

## On Reading Bonhoeffer's Spiritual Classic, *Discipleship*

### HISTORY OF THE TEXT

Originally published in German in 1937 as *Nachfolge* ("Following after" [Christ]), *Discipleship* was the first of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's books to be published in English translation. Endowed with the catchy title, *The Cost of Discipleship*, the book appeared in 1948 in abridged form as a collaborative effort initiated by Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law (married to Bonhoeffer's twin sister, Sabine), Gerhard Leibholz, who also wrote an introductory "Memoir" that placed the book in its biographical and historical context. Bishop George Bell of Chichester, Bonhoeffer's closest friend from Great Britain and confidant during the church struggle, contributed the Foreword. The American edition, enriched by Reinhold Niebuhr's preface, was published by Macmillan Company a year later. This edition was also abridged. To the dismay of scholars the abridged versions had omitted ten sections of Bonhoeffer's original German text.

Those sections were restored in subsequent publications beginning with the SCM edition of 1959 and that of the

Macmillan Company in 1960 as well as the paperback editions in 1963 (Macmillan) and 1964 (SCM). In 1995, Simon and Schuster purchased the rights for its Torchback paperback edition. Although Irmgard Booth had revised Reginald Fuller's original translation for the editions of 1959 and 1960, from their inception, all editions of *The Cost of Discipleship* have been marred by faulty, misleading translations and the absence of the critical notes needed to understand why *Discipleship* is so pivotal in appreciating Bonhoeffer's intent more fully.

To that end, the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, inaugurated the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Translation Project (DBWE) of which *Discipleship* is the fourth volume in what will eventually be seventeen volumes of Bonhoeffer's collected writings. Each volume provides readers with an entirely new, unabridged translation coupled with the critical apparatus lacking in previous translations but now supplied by experts skilled in interpreting Bonhoeffer and familiar with the individual texts assigned to them. The present text of *Discipleship*, edited by John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly and published in 2001 by Fortress Press, is based on the critical German edition published in 1989 and revised in 1994. That critical edition was in turn based on the first edition of 1937, though improved through corrections of typos and other printing mistakes. The new critical edition illumines Bonhoeffer's role in writing the book as an important document in the church struggle in the Hitler era. In addition, the critical apparatus explains many of the historical allusions otherwise left to the imagination of the reader and subject to misinterpretations. Finally, *Discipleship* relates Bonhoeffer's text to the inner core of his Christocentric spirituality.

THE OPENING OF *DISCIPLESHIP*:  
CHEAP GRACE AND COSTLY GRACE

At the outset of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that he wants to get behind the ideological battles related to the church struggle and focus on the one person who ought to be the center of their concerns, Jesus Christ. He poses the disturbing question: "What does Jesus want from us today?" As a caution against what the churchgoing Germans were hearing from their pulpits, academic podiums, or reading in their newspapers, Bonhoeffer concludes in this opening section: "It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. Rather, we want to know what Jesus wants."<sup>1</sup> *Discipleship* is a book in which Bonhoeffer uses Jesus' own words as recorded in the gospels and the exhortations of the apostle Paul to confront readers with the uncushioned challenges to all their inaccurate ideas, falsified by Nazi propaganda, of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Although the book was first published in 1937, the words that have excited each new generation of readers were actually spoken or written much earlier, during Bonhoeffer's work as a young teacher in Berlin and as a seminary director in lectures to his seminarians. In writing *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer drew on the insights he had expressed in prior writings and lectures on church, faith, and community life in order to integrate a Christ-centered spirituality into the demands on their daily lives of those who proclaim themselves followers of Jesus Christ.

The book itself was set in its penultimate form during his years as director of the illegal Confessing Church seminary at

1. D (DBWE 4), 37.

Finkenwalde in Pomerania. There Bonhoeffer was able to present his thoughts more fully on following Jesus Christ in the paths of Christian discipleship. Bonhoeffer's biographer and best friend, Eberhard Bethge, called Bonhoeffer's reflections on the Sermon on the Mount the "nerve center" of the seminary and the book that ensued, "Finkenwalde's own badge of distinction."<sup>2</sup> In those lectures he opened to his seminarians the personal heart of his own spirituality: discipleship and the cross, living out the teachings of Jesus Christ even if that led to their persecution and martyrdom. The opening passages of his book expose his deeply felt chagrin at the church's apparent watering down of Jesus' teachings and example in their efforts to accommodate a powerful political ideology. He shares his conviction that too many church leaders had cheapened the gospel and misled their parishioners. The protestant principles of faith alone, scripture alone, and giving glory to God alone now had deteriorated into mere boorish churchgoing, easy procurement of sacramentalized grace, and reduction of the Bible and worship to abstract dogmatics, legalisms and routine rituals.

