Christians. *Communio* tells its story in a way that alludes to the religious tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer but does not overtly dwell within it, meaning the language used in the film is accessible to religious and non-religious audience members alike. By framing the film this way, I hope to create a desire within all viewers to see issues from the other side and to create a discourse on how we might move forward into racial reconciliation. Furthermore, I would like the viewer to come away with a newfound interest in the life and theological writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His theological works hold important lessons for society today and should be discovered by as many people as possible. For those who are already familiar with his story and work, my hope is that the film gave them fresh insight as they re-read Bonhoeffer’s works.

As far as my professional goals went, I wanted this film to be the culmination of all of the studying and production I had done up to that point. From the onset of my film studies in the fall of 2013, I had worked on numerous student shorts, a trio of television shows, and two feature-length films (one documentary and one narrative). I had also written, directed, and produced several narrative shorts of my own, including three in my first year of graduate school. I wanted this documentary to showcase the skills I had developed over the last 5 years and to serve as a bridge into the professional world. I also

wanted for this film to tour film festivals without being categorized as a “student film”. Lastly, it was my hope that this project would be noteworthy enough to help secure funding for a feature-length version of the story, as I believed a feature-length version of this story could cover the issues it raises in more detail.

### *Message and Theme*

The theme of *Communio* can be can be succinctly described with the word *reconciliation*. In this context, reconciliation means prompting the viewer to face up to their own biases, their role in oppressing others, and to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer; furthermore, they must then take that knowledge and translate it into action. This is a theme that I believe resonates with Christian audiences and non-Christian audiences alike.

For Christians, reconciliation is a process not unlike that of sanctification. One learns about the sacrifice of Jesus, how He carried a cross and purchased the sins of man with His own life, and how He called Christians to follow His example by living for and loving all of creation. A mature Christian learns to bear their own cross and eventually learns to help others in bearing their own crosses, too. To put it in secular terms, one learns their role in systematic injustices and, over time, begins to empathize with the oppressed. Eventually, an individual might learn how they can walk *alongside* the oppressed, working to assuage the pains of racial bias and to directly subvert the systems of injustice that they previously participated in, ultimately offering a helping hand into the oppressed individual’s rise into equality. Thematically, everything about this film is intended to direct the viewer towards garnering a spirit of reconciliation. I harbor no illusions that this film alone can accomplish such a dramatic change in an individual’s

perspective, but if it creates a spark that sends the viewer on a journey towards reconciliation, then it has served its purpose.

Going hand-in-hand with the theme, the message of *Communio* is that the path to reconciliation requires continual encounters with relationships and places where one experiences discomfort. It requires loving everyone as one loves oneself. Encounters with the other will leave one with no choice but to rise up and do the good work of the love. In the face of great evil and injustice, the individual will respond with even greater fortitude, whereas to stay silent would be an endorsement of the injustice at hand. Therefore, it is not sufficient for individuals to simply become aware of the problems caused by racial injustice, for awareness does nothing but enable them to flaunt their newfound wokeness in classrooms and coffee shops. They must violently shake off our complacency and become advocates in whatever manner they feel led to be. Not all are to give their lives in a literal sense like Bonhoeffer was, but a metaphorical death is a necessary part of this journey. They must be faced with their own flawed biases and, in turn, be transformed. This is my message to the viewer – that they listen, respond, and be transformed by hearing the story of a man who chose to emulate Jesus and serve others.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

Christian scripture says, “In the beginning, there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*The Bible*. English Standard Version). Ideas for movies almost always start out as an abstraction in my mind, a feeling or an image I cannot escape. I then spend a significant amount of time trying to figure out how to translate those abstractions into word. With this film, however, the idea originated with word. More specifically, the film had its origins in a number of texts that influenced my thinking on race and theology, and the words of these texts then created an inescapable feeling that I wanted to put onto the screen using as few words as possible.

#### *Literary Influences*

*Communio* owes a tremendous debt to the theological writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, specifically his seminal texts *Life Together* and *Discipleship*. Key passages from these texts are burned into my brain and have had tremendous influence on my thinking on race, the teachings of Jesus, and life in general. Written while Bonhoeffer was leading an illegal seminary that would eventually be shut down by the Gestapo, *Life Together* puts forth a compelling vision of what a Christian community should look like. Much of the content in the book pulls from Bonhoeffer’s experiences at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and these experiences led to a vision that is still talked about in Christian circles. I first encountered this book in an undergraduate leadership course at Baylor University, and I have carried its lessons with me ever since. *Discipleship* (usually

referred to as *The Cost of Discipleship* in English) is a powerful book in which Bonhoeffer critiques the lack of discipleship in the church of his day. He rails against the concept of “cheap grace,” stating that, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.” (Bonhoeffer 44) This is a statement that Bonhoeffer would end up embodying, as he was hanged for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler at 39 years old. There is clear evidence that Bonhoeffer’s ideas on discipleship were formed under the hand of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church during his time in New York. These two books have had a significant impact on my own theological formation and, through that, on the ideas put forth in this film.

Another substantial debt is owed to Dr. Reggie Williams and his book *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*. Dr. Williams put tremendous care into compiling the various scraps of information that exist on Bonhoeffer’s time in Harlem into a comprehensive book that also examines the racial and social context Bonhoeffer walked into in Harlem. Dr. Williams’ research takes *Communio*’s subject material out of the realm of speculation and into the realm of historical fact. For that, I am incredibly grateful. A detailed analysis of the book’s main points will be presented in chapter two of this paper.

Like many others concerned with issues of race in America, I eventually found myself face to face with the writing of James Baldwin. His book *The Fire Next Time* proved to be particularly influential on my own thinking. Baldwin’s distinct voice captures blackness in a manner uniquely his own. Baldwin was raised in the Christian church, and though he left it as an adult, key aspects of the Christian faith remained with him.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin stated:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth (*Letter from a Region in My Mind* | *The New Yorker*).

The sort of love Baldwin talks about is very similar to Bonhoeffer's concept of "cheap grace" in *Discipleship*:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner (Bonhoeffer 45).

Baldwin, who was born and raised in Harlem, would have been six at the time of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's arrival in New York City. Though they presumably never met, I see it as no coincidence that their unique voices have significant influence on this project. Their ideas were cultivated in the same fertile soil.

### *Filmic Influences*

In addition to its literary influences, *Communio* also was also heavily influenced by other films. Terrence Malick's recent trilogy of unscripted films – *Song to Song*, *Knight of Cups*, and *To the Wonder* – had significant influence on the visual and narrative style of this film. Malick employs a handful of devices in these films that I found useful in my own work. For one, Malick uses voiceover liberally in his films, and the voiceover is often abstract or philosophical. In some cases, this voiceover borrows completely from other texts, such as when Javier Bardem's priest in *To the Wonder* prays a prayer from St. Patrick's Breastplate (*CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: St. Patrick*). The spoken words in these films often point to the transcendent, and this is an effect I wanted to capture in

*Communio*. Additionally, Malick constantly uses montage theory as a device, pairing diverse imagery from his disjointed narratives with the voiceover to great effect. The shots can sometimes be completely unrelated to one another in sequence, but when taken in context of the film as a whole, they make complete sense. The shots are always consistent in their visual and thematic motifs, further contributing to Malick's unique vision.

Werner Herzog's surreal documentaries *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and *Encounters at the End of the World* look at the world with a sense of wonder that I wanted to emulate. Those two films, along with Raoul Peck's beautiful documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, served as the best examples I could find of what I call visual essays, or films that use imagery as a supplement to the musings put forth in the narration. While a standard documentary will focus mostly on the presentation of facts as such, visual essays will present facts as a supplement to their broader musings.

In Herzog's case, this means using ancient cave drawings and the scientists who inhabit Antarctica during the wintertime as a launching point for existential questions. For example, in *Encounters at the End of the World*, Herzog interviews a reclusive scientist who studies penguins. After struggling to get any good information out of the scientist, Herzog changes course and asks if there is such a thing as insanity among penguins. The scientist pauses, clearly thrown off by the question. Finally, he remarks that penguins can sometimes get disoriented and end up in places that they should not be, and that no amount of guidance can correct their course. This leads to the film's most poignant moment, in which Herzog and the team of scientists he is travelling with encounter a disoriented penguins dozens of kilometers away from its flock.

They watch with awe as the penguin wanders aimlessly towards the mountains and very likely its own death. At the end of the segment, Herzog simply asks, “But why?” Herzog uses documentary here not simply as a means of presenting facts, but as a means of guiding the viewer to a larger question or theme, much like a good essay does with the reader. Herzog’s penguins serve as a metaphor for the often inexplicable and self-destructive decisions humanity makes, and he uses them as a means of prompting the viewer to introspection.

In the same way, *I Am Not Your Negro* is a documentary about James Baldwin that is more about James Baldwin’s writing. The story is told exclusively in Baldwin’s words and pulls heavily from an unfinished memoir and from *Letter from a Region in my Mind*, but rarely does Baldwin talk about himself. When he does, it is always with the purpose of providing a frame of reference to his musings on the state of race in America. Baldwin wants his readers, or in this case listeners, not to be distracted by remembering facts and trivia. Instead, he wants them to meditate on the state of American society, allowing these musings to permeate and eventually reshape the viewer’s perspective. Baldwin was an essayist at heart, so it is fitting that *I Am Not Your Negro* reads more like an essay than a trivia book.

