

Introduction

Discipleship – Signing up for the Whole Package?

Walk through any town centre and you can get a quick but accurate picture of the situation in which the followers of Jesus find themselves today. There is a range of churches, from impressive buildings that have stood for centuries, to more recent buildings but whose shape and style cry out: 'this is a church'. There will also be modern buildings with clear modern branding declaring that they are churches, and a range of halls which also serve as churches. Some will be part of vast international networks, others will have far more tenuous links with a wider network, and some will be wholly independent. Some will have a whole backstory and a professional ministry – the clergy – while others will have a Bible, a hymnbook, and a pastor who is linked to just that group. If variety is the spice of life, Christianity is a very spiced religion.

However, for every church building that is still functioning, there will be others that are firmly locked or have been repurposed for other functions, such as shops, or have been taken over as mosques or gurdwaras as the ethnic make-up of the city has changed over recent decades. Go into most of the churches that are still functioning and you will notice that there is plenty of spare seating, and that many of the participants are greying. For most of their fellow citizens, religion is a matter of personal choice: one more optional interest. If you are 'religious', then this makes sense; but if you are not 'religious' then this whole array of churches is as irrelevant as a ballroom for someone who has no interest in dance!

These three features of modernity: (1) that there is no single form of Christianity that is taken as normative, (2) that it is widely seen as somehow past its sell-by date, and (3) that religious engagement is just an option, are now fully part of our western, developed-world experience. While we might want to note just how novel and how culturally specific

these assumptions are, and might even want to regret them, what is important is that we take account of them as the background against which any study of discipleship takes place.

This trip around any western city and its many churches, church buildings, and ex-church buildings, however, only reveals one dimension of our situation. For apart from the buildings are the real churches – communities of people – who are energetic, dynamic, and looking to the future. These individuals and groups often express their vision of what it is to be a Christian not in terms of conforming to ecclesial pattern or membership of a club – both common ways of expressing a serious engagement with Christianity in the past – but in terms of being a disciple: discipleship, moving along a way as one committed to following Jesus, captures their sense of commitment, of engagement with the world around them, and their desire for a distinct set of relationships. In this process, they often turn afresh to the early churches and the earliest evidence we have of the followers of Jesus and their gatherings: churches. This book tries to take some themes of discipleship – as they emerge today – and then see how they are reflected in those early writings. Therefore, the starting point is discipleship today and then we look at how light is shed on that by the past.

This raises the immediate question: why not just produce a ‘history of discipleship’ focussed on the first and second centuries of the Common Era? The answer is simple: while there were many who were referred to as ‘disciples’ in those documents, and ‘disciples’ were a common commodity in the Graeco-Roman world where every philosopher and every teacher and indeed every master craftsman had some, the notion that one envisages one’s religious engagement in terms of discipleship is a product of the twentieth century. It was only when a supposed ‘Christian society’ acted in such a manner that a Christian had to oppose it, tooth and nail, that the notion that being a Christian was more than ‘belonging to a church’ – or just identifying with some religious group – entered our world. Discipleship was not just passive identification, but taking one’s commitment so seriously that it meant challenging church structures, the legal structures of the state, and even the accepted vision of society, despite most of that society having been baptised and a sizeable proportion of the members of that society being ‘regular church goers’.

This was the situation in which many Christians found themselves in Nazi Germany where, unlike those Christians in the Soviet Union, as a state persecuted religion, they had to take a stand not only against

the state but against the acquiescence of their fellow Christians who combined their church membership with their support, at least passively, for the state. Discipleship as a theme emerges with the Confessing Church in Germany during the Nazi era, and is linked to one name in particular: Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His 1937 book, *Nachfolge* (literally: 'following'), marks the moment when the theme entered modern Christian thinking. It was translated into English after the war with a title that captured its essence: *The Cost of Discipleship*¹ – and it came with the personal testimony that its author was willing himself to pay that cost. Bonhoeffer was murdered in Loewenberg concentration camp on 9 April 1945 as the Nazi regime crumbled.

To approach the topic of Christian origins from the standpoint of discipleship is to do far more than engage in an historical enquiry. It means to engage with the reality of the Christian past – for better for worse, warts and all – and then see if following Jesus is a worthwhile endeavour in the world in which we live today.