#### CHEAP GRACE, THE MORTAL ENEMY OF THE CHURCH, AND COSTLY GRACE IN DISCIPLESHIP

The first chapter of the book that created such a stir both in Germany and, later, in the English speaking world, begins with Bonhoeffer's declaration of the real source of the crisis generated by the collapse of any effective church resistance to Adolf Hitler and the growing popularity of Nazism among the citizens of Germany: "Cheap grace is the mortal en-

2. DB, 450.

emy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.”<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer goes on to describe this “cheap grace” as “bargain basement” Christianity doled out by careless and cowardly church leaders, in the form of doctrines, principles, systems, a cheap “cover-up for its sins” for which the church “shows no remorse.” It is, in effect, the denial of the word of God and everything Jesus Christ stands for. Finally, the cheapening of grace reaches the point of denying the need to follow Jesus Christ in discipleship. It is devoid of the cross and “without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sorum has said it well: “Cheap grace is *not* grace and Costly grace is *simply* grace.”<sup>5</sup>

In this initial chapter Bonhoeffer then turns his attention to a contrast between cheap grace and costly grace. Costly grace is simply the gospel that can never be taken for granted but is subject to daily renewal. He says it is costly because it is the call to follow Jesus Christ, a path that can cost Jesus’ followers their lives. Such grace condemns sin, though through Jesus it offers justification to all sinners who repent. Such grace was even costly to God because it cost the life of God’s own son whose death was a sacrifice for us. Later, Bonhoeffer will write in his prison letters of this aspect of God’s own sufferings. Here he concludes that “costly grace is the incarnation of God.”<sup>6</sup> As God’s living word, costly grace places people of faith under the yoke of actually following Jesus, a yoke that Jesus himself declares to be “easy” and “light.”<sup>7</sup>

3. D (DBWE 4), 43.

4. D (DBWE 4), 43–44.

5. Sorum, “Cheap Grace, Costly Grace, and Just Plain Grace,” 20.

6. D (DBWE 4), 45.

7. Matt 11:30, cited in D (DBWE 4), 45.

Bonhoeffer traces costly grace to Jesus' threefold call to Peter to follow him. Peter was asked to follow Jesus, to confess his faith in Jesus, and finally, to enter into the communion of martyrdom. But such examples were gradually lost through the twin developments of Christendom's expansion and the advent of secularization. Monasticism came into existence as a protest against this cheapening of grace and toleration of human sin. Those involved in the monastic movement left everything for the purpose of following Jesus' commands more strictly. But monasticism itself lost its impact, suffocated at the hands of the very church it had protected from the decay of creeping secularization. The church began to exalt this way of following Christ to the province of only those few individuals, a specially graced elite who were so called, whereas the average churchgoers were steered toward the easy, watered down way of believing in Jesus Christ. Enter Martin Luther who, by leaving the monastery was himself led to protest against the corruption of discipleship. Returning to the world, he was enabled by God's grace to declare that following Jesus had to be extended to all peoples living their lives in the midst of the world. His new allegiance to Jesus Christ had cost him a comfortable monastic life in favor of finally understanding the true nature of justification by faith alone that in turn became living the gospel in the world in discipleship to Jesus Christ alone. The church itself would begin to sink into its own addiction to a status quo of wealth and privilege.

Nonetheless, as Bonhoeffer goes on to point out, the forces searching for an easier way to be Christian reduced the dynamism of justification by faith alone into a principle whereby sinning was justified in advance and following Jesus became no different from being like the world, thoroughly

secularized. Christianity was further cheapened by churchgoing seen as a social gathering where one leaves the worldly sphere for a short time to enter a church service and receive assurance that one is on the right track of discipleship. This, for Bonhoeffer, is the gross deception that parades as justification but in effect constitutes a falsified liberation from the gospel demands of Jesus Christ. Luther's paradoxical call to "sin boldly" when construed as a presupposition of justification had, to Bonhoeffer's dismay, become a preset absolution merely to do as one pleases and to bask in a discounted form of discipleship.