These films best encapsulate what I attempted to do in *Communio*. While the presentation of facts was obviously an important part of telling Bonhoeffer’s story, I really wanted the facts to guide the viewer to larger questions. *Communio*, like a good essay, was intended to present its information in a compelling way and, through that, prompt the viewer to explore other perspectives.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Reggie Williams' Black Jesus

#### *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*

The research of Dr. Reggie Williams proved to be the most informative glimpse into Bonhoeffer's transformation in Harlem and served as the factual backbone of *Communio*. Most of the information on Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem – and Bonhoeffer's associated theological transformation - came directly from Dr. Williams' book *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*, while the rest of the information came directly from primary sources that Dr. Williams cites. Over the course of five chapters, Dr. Williams examines the unique social, theological, and economic conditions of the Harlem Renaissance and how those conditions, when mixed with Bonhoeffer's preexisting theological ideas, transformed him into the pastor who would later give his life in resistance of the Nazis.

#### *Introduction*

In his introduction, Dr. Williams gets to the heart of the argument he presents within the book. Each of the following chapters elaborates on a claim made in the introduction. Perhaps the largest claim made in the introduction is that empathy in its healthiest, undistorted form, was a key character trait that enabled Bonhoeffer to shed the perspective afforded to him by his wealthy aristocratic upbringing in Berlin and to see from the perspective of the oppressed:

It would be difficult to claim that empathy was a healthy component of Bonhoeffer's transformative experiences in Harlem if he did not learn something completely new. But his new learning in Harlem is apparent when consideration is given to at least a few key specifics: his frame of mind prior to coming to New York, the open vulnerability with which he encountered the Harlem community, and his post-New York turn toward the Jesus embraced by suffering African-Americans, who suffers with them against systematic injustice and racial violence (Williams, 4).

Empathy, of course, does not necessarily lead to concrete action, even when combined with faith. One simply has to look around the campus of any major university to find a multitude of faithful Christians who empathize with the plight of marginalized communities but remain unwilling to bear suffering alongside them. Bonhoeffer himself came from such an academic background, as did many of his peers in the German church who would later support the Nazi cause. In the end of his introduction, Dr. Williams claims that other Christians in Germany failed to perceive the dangers of Nazism and its race-centric ideology in the way that Bonhoeffer did, despite their similar faith backgrounds:

...Bonhoeffer would not have seen the danger so clearly either, and he may have avoided his (execution at the hands of the Nazis)... if it were not for his experience in the Harlem Renaissance that validated the cosufferer image in human practice as he learned to act on behalf of the hungry, the poor, and the downtrodden, marginalized members of every human context (5).

Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem was one filled with empathy, and it would be that same empathy that would ultimately lead him down a path of resistance against his own government.

### *To Harlem and Back*

In chapter one, Dr. Williams provides a general overview of Bonhoeffer's life, the people he met during his fellowship at Union Theological Seminary, and the theological

foundation he carried with him as he entered into the Harlem Renaissance. This background is the heart of the factual information in *Communio* and helps provide a link between pre-Harlem Bonhoeffer and post-Harlem Bonhoeffer.

The Bonhoeffer family did not regularly attend church, but hymns, scripture reading, and other spiritual practices were an important part of their daily life. Bonhoeffer's mother led them in these daily practices, and they would have a profound impact on young Dietrich. At 13 years old, Bonhoeffer decided that he wanted to become a theologian, and consequently he spent his undergraduate and graduate studies chasing that dream. Bonhoeffer was known as a gifted student and "crafted a unique social theology by synthesizing... the work of... liberal scholars from the University of Berlin... with the newly emerging dialectical theology of Karl Barth" (Williams 9). The social theology of Bonhoeffer is important in order to grasp the origins of his theological transformation:

For Bonhoeffer, Christ is present in the world as the church, in the communion of saints, in the community of believers. Christ existing as the church is empathic, vicarious representative action, or Jesus as *Stellvertretung*, who became *Kollektivperson*, or humanity combined in one, by standing in for all of humanity in the sin and shame that makes us hide and isolate ourselves from God and one another. Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Christ as vicarious representative action is not only who Jesus is; *Stellvertretung* as vicarious representative action is an ethical mandate for followers of Jesus (10.)

The seeds of Bonhoeffer's most significant work had been sown by the completion of his graduate studies, but they would not germinate until his time in Harlem. Bonhoeffer's unique vision of Jesus as *Stellvertretung* combined with his empathetic personality and paved the way for his transformation in Harlem and ultimately his work as a pastor and member of the resistance.

Despite his theological views and empathetic personality, however, Bonhoeffer was also very much a product of his environment. He was just a child during the First World War, and, like many other Germans, Bonhoeffer experienced profound pain and loss when his older brother was killed in combat. As Dr. Williams succinctly put it, “Bonhoeffer’s theological presence was conceived in the wounds of war” (Williams 8). This pain and loss would manifest itself in the form of strong nationalism, the very same nationalism that would help give rise to the Nazi regime and cause World War II. In between the completion of his graduate studies and his two semesters in Harlem, Bonhoeffer would spend time as the pastor of a German congregation in Barcelona. The lectures Bonhoeffer gave to his congregation in Barcelona present the strongest evidence towards his yet-to-be-undergone theological transformation, for his social theology had not yet been liberated from the clutches of German nationalism:

Bonhoeffer’s Barcelona lectures reveal a Bonhoeffer who was in step with German nationalism... The empathetic, socially vicarious language of *Stellvertretung* is modified, and German-centric nationalism, rather than Christ-centered ecumenism, becomes the guide to Bonhoeffer’s Christianity... His German postwar interpretation of Christ turned Jesus into God’s endorsement of the retooled narrative of the *Volk*, a point he demonstrated with unabashed clarity at the end of his second Barcelona lecture when proclaimed, “German people, that is your God!” (Williams 14-15)

Bonhoeffer even went so far as to put forth a theological argument that a group of people, or *Volk*, had the right to live out its calling, even at the expense of loving one’s enemy:

It would be an utter perversion of one’s ethical sensibilities to believe that my first duty is to love my enemy and precisely in doing so surrender my neighbor to destruction... God gave me my mother, my people. For what I have, I thank my people; what I am, I am through my people, and so what I have should also belong to my people; that is the divine order of things, for God created the peoples (Bonhoeffer and Green 371).

In retrospect, one might easily pinpoint this ideology as the root of Nazism and label it as profoundly evil. Bonhoeffer's words, however, are not unlike the words of present-day Christians in America who use their nationalism to justify foreign wars and deny immigrants and refugees entry into their country. It is not hard to imagine a present-day American politician giving a speech with the exact wording Bonhoeffer used in Barcelona, invoking God and love of country to elicit an emotional response from the public. Fear and anger were the driving factors that led to the rise of the Nazis, and fear and anger caused Bonhoeffer to misinterpret the teachings of his faith in order to justify his own nationalism. If Bonhoeffer had stuck with this line of thinking, he would have been another in a long line of German Christians who failed to address the Nazi injustice. Thankfully, Bonhoeffer would come to see the error in his thinking:

Bonhoeffer later recalled his pre-New York career and wrote, "I had not yet become a Christian but, wildly and undisciplined, was my own master. I know that at that time I took personal advantage of the cause of Christ and served my own vanity" (Williams 15).

The balm to soothe Bonhoeffer's wounded nationalism would turn out to be the people of Harlem.

When Bonhoeffer first arrived in New York City to study at Union Theological Seminary in the fall of 1930, he was in a bit of a theological crisis. He had become discontent with German Lutheran churches and with the academic theology he had learned in Berlin, and he carried this discontentment into the churches of New York City and the lecture halls of Union. Bonhoeffer did not have kind words for the theology he encountered in Union, stating in a Christmastime letter, "There is no theology here. Although I am basically taking classes and lectures in dogmatics and philosophy of the religion, the impression is overwhelmingly negative" (Bonhoeffer and Green 310).

Ironically, it would be two fellow seminarians at Union that would aid Bonhoeffer's transformation during his two semesters there. Albert Franklin Fisher, who came from a long line of preachers and was the grandson of a slave, would serve as Bonhoeffer's introduction to Abyssinian Baptist Church and to the streets of Harlem. Because of his relationship with Fisher, "Bonhoeffer encountered Christians aware of human suffering and accustomed to living with the threat of death in a society organized by violent white supremacy" (Williams 22). Without Fisher, Bonhoeffer likely would have never wandered into Harlem, and there would be no story to tell. Bonhoeffer would also befriend a Frenchman named Jean Lasserre who would have significant impact on Bonhoeffer's theological perspective. His emphasis on pacifism and on the Sermon on the Mount would help form the basis of Bonhoeffer's arguments in *Discipleship* and would also inform his work as a pastor and member of the resistance within Nazi Germany.

### *A Theology of Resistance*

In chapter two, Dr. Williams argues that conditions in Harlem were ripe for facilitating the deconstruction of Bonhoeffer's pre-existing theological and nationalistic assumptions. Harlem was a unique melting pot in which the effects of mass migration, changing social conditions, and rapidly degenerating economic conditions combined into one volatile cocktail that put many in a great place of need. At the same time, there was a tremendous amount of cultural development taking place in what has become known as the Harlem Renaissance:

The Harlem Renaissance saw a proliferation of music, art, and literature that coincided with a developing political and theological black self-understanding in the formation of black culture from the Harlem community in Manhattan. It was a

rebirth of blackness transpiring in America – a Renaissance in Harlem...  
Bonhoeffer turned Harlem into an extension of the classroom during his academic  
experience in America (Williams 37).

This cultural renaissance would help shape Bonhoeffer into the man he was at the time of  
his death. During his time in Harlem, Bonhoeffer would develop an affinity for African-  
American spirituals, and, seeing as Bonhoeffer was a gifted musician himself, it is likely  
that he encountered early forms of jazz and other distinct forms of African-American  
music. He also read literature from many of the great writers of the Harlem Renaissance,  
and his consumption of this literature only broadened his perspective.