The Apprentices

So where do we start? We might begin with the notion of the apprentice who learns by doing. We have all heard the word 'disciple' hundreds of times. We even have very fixed ideas of what the disciples of Jesus looked like as they followed Jesus around Palestine on his journeys. It is just one of those words we use in church and do not think much about. But in the middle of the last century a group of Christians in Germany – faced with the horrors of Hitler's Nazis – became convinced that we needed to think about the whole matter once more.

It is very easy to think of our religion in terms of identities – and most situations encourage us to think in this way – so that I say 'I *am* a Catholic' or 'I *am* a Christian' or 'You *are* a Buddhist' or 'She *is* a Muslim'. The box is ticked, there is little more to say, and we can just see life as following accepted conventions (e.g. 'Jews go to synagogue' or 'Catholics go to mass') and that is that. But what if I recognised that becoming a follower of the Christ was not a done deal, but a work in progress? Now I would not start from my identity, but from my failure to recognise what being a Christian entailed, and I would become aware that at any time I might only glimpse what it means to be a disciple.

¹. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London, 1955).

Lifelong Learning

It is very easy to get complete command of any body of facts that can be learned by rote, downloaded from a book, and then trot out predictable answers to old questions. What is far more challenging is learning slowly how to master a skill – whether this be the skills of a plumber or someone who seeks to build the Kingdom of God – because one must always be open to new problems, new challenges, and note that, while we are hopefully getting better, we are still far from perfect. One will only know one *is* a Christian at the end of a lifetime of trying to make life better, seeking to value love, seeking to minimise destruction, and seeking to bear witness to God the Father's love for all humanity manifested in Jesus the Anointed One. One is always *becoming* a Christian.

Growing and learning what it is to be a disciple is a *lifelong process*. Indeed, being a disciple is far more like being an apprentice in a trade than being a student in a school boning-up on a subject. The student has all the answers at hand if only she can get them all into her head; that done, she can pass the exam and 'be' something. The apprentice learns a bit here, learns another bit there, meets this situation and that, makes mistakes and has to start over – it's messy, slow, but is constantly in touch with the real world. Indeed, as the real constantly changes, the apprentice has to think up new solutions to problems that may never have existed before. If we think about Jesus being followed by his apprentices, and ourselves as his apprentices, then we radically alter our vision of who we are, what we are about, and what Christianity will mean for us today, and tomorrow.

Picasso, the painter, is reputed to have once said that 'tradition is having a baby, not wearing your grandfather's hat'. We often think of religion in terms of the past, and of holding on to the past, but if we are apprentices then the challenge is the future and making it a little more like the world of justice, peace, and love that God's love beckons us to build. Tradition is not a having, but a making. We hand on the vision of Jesus so that it is more there tomorrow than today.

Self-Image

If it is better to think of ourselves as apprentices to the Christ rather than being Christians, then each of the Sunday gospels challenges our assumptions, prejudices, biases, and certainties. Faith is an adventure

to build the Reign of God, it is anything but our inherited 'old school' customs. The apprentice is always learning, and at the same time making a difference – hopefully for the better – to those around them.

Three Other Issues

You might ask why this book does not follow some systematic plan either of topics or texts? If one could reduce following to a plan it would be tantamount to saying that life is predictable. The skilled apprentice does not know just one or two patterns, but has to the skills to tackle problems that occur – and this book, therefore, follows a narrative sequence.

Very often historical works engage critically with the sources while works of theology/spirituality take a looser approach – but in fact modern human use an historically critical method in our everyday lives. When something goes wrong and there is an inquiry, that method is employed and it is by that method we seek to avoid falsehood, prejudice, and nonsense. It may not be an historical inquiry into the past, but its method is the same. Confronting the reality of what we know of our history is part of the challenge of discipleship.

This account is open-ended: it does not deliver a checklist, nor a package that can be absorbed over a certain number of training sessions. In recent years discipleship 'packages' and 'training programmes' have become big business: but that assumes that one can know our human nature far more fully than any sensible theologian is willing to admit. Life is open-ended in the calls it makes on us, and so is discipleship.

The Images

In this book you will find a series of images. They are not intended as 'illustrations' but as visual question marks. We often become so familiar with words that they become tired and we forget how challenging they originally were. Images too are often so familiar that that we take them for granted as part of our everyday background, but in their juxtaposition they can refresh and reveal one another. The eighteen images in this book can be seen as weaving in and out of the words in the chapters – drawing attention to points in a new way, refreshing them, or highlighting them. Meanwhile, the images themselves draw attention to the theological values that are virtually ever-present around us.