Bonhoeffer could see the results in Nazi Germany when so many parishioners were afraid to "sin" against the status quo of political structures that denied human and civil rights to their fellow citizens or against the churches that had acquiesced in the violence of the Nazi government. Hence his caustic denunciation of the disturbing effects of pursuing a cheapened Christianity: "Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us."<sup>8</sup> He concludes with a litany of lamentations on the consequences of pursuing cheap grace. Bonhoeffer had become convinced that the churches' influence for good had collapsed. Bland preaching and an easy self-righteousness based on mere church attendance had so cheapened Christian life that the call to follow Jesus Christ by accepting the gospel challenges had become diminished. The leaders of Nazi Germany were thus able successfully to erect barriers against actions on be-

8. D (DBWE 4), 53.

half of justice for peoples trapped in a repressive, militaristic ideology.

#### THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP AND SIMPLE OBEDIENCE

Bonhoeffer's analysis in his second chapter of the dynamics of Jesus' call to follow him delves into the gospel stories of those who have, indeed, either risked all to accept the call or succumbed to the temptations of evading the stark demands of the call or even invoked reasons to reject the call. Bonhoeffer insists that the essence of the call is that it comes from none other than Jesus himself and it compels obedience without the usual rationalizations that might impede the directness of the call itself. The promptness of Levi's obedience from Mark 2:14 illustrates what Bonhoeffer means by the content of the call to discipleship. The disciple leaves everything. Disciples step out of their previous existence and livelihood and embrace the insecurity of where Jesus might lead them while paradoxically enjoying the absolute security that communion with Jesus confers. Jesus' call breaks through all the legalisms, dogmatic systems, and rationalizations because the call is to a person. In Bonhoeffer's words: "Discipleship is commitment to Christ."<sup>9</sup>

#### *Answering the Call without Hesitation*

Bonhoeffer contrasts Levi's answer to the call with the examples one finds in Luke's gospel story of three would-be followers of Jesus. The first simply declares he will follow Jesus. Jesus gives him in return a reality check. Following him will

9. D (DBWE 4), 59.

not be easy. He has no set place to lay his head. Nor would the would-be follower qualify who would first bury his father according to the law. The issue in that case is to prefer obedience to the law to the call of Jesus. Here Bonhoeffer comments that nothing, not even the law, should come between Jesus and the disciple. One suspects that Bonhoeffer is alluding to the conflict so prevalent in the Nazi era that following Jesus Christ could very well entail violating laws that the gospel would oppose. Finally, a third would-be follower wants time to bid farewell to his family. This provokes Jesus' reply about the unworthiness of one who would put his hand to the plow and looking back, probably with regret, on what he had left behind. Bonhoeffer interprets this to mean Jesus' refusal of a discipleship in which the would-be follower sets his own conditions for accepting the call. This, he declares, is tantamount to a rejection of what Jesus wants in favor of one's own will.<sup>10</sup>

Bonhoeffer then addresses the question of what comes first, the gift of faith or the graced obedience to the call of Jesus Christ. Here he steps into the controversy that reaches all the way back to the Reformation, justification by faith and not by works. Like Luther, Bonhoeffer argues that good works are not eliminated in the response to Jesus' call. In fact, they emanate from the faith that justifies. Bonhoeffer makes the daring statement in this chapter that "the road to faith passes through obedience to Christ's call." For Bonhoeffer, the Christian life is not a choice between the priority of faith and obediential discipleship. Faith and obedience are correlative: "*only the believers obey and only the obedient believe.*"<sup>11</sup>