Another key part of Bonhoeffer's transformation would be the unveiling of  
European colonialism within his faith. Bonhoeffer received his theological training in  
Berlin, and it is easy to see the impact that colonialism and white supremacy had there. In  
Berlin, Bonhoeffer lived comfortably as a benefactor of this white Christianity. In  
Harlem, however, Bonhoeffer experienced the discomfort of being an outsider in a place  
that was full of outsiders. From this outsider's perspective, Bonhoeffer would slowly  
come to recognize his whitewashed Christianity for what it was:

...The theological legacy of modern European imperialism...brought together an  
unholy marriage of Christianity and imperial domination that has endured until  
the present with undying stamina... Human identity and social intimacy were  
reimagined to correspond with a radicalized European Christian worldview,  
making Eurocentric humanity-white supremacy- the God-endorsed norm  
(Williams 47).

Bonhoeffer witnessed the realities of racial segregation, backed up by a tainted form of  
Christianity, and found them unacceptable. He saw how many of his beliefs had been  
used to exploit the poor and marginalize those of different ethnicities. Bonhoeffer would  
also take an ethics course under the tutelage of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr in the spring of

1931 that would further expose him to social and economic issues within America and Harlem. All of these experiences would be vital to Bonhoeffer's transformation.

*Bonhoeffer in the Veiled Corner*

In chapter three, Dr. Williams places significant emphasis on the literature Bonhoeffer encountered in Harlem. Bonhoeffer had the distinct advantage of being dropped into "...a theo-political space for an emerging global discourse on race, religion, and politics" (Williams 53). These discussions had been taking place in the years before Bonhoeffer's arrival, and thus he had the privilege of encountering already-completed works by many great African-American writers and academics.

The Harlem Renaissance featured voices such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and more. Bonhoeffer was a prolific student, and he put in the necessary work to familiarize himself with their writings. Many of these writers used lynching parables to help emphasize their points, and the shock of such stories certainly had tremendous influence on Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer also got to bear witness to the public debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois on how to overcome racial disparities. Du Bois emphasized pride in the race and encouraged direct resistance to racial hatred and segregation. Washington, however, took a more subdued approach. He felt that education and economic prosperity was the right path to take in achieving racial equality, rather than active resistance of Jim Crow Laws. While both men ultimately had the same goal in mind, their differences were the center of a tremendous debate within the Harlem

community, and writing found in Bonhoeffer's notes from that time show he was well informed on the matter:

Bonhoeffer esteemed Du Bois over Booker T. Washington... (Bonhoeffer's) emphasis on Du Bois' race pride is affirming it. This is not surprising, given what he came to learn about the reception of Washington's perspective within the communities of young participants in the Harlem Renaissance, among whom he was gathering friendships... Within the black community at Abyssinian Baptist, in classes at Union, and on campus at Howard, Bonhoeffer learned about the Washington/Du Bois dispute as a contest for the value of black life and the role of black leadership in America (Williams 74).

Bonhoeffer got to bear witness to public discourse on what it meant to be black and how blackness should be lived out in a nation constructed for white people. This argument played out in many of the texts Bonhoeffer would read, and he would eventually write a paper on the literature he read:

In a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, written from Germany in 1933, Bonhoeffer... asked that Niebuhr "please pass along hearty greetings to my friends from that time, particularly Jim Dobrowski (whom I ask to return my essay on Negro literature that he must still have)" ... The impact of that literature on him, and the location of his encounter with it, was undoubtedly transformative for him (Williams 75).

Harlem literature played a substantive role in Bonhoeffer's transformation, and it would eventually work its way into his theological writings. Without the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Bonhoeffer likely would have been a brilliant but marginal Lutheran theologian rather than the man who wrote *Discipleship* and gave his life resisting his own government on behalf of marginalized people.

#### *Christ, Empathy, and Confrontation at Abyssinian Baptist Church*

During the last years of his life, Bonhoeffer would work as one of the leaders of the Confessing Church to resist the combination of church and state and to unify Christians in Germany. At the same time, he was not afraid to call out the Confessing Church for

not take a stronger stance against Nazism. He wanted the church to actively resist Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government, but it refused to do so, frustrating Bonhoeffer and forcing him to forge his own path. As Dr. Williams makes it clear in chapter four, Bonhoeffer had learned this outspoken activism at Abyssinian Baptist under the leadership of Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Powell was a fiery preacher whose strong leadership of Abyssinian and frankness within his community made him a prominent leader of the Harlem Renaissance. When he took the position of pastor of Abyssinian Baptist on New Year's Eve of 1908, the church was not even located in Harlem. In fact, three previous pastors had resigned as a result of failed efforts to move the church. Powell, however, would succeed in getting the church moved, and in 1923 Abyssinian Baptist Church opened its doors in Harlem.

In Harlem, Powell would lead Abyssinian to become a strong voice in the community. When giving public remarks on the issues facing black migrants in Harlem, Powell would call out leaders such as Booker T. Washington for failing to understand the plight of the black workers. He would push his congregation to take an active role – financially and otherwise - in assuaging the struggles of its community. He believed that the church was the center of Christian life and, therefore, the center of its community. To ignore the problems facing those communities would be to ignore the very call placed upon Christian life by God. Powell made these words quite explicit in a newspaper article published in December of 1930 in which he strongly asserted that black churches ought to assist those impacted by the Great Depression or close altogether.

These were teachings that Bonhoeffer, who spent the better part of 6 months attending Abyssinian by his own account, would have heard:

...Powell saw himself as an advocate for “suffering humanity.” Powell understood Christ to be present in the encounter we have with the suffering of the needy. For Powell, Christians must not be complacent or apathetic in this encounter, for to do so would be to ignore the very presence and needs of Christ. Three weeks before Powell wrote his contentious public appeal, he was mobilizing his church to relieve suffering in service to Christ... Bonhoeffer was most likely hearing “the genuine proclamation of the gospel from a Negro” at Abyssinian when Powell preached two consecutive Sunday sermons, the first entitled “A Naked God” and the next one “A Hungry God.” Powell indicated that the suffering and destitute population was a constant subject of his prayers, and his lament to God for the poor returned to him as a directive from God... Bonhoeffer would later make similar admonitions during the confessing church movement in Germany on behalf of the Jews (Williams 101-102).

Powell’s fiery commitment to justice on behalf of his community helped inform Bonhoeffer’s own pastoral work later in his life. Like Powell, Bonhoeffer would make bold ethical claims during the latter part of his career when other pastors in Germany stayed silent. Martin Niemöller, a fellow pastor of the Confessing Church, is often credited with writing the famous poem *First They Came* that laments his inaction in the face of the Nazi machine:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me  
(Niemöller, *Origin of Famous Quotation “First They Came for the Communists...”*).

Bonhoeffer did not have to write a poem lamenting his inaction because he was killed as a result of his action. Instead, he would write a poem entitled *Who Am I* from his cell in Tegel prison which speaks from the perspective of an oppressed individual. Niemöller, to his credit, was also eventually placed in a concentration camp as a result of his beliefs but

was spared execution. One can make a strong case that the significant difference between Bonhoeffer and Niemöller came from Bonhoeffer's experience at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Bonhoeffer got to witness the needs of others being tended to through the work at Abyssinian, and that firsthand experience with the persecuted Christ would be useful at the end of his life. As Dr. Williams succinctly puts it at the end of the chapter, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's formative German nationalist environment had been disrupted by his immersion in a different community" (Williams 105).

### *Christ-Centered Empathic Resistance*

In his fifth and final chapter, Dr. Williams examines the consequences of Bonhoeffer's Harlem transformation. Like the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, Bonhoeffer was at an in-between place when he had a life-changing encounter. To further his connection to Paul, Bonhoeffer's theological transformation would culminate in his being executed by the state. Before death, however, came devotion. As a result of his experience in the midst of Harlem, Bonhoeffer would devote the rest of his life to living out his Christian faith in concrete ways, distinguishing himself as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's greatest theologians.

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, "The problem of what a Christian must do was now paramount... Theology for Bonhoeffer now had to translate into daily, lived obedience to Christ" (Williams 109). This meant living multiple lives and filling roles he had never done to that point. Ironically enough, Bonhoeffer's academic career took a diminished role in his life after his studies at Union. He had initially gone to there in an effort to pass the time before he was old enough to teach at Berlin University, and when he returned, he was given a position as a lecturer that he would hold until it was abruptly

revoked in 1936. Bonhoeffer's tenure as a lecturer, however, happened to coincide with the rise of Nazism among the youth of his time, and so it was destined to come to an end.

In the mean time, Bonhoeffer took up a chaplaincy position that led him into one of the poorest neighborhoods of Berlin. It was there that Bonhoeffer would lead a class of rowdy youths in a confirmation class. By Bonhoeffer's own account, he managed to tame the class by telling them stories about Harlem and the people he encountered there, and after the class was over he continued to maintain relationships with many of his students. He also put together a youth club that helped poor and misfortunate youth who were in a neighborhood called Charlottenburg. The club's work included providing job training, housing, and food for those in need, and the work paralleled the volunteer work

Bonhoeffer would have participated in under the leadership of Rev. Adam Clayton

Powell Sr.:

(Bonhoeffer's) work at Prenzlauer Berg and in Charlottenburg among the poor and unemployed resembled what Powell Sr. was committed to while Bonhoeffer was in lay leadership at Abyssinian. Bonhoeffer's youth group in Berlin and Abyssinian's community house both offered to help the poor and unemployed with free food, employment assistance, meaningful recreational activities, and education. In Charlottenburg, as in Prenzlauer Berg, Bonhoeffer's ministry was inspired by exposure to Christianity in Harlem (Williams 115).

