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Book Review: Awake in Gethsemane: Bonhoeffer and the Witness of Christian Lament

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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Awake in Gethsemane: Bonhoeffer and the Witness of Christian Lament, by Tim Judson. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2023. 220 pages, \$70.

Reviewer: Myles Werntz

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for such a short life, continues to offer theological wisdom—on Christian opposition to tyranny, on the doctrine of the church, on ecology, and on community, to name just a few recent works. Tim Judson’s work picks up a neglected thread within his corpus—Christian lament—and explores how lament might inform our theology, our ethics, and our liturgical gatherings. Lament pervades the Scriptural canon, and its presence is something for us to take up more seriously, Judson contends, with Bonhoeffer’s unity of theology, ethics, and liturgy as his signal contribution. Lament is a surprisingly underexplored topic, Judson notes, not only because of its prevalence within Scripture, but its prevalence within Christian tradition as well. Both Old and New Testament prioritize corporate lament, as did numerous figures in the early church through the Reformation. Liberation theologians offered retrieval which explicitly connected liturgical lament to ethics, with Bonhoeffer offering a full-blown move in that direction.

Part One sets the stage for building a contemporary account of Christian lament, explicating these three dimensions of theology, ethics, and liturgy in turn. As Judson notes, this division is artificial, but helpful for the reader to see the parts of an intricate whole. Because church and world are constituted together, discussions of how we think theologically about lament, respond morally to it, and employ it in worship occur together for Bonhoeffer. Chapter One invites us to consider that Christ’s revelation in the world conditions what lament is: that Christ is who names what we should mourn and how. Our solidarity with the suffering follows from this Christological model, joining with the suffering of others as Christ

joined with the suffering of creation. Chapter Two contemplates the ethics of this proposal, arguing that lament is that which enables the church to discern its responsibilities in the world (69), as a sociopolitical act of witness to Christ's presence in a suffering world. Chapter Three invites the reader to conform our acts of worship to this Christological reality, worked out in church community and throughout creation.

The remainder of the book delves into particular questions surrounding lament. Chapter Four offers guidance with respect to lament's normativity, and how God's providence and our silence before God play into the practice of lament. In opposition to a therapeutic approach, lament does not serve the psychological well-being of the believer, but draws us deeper into God's own presence and call. Chapter Five turns toward questions of penitence, and how lament invites a church to retell its own story in more honest ways, that lament is not an add-on to a church's story, but part of how it reclaims a true relationship to Christ in the world.

The book draws deeply from Bonhoeffer's corpus, demonstrating the ways that lament is built on Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ as the one who is present in both church and world, such that truly being the church involves our being conformed to those things which Christ cares for. So far, so good, and Judson is to be commended for excavating this aspect of Bonhoeffer's corpus. The next step, however, is to begin asking about how lament operates in a church over time, for there are always those to mourn with, for the church is not only a place of entering into Christ's suffering but Christ's resurrection as well. Bonhoeffer is right to warn us about passing over Christ's death and jumping too quickly over the suffering world, but expanding Judson's work might involve asking what resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit might mean for how we lament.

For if the Spirit is the one who both makes possible Christ's death and resurrection, and comes to the church following the ascension, then lament for Bonhoeffer might take on additional textures than those of mourning and penitence, but perhaps insurrections of joy, building where good things have been torn down, or planting where desolation has occurred. Judson has done Christians a great service in contributing to the literature surrounding lament and its use, and there is more yet to be recovered for churches seeking to be in solidarity with the suffering, and witnesses to the resurrection that comes therein.

Myles Wertz (PhD, Baylor University) is an associate professor of theology and Director of Baptist Studies in the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. He is the author or editor of several books, including *Bodies of Peace* and *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence*.