10. D (DBWE 4), 60–61.

11. D (DBWE 4), 63; emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

He admits that the obedience in question follows on faith and that the actions done in obedience do not in themselves justify either sinners or would-be disciples. Nonetheless, he sees an “indissoluble unity between faith and obedience.”<sup>12</sup> Obedience to Jesus’ call or command is of crucial importance in this dialectic. Otherwise, he argues that faith could easily deteriorate into pietistic and deceptive abstraction and the external actions in accord with Jesus’ mandates on behalf of the “least” of society’s children could more easily be downplayed and avoided. That would be the “cheap grace” behind which so-called believers in Christ could hide, safe in being absolved from obeying Jesus’ difficult gospel demands.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Problem of the Rich Young Man*

Bonhoeffer uses the story of the rich young man who wanted, like so many contemporary believers, to parse Jesus’ call to completely change his priorities in favor of an unconditional willingness to follow in Jesus’ own way that could include, as it did for the rich young man, voluntary poverty. Jesus, as the gospel reports, loved him but recognized at the same time that the young man wanted something more concrete in the way of ethical laws or behavior, never realizing that the call was to leave his affluence and follow the person of Jesus wherever that could lead, even to an unknown future. The scribe’s question, on the other hand, was all about the relative standing of God’s commands for salvation. Again, his probing into gauging the worth of the salvific commands of God betrays an inability to imitate Jesus in extending neighborly love to all

12. D (DBWE 4), 64.

13. D (DBWE 4), 69.

those who in Jesus' spirit may lay claim to one's compassion and help.<sup>14</sup>

Bonhoeffer's third chapter extends his analysis of the call to discipleship to the issue of "simple obedience." Jesus' call has to circumvent several seemingly inbred obstacles: the dictates of reason, common sense, the invocation of personal responsibility, one's personal, comfortable piety, legal hesitations, and even scripturally cited reasons to evade the call. Bonhoeffer's answer is simplicity in obedience to the call. When Jesus calls a person to follow him, one is not to be deterred like the rich young man by worldly possessions or personal wealth. Jesus' call, on the other hand, can mean leaving one's present station in life, one's family and home, and friends, all of which are outweighed by the fulfillment of entering into community with none other than Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> The disciples who answer the call are told not to worry. Every source of anxiety, such as worry for the family or even how to respond to being struck in the face by an enemy, should give way to the primal nature of Jesus' call, namely, the promotion of God's Kingdom on earth as it is embodied in Jesus' personal example and teachings.<sup>16</sup>

Bonhoeffer concedes that one could argue the possibility of living in the world while possessing the world's goods as if one did not possess them and still believe in Christ. But he argues further that such a possibility can never annul or satisfy simple obedience to the gospel commandments. There is always the danger, he points out, in one's worldly attachments, affections, or affluence that they can become

14. D (DBWE 4), 72–76.

15. D (DBWE 4), 78–79

16. D (DBWE 4), 79.

a pretext for fleeing from obedience to Jesus Christ when his demands appear to escalate beyond one's comfort zone. Bonhoeffer continues to insist that what seems impossible in human terms becomes, in faith, a willingness to engage in gospel-inspired actions. The word of God can thus thrust persons of faith into such actions and provide them the helping grace they need in the face of danger and despite their all-too-human fears.

### *Simple Obedience in Uncompromising Discipleship*

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on "simple obedience" was not new to him. In an earlier talk that he gave to young students involved in the German Student Christian Movement in Berlin in 1932, entitled "Christ and Peace," he had declared that refusing to follow the path of obedience to the gospel teachings is only to "make grace cheap and with the justification of the sinner through the cross of Christ, we thereby forget the cry of the Lord who never justifies sin." He added the following uncompromising comment that is echoed in his later book on *Discipleship*: "The command, 'you shall not kill,' and the word, 'love your enemy,' are given to us simply to obey. . . . Simple obedience knows nothing of the fine distinction between good and evil. It lives in the discipleship of Christ and does the good work as something self-evident."<sup>17</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, in such situations legalisms are of little help. Nor can ideals offer the guidance that can only come from Jesus' call and Jesus' graced commands. Other forms of obedience, whether to law or to ideals, might trap people within themselves and enslave people of weak faith within political or religious ideologies and patriotic slogan-

17. TF, 94-95.

eering as was evident in the historical era in which Bonhoeffer was writing. He concludes that salvation through discipleship to Jesus Christ is ultimately possible only through God's costly grace and not through any merely human endeavor.<sup>18</sup>