The rise of Nazism, however, would force Bonhoeffer to change course once again. The Aryan Clause was applied to the church, meaning that Jews were not allowed to participate in church life and that the church was subject to Nazi racial laws. As a result of this, Bonhoeffer would leave for London to become the pastor of two expatriate congregations. He would return to Berlin in 1935 to work with the Confessing Church, and his active resistance of the Nazi regime would begin. A movement known as the German Christians had begun working to unify the Protestant church in Germany under

the umbrella of the Nazi regime, and Bonhoeffer became one of its most vocal opponents:

As a result of his time in Harlem, the twenty-seven-year-old Bonhoeffer was clear from the beginning that the mixture of race, nationalism, and religion was lethal. Most of his much-older colleagues within the church resistance movement could not share his insight. Bonhoeffer reasoned that state racism is an error egregious enough to invalidate the legitimacy of a government and to compel the church to speak in opposition (Williams 123).

Bonhoeffer quickly became an active participant in resisting Nazism in the church and in Germany as a whole. His theology and his work were all greatly impacted by this resistance.

Two of Bonhoeffer's greatest works, *Life Together* and *Discipleship*, were published during this period of Bonhoeffer's life and were greatly influenced by the issues of their day. *Discipleship* was written as a direct attack on the concept of cheap grace within the church. In essence, Bonhoeffer was attacking other Christians in Germany who claimed to love Jesus for sitting by idly while their Jewish neighbors were being relentlessly persecuted. Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together*, a treatise on Christian community, as he led an illegal seminary for the Confessing Church in the countryside. It was among this small group of passionate seminarians that Bonhoeffer conceived of a simple vision of Christian community, and the influence of Harlem was still a strong force in his life at this time. Bonhoeffer would often play records he bought of African-American spirituals in Harlem for his seminarians and talk to them about his experiences there. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer advocates for a Christian society that takes an active role in its community. The influence of the Harlem community is evident in Bonhoeffer's work with his seminarians and in the book that was published as a result of that experience.

After the Gestapo shut down Bonhoeffer's seminary, he continued to work with resisting pastors in an effort to stop Nazism from infiltrating the church. He also became involved in efforts to smuggle Jews out of the country, all the while continuing to serve members of his community in a pastoral role. As the World War II broke out, Bonhoeffer's work became increasingly risky, and he would soon become connected to the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer had come to believe that remaining silent in the face of oppression would mean becoming complicit with the oppressor, so he chose to act and called others to do the same. Bonhoeffer outlined a theology of resistance for the church in dire times:

Bonhoeffer listed three possible approaches that the faithful church must consider taking in the current emergency. First, the church can hold this state publicly accountable by questioning the injustice of its behavior towards its Jewish citizens... Second, the church could attend to the victims of the unlawful government... Last... the current crisis may call for the church to take direct political action and declare the illegitimacy of this regime that has become a state of injustice (Williams 124).

Bonhoeffer found himself embodying this theology of resistance, and that work would culminate in his arrest by the Gestapo in 1943. When the plot to assassinate Hitler failed in 1944, Bonhoeffer was assumed to be among its conspirators, and it became clear that he would remain in prison until the end of the war. When the end of the war approached, the Nazis decided to take revenge on the conspirators. In February of 1945, Bonhoeffer was moved to Buchenwald concentration camp before being transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp. He would summarily be executed at dawn on April 4.

### *Conclusion*

Bonhoeffer's execution at the hands of the Nazi regime appeared to have silenced one of the greatest theological minds of the twentieth century. A close look at the

evidence, however, shows that his voice has only gotten louder in the proceeding decades. Bonhoeffer's theological works and life story have made him a hero among evangelical Christians all over the globe. His books are taught in university classrooms and in Sunday morning bible studies. Liberals, conservatives, and moderates all pull from his theology in an effort to support their causes. His greatest work, however, may just be the fact that he used his privilege as a white male to bring light to oppressed and marginalized people.

Like Christ, Bonhoeffer chose to make himself lowly so that oppressed members of society could experience the love of God. He did so not out of obligation but out of a genuine belief that it is the duty of all Christians to love and support those who society deems unworthy. As Dr. Williams states, "Bonhoeffer remains the only prominent white theologian of the twentieth century to speak about racism as a Christian problem" (139). Bonhoeffer's life and work were forever altered by the time he spent in Harlem. Without the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, Abyssinian Baptist Church, and a willingness to engage as an outsider in a community far different from his home, Bonhoeffer would have likely been just another German academic who got swept up in a wave of hatred. Instead, he swam against the current and made issues of race a part of his life's work, lending a voice to the voiceless and ultimately suffering martyrdom on their behalf. He did so joyfully, and this joy points directly to the streets of Harlem

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will discuss the methods of production I used during the creation of this project, including writing screenplay, shooting the film, and choosing music.

#### *Delegation*

Due to the nature of shooting a documentary and the specificity of the subject material, *Communio* was largely a one-man shoot. I acted solely as the director, cinematographer, audio-mixer, and editor of the production, as well as the primary producer. Additionally, my parents served as executive producers, helping me to fund some of filming that required travel. Members of the Baylor Film and Digital Media family helped me in preparation for the production, ranging from help preparing equipment from Bobby Frillou and Ron Garrett to Dr. Joe Kickasola helping me with travel logistics in New York City.

#### *Location*

The film features three distinctive locations – New York City, Berlin, and Waco. The first two locations have obvious connections to the Bonhoeffer story. New York City was the location of Bonhoeffer’s Harlem conversion and holds tremendous weight in the telling of his story. The visuals of New York’s skyline and Harlem’s distinct cultural identity all serve this film a great deal. Berlin, of course, was the epicenter of Bonhoeffer’s life. His family home was there, he did much of his significant theological

work there, and it served as his base of operations while he worked to undermine the Nazi regime. Berlin itself features some iconic imagery such as the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag that helped add visual flair to the film.

Waco features no direct connection to the Bonhoeffer story, even though there is an unusually high amount of Bonhoeffer scholars per capita there. Some indirect connections to the Bonhoeffer story do exist, however. For one, Waco has long been seen as a city that uniquely symbolizes the contemporary relevance of Bonhoeffer's story. For a long time, Waco has been a city representative of racial inequality. The lynching of Jesse Washington in 1916 played a significant role in the cultivation of this image. Recent racial tensions in the United States have sparked renewed interest in Jesse Washington's story, too. Spike Lee's 2018 film *Blackkkklansman* features a lengthy retelling of Jesse Washington's story, bringing Waco back to the forefront of discussions on racial inequality 102 years after the original event. There is a solid chance that Bonhoeffer even read about the lynching. W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent writer and civil rights leader during the time Bonhoeffer was in Harlem, references it in his 1920 short story *Jesus Christ in Texas*, and Bonhoeffer devoured the writings of Du Bois and other prominent black writers of the period while he was in Harlem.

In addition to the lynching of Jesse Washington, Waco is currently undergoing a process of gentrification that contributes to its image as a symbol of racial inequality. Tremendous economic growth spurred by the success of the reality TV show *Fixer Upper* has led to a boom of development in and around the downtown area. Specialty coffee shops and vintage boutiques sit just blocks away project housing and auto body repair shops. A quick drive through the heart of Waco reveals a city deeply divided among racial and socio-economic lines. Filming Waco and all of its history, social tension, and

cultural relevance helped to bring the subject of this documentary into the present day, and it helped add a personal touch to a story that took root in my heart in Waco.

### *Visuals*

Voiceover narration was a very important element of this story. My primary inspiration for the voiceover drew from Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*. The voiceover in that film comes entirely from the words of its subject – James Baldwin. It uniquely blends narration of Baldwin's writings (voiced by Samuel L. Jackson) with Baldwin's actual speaking voice (taken from interviews or public speeches he gave). This approach helps to reveal two sides of Baldwin – the fiery, public Baldwin who by merit of being a self-proclaimed “witness” to the civil rights movement became one of its strongest voices, and the contemplative, often-fearful Baldwin who wrote *Letter from a Region in my Mind*.

It was not practical for me to directly copy the voiceover style of *I Am Not Your Negro* by scripting the film exclusively in Bonhoeffer's words, however. The writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are much more academic in nature than Baldwin's, and, with the exception of a few asides in various letters and writings, there are fewer direct comments on the issue of race. Bonhoeffer's works have also been translated into English from German, and this dampens their effect when spoken. The feeling invoked by *I Am Not Your Negro*'s voiceover, however, is exactly what I intended to capture in my own film. Like Baldwin's writing, the voiceover was written to get to its point with efficiency and with a distinct ability to connect with the heart of the listener. I wanted the tone of the narrator's voice to be direct and calming, as if they were having a quiet yet passionate discussion about the subject with a friend late at night in the middle of a hotel lobby. The

voiceover was written to sound somewhere between a visual essay, a memoir, and a recounting of historical fact. It was important to me that the voiceover served as an emotional spark on the viewer's journey to understanding and acting on racial inequality.

### *Visual Style*

As mentioned earlier in this paper, *Communio* drew heavily from the films of Terrence Malick and his work with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki. Malick and Lubezki worked together to perfect a unique visual style that centers on the use of natural light, a moving camera (always on a gimble or steadicam), and wide-angle lenses. This is a visual style that has appealed to me ever since I laid eyes on it, and I have tried to emulate it in many of my films. An *American Cinematographer* article from August 2011 wrote about their distinctive visual style:

Although there is no written version of the Malick-Lubezki dogma on *Tree of Life*, interviews with the cinematographer and some key collaborators suggest some parameters:

- Shoot in available natural light
- Do not underexpose the negative Keep true blacks
- Preserve the latitude in the image
- Seek maximum resolution and fine grain
- Seek depth with deep focus and stop: “Compose in depth”
- Shoot in backlight for continuity and depth
- Use negative fill to avoid “light sandwiches” (even sources on both sides)
- Shoot in crosslight only after dawn or before dusk; never front light
- Avoid lens flares
- Avoid white and primary colors in frame

- Shoot with short-focal-length, hard lenses
- No filters except Polarizer
- Shoot with steady handheld or Steadicam “in the eye of the hurricane”
- Z-axis moves instead of pans or tilts
- No zooming
- Do some static tripod shots “in midst of our haste”
- Accept the exception to the dogma (“Article E”)  
(*The ASC -- American Cinematographer: Cosmic Questions*)

Some of these rules apply to *Communio* more than others. For example, shooting in backlight did not really work when capturing b-roll of urban landscapes. I wanted the audience to clearly see what I am shooting with very few silhouetted structures. Shooting in available natural light, however, was ideal for *Communio* and generally made the process easier. I did not shoot any interviews for this film, so traveling with lights was unnecessary and impractical. I wanted to capture the locations I shot in in as they actually were, with all their light or lack thereof.

Z-axis camera moves are also a visual flair of Malick’s that I found particularly useful. Documentaries tend to be filled with b-roll, and this film was no exception. Since there are no on-screen interviews and no existing footage of Bonhoeffer to show, there were limited options in terms of what I could put up on the screen. The use of Z-axis camera moves allowed me to avoid the use of photographs throughout my documentary, which I find to be an overused trope. By mounting the camera on a gimble, I was able to move the camera in a variety of directions without having to be tethered to a tripod or having to do lots of preparation to use a dolly or jib. The camera and its field of view were able to go wherever I went.

Some smaller elements of Malick and Lubezki's visual style were also used in the film. For instance, I tried to get as clean of an image as possible, shooting in the highest resolution available and getting little to no grain in the image. While some filmmakers spend all their time trying to get rid of the digital look in their films, I find it to be very pleasing. A sharp, clear image helps the viewer place this story in the present-day, and that was important to me. The use of deep focus was also important, as well. I wanted very little bokeh or soft focus in my images.

### *Music*

In the opening scene of *I Am Not Your Negro*, James Baldwin is shown giving an interview on the Dick Cavett Show. In it, Cavett asks Baldwin if there is any hope for the black man in America. Baldwin responds by eloquently reframing the question. "It's not a question of what happens to the negro here... The real question is what's going to happen to this country..." The interview cuts abruptly, and Buddy Guy's "Damn Right, I've Got the Blues" begins playing over images of riots in Ferguson, Missouri. Images of police in riot gear, protestors being arrested, and even a black cop pressing another black man against the street are shown as they cut to the beat of Guy's driving blues rhythm. The credits then roll, featuring black and white title cards intermixed with images from the civil rights movement. The images, of course, are powerful ones, but the music drives home the point. This is a film about the struggle for black equality, and blues music encapsulates that struggle.

The film ends in a similar manner, cutting from an interview in which Baldwin says the future of the country depends on white people determining why castrating the black man was necessary to the closing credits and Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the

Berry.” This song comes from Kendrick’s masterpiece album “To Pimp A Butterfly”, which deals with the pimping of blackness by the record industry and black artists themselves. In “The Blacker The Berry,” Kendrick manipulates his voice into a coarse, almost-violent yell, ranting about taking pride in his blackness and rejecting the hate he has experienced because of it. Raoul Peck’s choice to end *I Am Not Your Negro* with this particular Kendrick song drives home the point of the film – the black man has had enough, and he refuses to take it any longer.

Music should emphasize the themes of a film. It should bring the emotions of the film to the forefront of the viewer’s brain, allowing the image and its thematic undertones to meld into a more comprehensive understanding of the filmmaker’s vision. Music has played an important role in my own journey, and it also played a significant role in Bonhoeffer’s journey. While Bonhoeffer was in Harlem, he fell in love with African-American spirituals. So much so, in fact, that he ended up buying records of the songs he heard in church and took them back to Germany with him. Later in his life, while he was running an illegal seminary that would eventually be shut down by the Gestapo, Bonhoeffer would play these records for his seminarians. Through the music of the oppressed, Bonhoeffer experienced a new depth to the gospel that he had never felt before.

In the same way that Bonhoeffer played the spirituals that meant so much to him, I wanted to feature some of the music transformed me in this film. Sho Baraka, Kendrick Lamar, and Propaganda are all artists I would have loved to feature. Their music is what would be described as “conscious rap”, or rap that is socially conscious. Spirituals were the music of the misfit and the oppressed in Bonhoeffer’s day, and rap its modern equivalent. Rap pulls much of its influence from the spirituals of yesterday, too, with

artists such as Chance the Rapper and Kanye West continually chasing after the “gospel” sound they grew up hearing in black churches (*Why Kanye West’s ‘The Life Of Pablo’ Is More Gospel Than You Think | Genius*). *Communio* is a film about an unlikely individual finding Jesus by sharing life with the oppressed, and rap music tells the story of the oppressed. Rap music would have made an ideal soundtrack for the film, and I had a few specific songs in mind that I would have liked to license if they had fit within my budget.

### *Casting*

This film features no Bonhoeffer look-alikes or any sort of on-camera interviews, so there was not a typical casting process. I only had to cast the role of the narrator, and this was a very important role to cast. I was not looking for an actor who could do a German accent, as I felt like that would cheapen the voiceover. Instead, I wanted an actor who could subtly manipulate their voice to add emotional depth to the story. Their voice should achieve the same tone that Samuel L. Jackson’s voice in *I Am Not Your Negro* had.

It was important to me that the narrator was a black man or woman. I saw this as an opportunity to artistically represent something that is at the heart of the Bonhoeffer/Harlem story. My intent was not to portray Bonhoeffer as a white savior but rather as a man who found the Gospel by recognizing and discarding all of the flawed privilege he had been afforded as a white, aristocratic male. Bonhoeffer finally found his voice as a theologian and pastor only by listening to the voice of oppressed black people in Harlem and serving oppressed people in his own nation. Through them, Bonhoeffer discovered a new, black Jesus who radically changed his interpretation of the gospel. It was by opening up his heart to this black Jesus, and with black people, that Bonhoeffer

eventually become an advocate and martyr on behalf of oppressed people in his own country. The voice of this black Jesus continued to speak through Bonhoeffer long after he had returned to Berlin, and thus I thought it would be a powerful act of symbolism to have a black individual voice Bonhoeffer.

Dr. Reggie Williams was the most obvious choice to serve as the narrator of this film. He has a distinct speaking voice that would have been perfect for a film like this. Furthermore, he is a black man and has done the most comprehensive research that exist on Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem, and I thought it would have been a great tribute to his research (and an honor to this film) if he were to serve as the film's narrator. Dr. William's travel schedule, however, made this an impossibility, so I instead casted Sam Henderson, a Baylor Theatre and Film and Digital Media professor with whom I maintain a close relationship. Thankfully, Sam shared my passion for the project and met all my necessary requirements for the part.

### *Scriptwriting*

This documentary is unique in that it was entirely scripted (see Appendix A). Anything that is spoken on screen was carefully written out beforehand. The script was written during the filming process. At first, I was unsure of how I wanted the script to be formatted. I thought that film would be told exclusively in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, just like *I Am Not Your Negro* is told exclusively in the words of James Baldwin. I soon learned, however, that this would be impossible. Bonhoeffer wrote about his time in Harlem during and after his time there, leaving clear evidence that Harlem transformed him significantly. He never explicitly said as much, however, and thus it is hard to use his own words to talk about that time. Because of this, I wrestled with

whether or not to use the words of Bonhoeffer in the script at all. It was only through this process of writing and reflecting that I eventually settled in favor of using Bonhoeffer's words in the film, albeit sparingly.

I wanted the primary narrator to tell Bonhoeffer's story in words from an original screenplay, and I wanted Bonhoeffer's letters and theological writings to be read sporadically throughout the film as a sort of secondary narrative. Bonhoeffer's books *Discipleship* and *Life Together* serve as a theological treasure-trove of information inspired by his experience in Harlem, so I thought these texts will serve as valuable supplements to the telling the Harlem story. Some of these quotes ultimately ended up working their way into the script through paraphrasing and allusion.

Another important note about the screenplay is its format. The average narrative screenplay features lines of dialogue separated by screen directions for the actors. There is no on-screen action, and hence screen direction is unnecessary. Because of this, I used a two-column script format in lieu of the traditional screenplay format. The right column featured dialogue from the narrator, and the left column featured specific images that will tie into each line of dialogue. While I had no intention of planning out every specific shot of the movie, there were a few specific images I had in mind that ultimately made it into the film with their associated images.

### *Assembly*

The assembly of all the elements in this film was part of what makes the project so unique. Editing is another area of filmmaking where I pulled significant influence from Terrence Malick, and documentary filmmaking plays right into that influence. When Malick edits, he will often do so with the dialogue muted and with music playing

in the background. Malick's films are often symphonic, featuring great choral numbers and musical movements from the likes of Bach and Beethoven. He cuts his movies to the rhythm of their scores, and that is more or less what I attempted to do. I tried to cut my footage to music that helps inspire each scene, regardless of whether or not that music eventually made it into the film. Since I knew that my final edit would be around 15 minutes long, my initial cut of b-roll was around 20-30 minutes long. This cut was divided into three main segments – New York, Berlin, and Waco.