#### DISCIPLESHIP AND THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST

In chapter 4 Bonhoeffer subsequently connects Christian discipleship to the cross of Jesus Christ. This is the sobering reality of how far the call of Jesus Christ can take a would-be follower. This chapter is pivotal to discipleship, given the widespread persecution by the Nazi government of Jewish citizens, political dissenters, and anyone suspected of disloyalty to the regnant political ideology, including Bonhoeffer's own Confessing Church. Many of Bonhoeffer's fellow pastors had been imprisoned and the moves against the Jews were already in place aimed at expelling or annihilating the entire Jewish population in Germany. Though the genocidal implementation of Hitler's "final solution" to the "Jewish Question" was only a few years away, Hitler's evil intentions were already clear to Bonhoeffer and those who would become his fellow conspirators in the German resistance movement.

Bonhoeffer contends from the very beginning of this chapter that Jesus *had* to "suffer and be rejected." The suffering was tragic enough, but the rejection was even more painful. "Rejection removed all dignity and honor from his suffering. It had to be dishonorable suffering. Suffering and rejection express in summary form the cross of Jesus."<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer admits that not all Jesus' followers were at peace with Jesus'

18. D (DBWE 4), 81–83.

19. D (DBWE 4), 85.

declaration that he was destined to suffer. He notes that even Peter rejected this role immediately after his remarkable confession of faith in Jesus' messiahship. For this friendly persuasion, Jesus rebuked Peter in some of the harshest words one finds in the scriptures (Mark 8:33). Bonhoeffer sees Peter as exemplifying the church's own offense at the suffering of Christ. Here, we see how Bonhoeffer uses Jesus' rebuke to Peter as a lament at the cowardice of the churches, afraid of suffering in the manner of Jesus for taking a courageous stand against Hitler and the Nazi government. He calls that the work of Satan "trying to pull the church away from the cross of its Lord."<sup>20</sup> In his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer will complain that the church was "standing up for the church's 'cause', but [with] little personal faith in Christ. 'Jesus' is disappearing from sight. . . . The decisive factor: the church on the defensive. No taking risks for others."<sup>21</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, Jesus makes it clear to his followers that they too must be prepared to suffer. True, the disciples are free in their choices, but *if* they intend to follow Jesus, they will suffer. In preparation for such a gospel-predicted eventuality Jesus counsels his followers to practice self-denial. This Bonhoeffer describes as the grace of "knowing only Christ, no longer knowing oneself,"<sup>22</sup> in the sense of keeping oneself always secondary in following Jesus who tells them unmistakably that all his disciples must take up their cross. Keeping Jesus foremost in one's thoughts makes the pain of the cross endurable because the cross of Jesus Christ is itself grace just as the preparation through acts of self-denial

20. D (DBWE 4), 85.

21 LPP, 381.

22. D (DBWE 4), 86.

is also a grace that Jesus confers on those who answer the call with sincerity and courage.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Cross of Rejection*

Bonhoeffer depicts Christ's death on the cross as a sign for disciples of their calling, as followers of Jesus Christ, to accept sufferings as essential to their vocation. In communion with the passion of Jesus, the cross of Christians also brings on them rejection, shame, and desertion by one's own people. We can only wonder if Bonhoeffer had in mind the shame and rejection experienced by those Christians accused of a lack of patriotism, of disloyalty to Adolf Hitler, of making common cause with the hated Jew. Or, would his words come back in his own case, when he faced accusations of treason for planning the overthrow of his evil government and death by hanging as a traitor? Or was he thinking of the churches and their bishops so craven in their attempts to win favor with the Nazi government and to retain their clerical privileges?

In Bonhoeffer's commentary he assures readers that there is no need to seek out a particular cross to bear. God's benevolence will know each person's weaknesses and thus measure the personal cross accordingly. Some may be honored with the grace of a bloody martyrdom. But for Christians the cross is laid on all, whether it is the death of one's old self and ways of conduct or the renunciation of every earthly attachment in order to follow Jesus wherever he leads. The cross that Jesus experienced in rejection and death is the destiny of every true disciple of Jesus Christ. In Bonhoeffer's stark words: "Whenever Jesus calls us, his call leads us to death."<sup>24</sup>

23. D (DBWE 4), 86–87.

24. D (DBWE 4), 87.