Malick frequently takes staged footage of actors and cuts them together as if they were filmed haphazardly on the street, much like a documentary. This is most obvious in Malick's oft-panned film *To The Wonder*. There is a sequence in which a priest (played by Javier Bardem) recites a prayer from St. Patrick's Breastplate while he ministers to sick and lonely people onscreen. Much like a documentary, the voiceover takes place off screen, and the footage often cuts to the music. On-screen dialogue fades in and out, sometimes taking place onscreen, sometimes not. What makes the sequence especially unique, however, is that the footage is not staged. The individuals Bardem interacts with are not actors, and the stories they tell are real. He stays in character throughout their conversations, lending the narrative a profound amount of humanity in the midst of an abstract narrative that focuses mostly on a couple's broken relationship. *To The Wonder* is no documentary, but it borrows heavily from elements of documentary filmmaking, but its motifs can be used in one. Malick's approach to editing, with his unique combination of documentary-style footage, non-diegetic music, montage editing, and voiceover, proved ideal for documentary filmmaking.

### *Conclusion*

Using the methodology listed above, I strived to make a film that told the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's transformation in Harlem in the most effective and poetic manner possible. It was my hope that these methods would help me to craft a story full of conviction that would resonate with audiences of all shapes and colors.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Reflecting on the Process

#### *Introduction*

Upon the completion of *Communio*, there was a lot to reflect on. The entire process – from writing the script to production to working with a committee – came with a number of lessons that I will carry with me to future projects. Making *Communio* also taught me a lot about change – both the change a film undergoes as it is made, and the change a filmmaker undergoes as they make a new film. I underwent a lot of change throughout the project, and making *Communio* was a huge lesson in what kind of filmmaker I am continually becoming.

#### *Reflecting on Preproduction, Production, and Postproduction*

Making *Communio* was a much longer process than I would have preferred it to be. The process of writing started in the latter part of the fall semester, with me working alone on a few drafts of the script before Matthew Aughtry jumped into the process. Matthew, who received a graduate degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and is an ordained minister and current member of the graduate film program at Baylor, proved invaluable to the writing process. We met a few times face to face, discussed what the script should be like, and each wrote on our own time. I wrote a few things and did not like them, and Matthew sent me a few more things that I did not like. After another face-to-face meeting in October, however, we had a breakthrough. The script as written stands came largely from a single writing session in which Matthew wrote from Bonhoeffer's

perspective, tracing the Bonhoeffer journey from start to finish as if Bonhoeffer were writing in a journal or one of his theological texts. This document became the basis for the film's voiceover, and many of the lines remain untouched in the final draft. I revised some of the lines and added a few new ones before recording the voiceover, and further revisions were made during the multiple voiceover sessions I had with Sam Henderson. Sam brought invaluable expertise to the revisions as well, as his experience as both an actor and as a filmmaker provided a fresh perspective. While the tweaking of lines continued up until the last voiceover session, assembling the script ultimately proved to be a smooth process.

I started production of the film on October 19, 2018, during Baylor's fall break when I traveled to New York City with my younger sister and captured b-roll throughout the city, and I did not officially wrap production until Martin Luther King, Jr. Day on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019 when I filmed b-roll in Waco and on the Baylor campus. That means production took exactly three months, which was way too long for my tastes. I prefer to shoot a film on consecutive days or within the span of a single month rather than spread the project out over a number of months, but unfortunately travel and school limitations prevented this. Of course, I did not film consistently during those three months, but to remain "in production" for such a length of time added a significant strain that I was not expecting. First and foremost, there is the issue of remembering to use the same gear during each shooting session, and there is an even greater issue of remembering to keep shooting style consistent throughout the project. The latter one was particularly tough for me. After I returned from New York, I was rather disappointed with some of the footage I shot. I did not linger on some of the subjects I filmed for as long as I wished I had, and

my footage of Abyssinian Baptist Church – the pivotal place in the Bonhoeffer/Harlem story – was manageable at best. A lot of this had to do with the equipment I used. I was using a handheld gimbal which I had very little experience with, and that caused some of my camera movements to be a bit sloppy. Furthermore, the camera I was given by the department for filming – the Canon 5D – had some limitations in terms of dynamic range and color profile. While my footage was certainly workable, I was a little disappointed with the initial results, and there are a few shots in the final edit that I wish I could redo. Perhaps all of my prior work on cinema cameras such as the RED EPIC and the Canon C300 spoiled me.

Because of these early problems, I had to carry those limitations with me during the latter instances of shooting, and keeping the visual style consistent proved to be tough. Camera movements had to be consistent with the ones in previous filming sessions, and I could not suddenly rid myself of the gimbal for the latter sessions. Despite this, I think the film may be a success in large part because of my ability to adapt to these limitations, but it would have been easier to cope with such technical problems if production lasted only a few days rather than over the course of a few shooting days spread out over the span of three months.

Another issue with making a documentary-style project over the course of several months was the issue of producing itself. I served as my own producer throughout the project, with my parents stepping in as executive producers at times to cover travel expenses to Germany, as well as transportation, meals, and other logistics. Producing a project with travel requires a lot of legwork that moved beyond my prior experience. There were the logistics of arranging the trip itself, which included scheduling a travel

date and purchasing plane tickets, arranging for transportation, researching filming locations in advance, pre-arranging all of the necessary gear, and arranging for a place to stay in location. The issue of housing ultimately proved to be a non-issue in both New York and Berlin. Thanks to Joe Kickasola, head of the Baylor in New York film program, I was able to secure free housing for my sister and I for the duration of our trip to New York. The apartment we stayed in was within walking distance of the Queensboro Plaza Station, giving us access to much of the city with no hassle. Similarly, my dad and I were able to stay with family friends while in Berlin, getting rid of any housing expenditures we would have needed to pay out of pocket and providing us with a point of contact in the city that proved beneficial. Other situations, such as packing, renting gear, and more, took a little more effort on my part to arrange and were all on me to handle. In the end, all of these things went off without a hitch, but I learned that I need to start working on these things early and to plan for contingency.

A final issue with production proved to be recording the voiceover. In a film that tells its entire story with voiceover, it was important to make sure that the voiceover sounded natural, and this was way harder than it should have been. During our first recording session, the audio quality was okay, but the tone of the performance ended up not matching the overall tone of the edit, forcing me to record a second session. The second session proved much better in terms of performance, but the sound quality was abysmal. There was lots of noise detectable in the recording booth, and all throughout the session we could hear people talking in adjacent offices, banging noises up against the wall, and more. Sam gave a much more subdued performance the second time around, so I had to increase the gain on the microphone in order to pick up his voice clearly, and this

led to all sorts of digital noise in the audio recordings. Matthew and I both did some post work on the audio to try and salvage it, but it was simply too atrocious to use in the film. As a result, I ended up paying Jeremy Culver, an FDM graduate who works professionally as a sound mixer, to drive to Waco and help me record voiceover a third time. Thankfully, Sam was gracious enough to give me more of his time, and we were able to get the voiceover recorded without a hitch (minus a few minor sound interruptions from adjacent sound booths in the library). Still, this process taught me that it is best to just work with an expert who knows what they are doing from the start, and not to rely on a second-rate equipment to get good audio.

Working with a committee to finalize the edit was also a new and challenging experience. I have done freelance work in the past that required me to screen projects for a client who then makes changes, but this was somehow more challenging. In that sort of work, I accept that the decisions of the client are final, as the work is ultimately for their use anyway. In my personal work, however, I often refrain from getting too much outside input for fear of getting bogged down in post, a problem that happens to me way too often. I usually seek out input on the initial screenplay and for elements such as costume design and characterization, and I often love to delegate tasks and be hands off on traditional narrative projects, meaning I let the DP light the scene, let wardrobe person dress the actors, etc. Even in post, I like to delegate when I can (my most recent fictional short involved an outside editor doing most of the cutting before I jumped in for the final polish). Despite that, it is difficult for me to verbally justify a filmmaking decision once I have made it, and working with a committee challenged my general-unwillingness to change or explain decisions I have already made.

The vast majority of the notes I got from the committee were good, such as the need to commit fully to the abstract narrative and to cut certain elements from the beginning and the end. I took these changes to heart and used them to improve my edit. There were other notes, however, that I was unsure what to do with, and this left me in a state of uncertainty about the project. For example, I got three contradictory notes on what to do with the set pieces in the film that were used to signify the start and end of each segment of the film. One member of the committee said they needed to go, a second said they needed to be amended, and a third had no opinion. This is not to pin any sort of blame on the committee, as the notes were obviously well intentioned and came from years of experience with storytelling. My thought process simply gets bogged down if there are too many notes. In that sense, I can understand why filmmakers like Terrence Malick and David Lynch have largely shied away from justifying their work after it is finished – because it’s hard!

While working with a committee proved challenging, it was a necessary and beneficial experience. The committee helped me to channel my passion for the subject material into something concrete and even encouraged me to fully embrace the abstract narrative that I naturally trended towards. Having that sort of input from individuals who have been around the block was encouraging and ultimately helped make to make *Communio* a better film.

### *Reassessing Communio's Influences*

When I wrote a prospectus for *Communio*, I described it as a “documentary” about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Having gone through the process of making the film, I can now say without a doubt that this film is as much of a filmic meditation on Bonhoeffer’s

theological translation as it is a documentary. The film has a different tone than a traditional documentary, but the end product is one that is still relatively close to the influences I initially cited.

When reassessing my cited influences, I noticed that I stuck to them quite well. If the film feels different than a traditional documentary, it is largely due to the combination of all the separate abstract influences into a cohesive whole. When filming b-roll for the documentary, I pulled heavily from Terrence Malick's impromptu filming style. I put the camera on a gimbal, used only the light that was available, and I often found myself drawn to more abstract representations of the subject I was capturing. In the same way that Malick often pans the camera away from an actor to chase a butterfly or film wind blowing through grass, I often found myself filming Bonhoeffer-related sites in a way that emphasized the sky or the space surrounding them. I did not care to tell a coherent narrative by visually indicating what each subject was. Some sites, like Abyssinian Baptist Church, are clearly marked with a shot of a sign on the exterior of the building, while others, such as the Bonhoeffer Haus in Berlin (at which Bonhoeffer wrote *Discipleship* and was later arrested by the Gestapo) are given no demarcation as to what they are. I also chose to abstain from using text titles within the frame to indicate each place, either. I wanted to avoid the cinematic cliché of over-explaining everything to my audience, and I feel that titles scattered throughout the film would ruin the pure cinematic experience. This is also a method used by Malick. He does not guide his audience from one scene into the next. Malick's films jump locations and encompass wide breadths of time with little explanation, running with the expectation that the audience is actively engaged with the film not just at a narrative level, but at an emotional and spiritual level,

too. Malick expects his audience to work into their cinematic experience, and I expect the same from my audience.

Werner Herzog's stylistic influence on the current version of the film may be harder to discern more so than Malick's, but I still stuck close to the heart of Herzog's thematic and stylistic musings. Like my own film, Herzog uses music to invoke a feeling that permeates the heart of whatever subject material he is dealing with. Herzog's music (like that in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*) is often some sort of Gregorian choir or folk music, whereas mine ended up being black gospel music (courtesy of Baylor's Black Gospel Music Restoration Project) and Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. To me, this music captures the spirit of Bonhoeffer's spiritual transformation. Wagner represents German nationalism, while black gospel music is representative of Bonhoeffer's encounter with Christ in the midst of a black church in Harlem. Bonhoeffer's own love of spirituals – and his willingness to transport physical copies of his favorite songs back to Germany after his time in Harlem was done – shows the significant impact music can have when invoking an emotional or spiritual connection. This is something I tried to invoke through my own his of music

Finally, Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* had a heavy influence on this project and served as the greatest indicator of what the project would become. Like *I Am Not Your Negro*, *Communio* tells its story in the subject's own words (though my script paraphrases actual Bonhoeffer texts and letters rather than quotes them directly). In *I Am Not Your Negro*, the narration quotes an unfinished book by James Baldwin, as well as excerpts from *Letter from a Region in my Mind* and other Baldwin writings. The point of the narration is not to fill the viewer's mind with facts about Baldwin (though there are

some brief autobiographical narrations). Rather, the narration is intended to invoke an understanding of his work. In *I Am Not Your Negro*, Baldwin elaborates substantially on the sociological issue of race and identity; in *Communio*, the exposition is largely theological. Bonhoeffer wrestled the clash between his childhood nationalism and his evolving theology, ultimately dispensing with his nationalistic Lutheranism in favor of an ecumenical theology. The narration in *Communio* traces this thought process from Bonhoeffer's childhood all the way to his imprisonment by the Gestapo, just as the narration in *I Am Not Your Negro* traces Baldwin's journey from his childhood in Harlem to his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

The convergence of all of these different elements – which largely allude to feelings and ideas rather than directly invoke facts – lead me directly to a documentary that reads more like a poem than a true documentary. I found myself chasing a feeling throughout this production – the feeling of wonderment at being completely and utterly changed by an encounter with Christ in the other. In his book *Transcendental Style and Film* (a book that I was reading during the production of this project), Paul Schrader states that the role of the artist is to take experience, translate it into form, and then use that form to generate a new experience for the participant. The author can never translate their own experience to someone else; they can only turn that experience into a piece of art or an expression that may or may not create a similar experience in the participant. The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Harlem resonated deeply within me. It made me feel a sort of love that I can only describe as divine. It is the kind of story that one hears and is profoundly changed by, and I found myself not wanting to retell the story piece by piece,

but to express the way the story made me feel so that others would search for that same feeling.

There is one notable deviation within the film from the original cited influences, and this is the use of historical footage throughout the film. This was born out of discussions I had with Matthew and others during the early drafts of the edit. I was told that many of film's visuals were inaccessible to the audience because they may not know the significance of each site. While I was not concerned with explaining every visual in the film, I knew I had to find some way for the audience to contextualize them for the audience, especially for the segment of the film that takes place in Germany. Matthew recommended I use historical footage from the famous Nazi propaganda *Triumph of the Will* (a film that is now in the public domain) to show Germany in Bonhoeffer's time. He showed me scenes from Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* in which Tarkovsky utilizes historical footage along with sound design to create a distinct feeling in the midst of a larger narrative. I took footage from *Triumph of the Will*, as well as stock footage of the Holocaust and the German blitzkrieg of the Netherlands, and combined them into a dramatic sequence. My intent in using this footage was to showcase the result of the nationalistic theology Bonhoeffer espoused before his Harlem conversion and contrast it with the present-day visuals of Berlin. While Bonhoeffer would ultimately come to resist the Nazis and their ideology, many other Christians never underwent the conversion he did. Instead, they supported the Nazi cause, resulting in the deaths of countless millions. In the present-day United States, many Christians espouse a similar form of nationalistic theology, and I wanted to create an emotional link between the voiceover that presents that theology and the imagery that shows its horrific consequences.

In addition to pulling influence from *The Mirror*, I also pulled some influence from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return*, particularly *Part 8*. The episode is cinematic storytelling at its finest and would be impossible to describe via print, as even a visual experience of the episode is almost incomprehensible. The episode essentially frames the origin story of an evil source known as "Bob" through the first nuclear bomb test in the desert during 1945. The episode then delves into a series of abstract images, surreal sounds, and horrifying visuals. The whole episode is a visceral experience that leaves the viewer both utterly exhausted and craving more. The atomic blast sequence in *Part 8* left a heavy mark on me, and I wanted to create that sort of feeling in my audience when they watched the historical footage segment of my film.

Because of this, I constructed the scene from the soundscape up, finding sounds online and arranging them into a segment that created an emotional response in me before finally pairing up images to the sounds. This was not something I planned at all; rather, it was one of those creative that comes in the midst of the creation of a work of art that is unexpected but welcomed with open arms. Despite not planning it, that segment is arguably the part of the film I am most proud of.

### *Conclusion*

Upon examining *Communio*, it was easy to trace the line of thinking from its sources to its final product. Terrence Malick's ponderous camera, Werner Herzog's emotional use of music, and *I Am Not Your Negro*'s reflective voiceover all are evident within the project. Additional influences, such as David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return* and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*, came during postproduction and helped supplement the other influences. Ultimately, the process of starting with a set of influences and

committing to their style was a productive one. I learned that the blending of cinematic styles requires nuance and might create an end product that is different than one might have originally expected. This is not bad; it is just the nature of creating art. The project changes and evolves as the artist changes and evolves. Still, being aware of one's influences when creating a film helps keep the project from having an inconsistent style.

Concerns were raised in the committee about an audience's ability to connect with the material. While I believed that the audience could connect with the material despite the abstract narrative, I understood these concerns, and this led to the creation of a supplemental document intended to accompany the film when it screens for large audiences (See Appendix B). The document features short paragraphs explaining each segment of the film, as well as photographs, recommended reading, and some biographical information. The document is intended to serve as a sort of "next step" for anyone who might want to know more about the Bonhoeffer and Harlem story.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

The following appendix is a copy of the original draft the screenplay for *Communio*. Final revisions were done during the recording process and are not included in this script.

Thesis Film

Written by  
Matthew Aughtry  
&  
Christian Oliveira

Second Draft  
December 31, 2018

Black Jesus - Screenplay

FADE IN:

Black

1945

A DARK ROOM WITH A TABLE, A  
CHAIR, A SMALL LAMP, AND A  
RADIO.

A man walks in, sits down  
at the radio, and turns it  
on. A radio broadcast  
begins.

RADIO

We now take you live to a special  
BBC broadcast in London of the  
memorial service for German  
theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.  
Reverend Bonhoeffer was killed by  
the Nazi regime on April 9 at  
Flossenbürg Concentration for his  
involvement in the failed plot to  
assassinate Adolf Hitler. Just 39  
years of age, Reverend Bonhoeffer  
is known for writing The Cost of  
Discipleship and Life Together, and  
was a key member of the Confessing  
Church, an effort to keep the  
German Christianity separate from  
the Nazi regime. A brilliant  
student, Bonhoeffer earned his PhD  
in Berlin by the age of 24 before  
spending two semesters at Union

(MORE)

RADIO (cont'd)

Theological Seminary in NYC. While in New York, Bonhoeffer fell in love with gospel music. Please enjoy as we play one of his favorite songs for you before taking you to the memorial service...

Music begins to play as the man sits in the darkness.

FADE TO BLACK

TITLE

"The Young Theologian: Bonhoeffer in Harlem

FADE IN:

BONHOEFFER'S DESK IN GERMANY. ON THE DESK RESTS SOME PAPERS, A COPY OF THE BIBLE, A PHOTOGRAPH OF HIS ELDEST BROTHER

It is written that there is no greater love than to be willing to sacrifice oneself for for thy neighbor. But who is my neighbor?

The candle blows out.

BONHOEFFER'S BROTHER

My brother.

GERMAN FLAG

My fatherland.

REICHSTAG

BERLIN AIRPORT

EAST BERLIN CROSSWALK

The land that gave me life.

BERLIN TRAINS ARRIVING

The land that nurtured me. Shaped

SNOW-COVERED LANDSCAPE

me into a man.

NATURE SHOTS

The land my God has given me.

BONHOEFFER'S CHILDHOOD HOME

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.

A BEAUTIFUL WINTER GARDEN	A generous inheritance. A gift from the Lord.
PEOPLE WALKING DOWN THE STREET	How can I love that which has not been given to me?
BERLIN WALL	
US/MEXICO BORDER	How can I love that which I do not know? I cannot. Such a love is mere abstraction. Platitudes from academics who know not love.
GERMAN BIBLE	Is this not why Christ was scorned?
The pages slowly turn as the voiceover continues.	The stumbling block of God made man. Born of one mother. Raised in a single village. A man from a chosen people, at an appointed time.
SIGN SAYING AMERICA FIRST	A man who loved <i>His</i> nation, his people. There was only one Peter. One John. One Martha and one Mary. One Lazarus over whose grave he wept. He did not weep for the death of foreign men but for the death of this one man, a man of his own soil, his own blood, his volk.
BEAUTIFUL B-ROLL OF BERLIN	This is our calling. This is what it means to love thy neighbor as thyself. We must never turn a blind eye to the needs of our countrymen (MORE)

RADIO (cont'd)

for the sake of those we will never know. To love fully is to be fully known. Therefore, we may only love what we are capable of knowing. We must give thanks for the land of our birth, for our homes, for our family, for our fatherland, our volk.

FADE OUT

TITLE

"The View from Below: Bonhoeffer in Berlin"

BONHOEFFER'S DESK IN NEW YORK - MINIMALIST, COVERED IN NOTES. A GRAMOPHONE SOFTLY PLAYS GOSPEL MUSIC (SOUND CUE)

Have this mind among you that was also in him. Though he possessed all, he did not cling to it. He emptied himself. Becoming nothing. Choosing slavery. Dying. A torturous death. A public lynching. Where can he be found? That ragged wanderer who comforts the stranger. Have we caught him? He who had neither hole nor nest. Can we entice him with gold or riches? No. He is not here.

MANHATTAN

The skyline comes into view from the water

He is risen. We can only love that which we know. So we choose to wallow in ignorance. The light came (MORE)

VARIOUS IMAGES OF HARLEM

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL JR. BLVD.

RADIO (cont'd)

down, yet we have loved the  
 darkness. Who is my neighbor? The  
 one I know, so I decide not to  
 know. To cut myself off from  
 everything unfamiliar until, at  
 last, I am left with only myself.  
 To loosen my grip on that which is  
 mine, to let go of everything, even  
 myself, there is no greater fear  
 than this, and perfect fear drives  
 out love.

VARIOUS PEOPLE STARING INTO  
 THE CAMERA

A whisper from behind the eyes of  
 the other. The holy wanderer seen  
 in the faces of the orphan, the  
 widow, the prisoner, the stranger.  
 To know people acquainted with pain  
 is to encounter a hidden kingdom.  
 Invisible, yet more real than  
 reality itself.

PEOPLE WALKING DOWN THE  
 STREETS OF HARLEM

RIVERSIDE CHURCH  
 COLOMBIA UNIVERSITY  
 STREET IMAGES OF NEW YORK

Who is my neighbor? I no longer see  
 them. I restrict access to roads,  
 ban them from my school, my  
 community. I know not my neighbor  
 because a wall that prevents me  
 from seeing those on the other  
 side.

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY      I profess my hope, my faith in a  
new dawn, only to draw the curtains  
and sleep in a fortress of my  
making.

ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH      Yet, light breaks through, as it  
always does, seeping through cracks  
in the walls I have built.  
Displacing my self-centered world.

IMAGES OF WALLS      It is precisely when the light  
breaks through that I am faced with  
A SLEDGEHAMMER RESTS IN THE GRASS      a choice - repair the wall, or tear  
it down.

FADE OUT

TITLE  
"Tearing Down the Wall: Bonhoeffer Returns to Germany"

A BAREBONES DESK, LOOSE      They lynched him on tree just  
PAPERS AND A LEATHER      outside the city walls. The holy  
JOURNAL SCATTERED ON IT.      made flesh, killed by the state.

PRISON BARS CAST SHADOWS ON      Therefore, let us join him there.  
THE DESK.

The sound of footsteps  
echo, the sound of shouting  
and an execution echo in  
the distance.

A ROPE IS HUNG OVER A TREE      Let us bear witness to the cause of  
redemption. Let us shed the  
vestments of academia and go forth  
into the world. Let us leave the  
lecture halls and the chapels and  
the workplaces and walk amongst one  
(MORE)

RADIO (cont'd)

another. Let us strive to know and  
to be fully known.

A TIRE SWINGS FROM THE TREE  
A FATHER AND SON PLAY ON  
THE SWING

We are all known by the fruit our  
love bears, and greater love has no  
one than to lay down their life for  
their neighbor. And who is my  
neighbor? The one I willingly enter  
into life with.

PEOPLE LOOKING INTO THE  
CAMERA

This is a choice. The only choice.  
Safety in isolation, or the risk of  
a life exposed. To walk alongside  
the Holy Wanderer, open to others.  
Open to life. For me, this is the  
end - the beginning of life.

## APPENDIX B

The following appendix contains a supplemental document to be included with screenings of *Communio*.





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## *About the Film*

*The genesis of Communion started in 2016 when director Christian Oliveira read a biography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer that briefly mentioned the influence the Harlem renaissance had on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This merged two areas of interest for Christian — racial reconciliation and theology — and so he had to learn more. Soon, the idea for Communion was born, and Christian decided to make Communion as part of his Masters thesis.*

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## Part 1

Part one of *Communio* traces Dietrich Bonhoeffer's early theological thinking and brings to light his soon-to-be-discarded German nationalism. Bonhoeffer was first and foremost a good German, and during the early parts of his academic career he came up with a theological justification for the Volk-centered ideology that would later be exploited by the Nazis to gain political power. Reggie Williams cites sermons Bonhoeffer gave to a congregation he pastored in Barcelona, Spain, as the prime example of this thinking.

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## Part 2

Part two of *Communion* deals with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spiritual awakening during fellowship at Union Theological Seminary from 1930-1931. Bonhoeffer was dissatisfied with the theology he found at Riverside Church (the church of choice for many at Union) and was instead led into Harlem by his friend Al Fisher, a black student who came from a long line of preachers. Fisher took Bonhoeffer to Abyssinian Baptist Church, and it was there that Bonhoeffer would encounter Christianity as he'd never seen it. Bonhoeffer became an active member of the church and engaged with much of the black literature and culture that came out of the Harlem Renaissance.

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## Part 3

*Part three of Communion portrays Bonhoeffer's theological mindset at the end of his life. Over a decade removed from his experience in Harlem, Bonhoeffer had followed a path that had led him into the ecumenical movement and as a leading Christian voice on behalf of persecuted Jews. His vocal dissent led him to lead illegal seminaries, work as a spy, and, ultimately, into a vast conspiracy against the life of Adolf Hitler.*

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## Recommended Reading

For more on the subject of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his spiritual transformation in Harlem, the filmmaker recommends reading Bonhoeffer's *Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* by Dr. Reggie Williams. This book served as the primary inspiration for *Commencio* and contains a great wealth of background information. Eberhard Bethge's biography *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* serves as the most comprehensive written account of Bonhoeffer's life story, and Bonhoeffer's own books *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* provide great insight into Bonhoeffer's theological perspective. Lastly, the filmmaker wants the reader to know that many people want Bonhoeffer to fit all sorts of agendas, political and otherwise. The best thing to do is read a multitude of varying sources on Bonhoeffer and to draw one's own conclusions on who he was.

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IM WIDERSTAND GEGEN  
DIKTATUR UND TERROR  
GABEN IHR LEBEN FÜR  
FREIHEIT RECHT UND  
MENSCHENWÜRDE

PFARRER  
D. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER  
ADMIRAL  
WILHELM CANARIS  
HAUPTMANN d. R.  
LÜDWIG GEHRE  
GENERALMAJOR  
HANS OSTER  
GENERAL DR. PHIL.  
D. FRIEDRICH VON RABENAU  
GENERALSTABSRICHTER  
DR. KARL SACK  
HAUPTMANN d. R.  
DR. THEODOR STRÜNCK  
ERMORDET AM 9. APRIL 1945

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## *Notable Visits in Commemio*

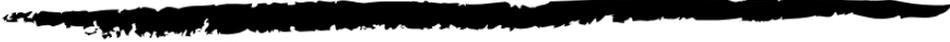
*Part 1: the Berlin Olympiastadion, at which the notorious 1936 Olympics were hosted by the Nazis, the Bonhoeffer Haus, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote The Cost of Discipleship and was arrested by the Gestapo, Platform 17, at which over 50,000 Berlin Jews were deported to concentration camps, the Reichstag, House of the Wannsee Conference, where the Nazi government met to plan out the Final Solution, The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a memorial in Berlin that memorializes Jews killed during the holocaust, the Berlin Wall, the Brandenburg Gate.*

*Part 2: the Brooklyn Bridge, Union Theological Seminary, where Bonhoeffer studied for two semesters, the Riverside Church, a church that Bonhoeffer attended before attending Abyssinian Baptist, the Harlem YMCA, where Bonhoeffer had membership during his time at Union Abyssinian Baptist Church, the largest black Baptist church in Harlem which Bonhoeffer attended and taught Sunday school at.*

*Part 3: Flossenbury Concentration Camp, where the Nazis executed Bonhoeffer, Baylor University, Platform 17.*

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## *About the Filmmaker*

*Christian Oliveira is a writer, director, and producer from the thriving metropolis of Hodley, Texas. He is currently pursuing a graduate degree at Baylor University and directs short films every chance he can get. He cites David Lynch, Terrence Malick, and Denis Villeneuve among his influences.*





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