

Editor's Introduction to the Reader's Edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*

Geffrey B. Kelly

In 1963, while serving as Spiritual Director of young postulants in the religious congregation of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, I had been going through a period of spiritual dryness. I felt drained of energy, bothered by my own aridity in prayer and meditation and growing lack of enthusiasm for the daily liturgies. The Director of Novices advised me to get another spiritual reading book with the inspiration I needed for my meditation. Following his advice I spied haphazardly a new book on our library shelves, *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I opened the book at random to the startling sentence: "Like ravens we have gathered round the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us." I felt immediately that I too had been pursuing the "cheap grace" of a religious routine. My entire day was mapped out into periods of prayer, meditation, daily Mass, manual labor, teaching and counseling postulants, and so on.

Reading further, I became fascinated by the awesome demands of the Sermon on the Mount, which through Bonhoeffer's words seemed addressed directly to me. When I looked beyond the title page, I was shocked to discover that the book was first published in German in 1937 at the height of Hitler's dictatorship, for it was highly relevant to my own world. I resolved to learn more about this writer and discovered *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the letters he wrote from prison before his execution for his involvement in the resistance against Adolf Hitler. Even today I am still deeply moved by the challenges of *Discipleship* and by the personal sacrifice of Bonhoeffer himself.

The Historical Context of Bonhoeffer's Text

Bonhoeffer was one of the leading theologians of the "Confessing Church," which arose in opposition to the "German Christians," a pro-Nazi group within the established German Protestant church. The "German Christians" attempted to Nazify not only the church but all of Protestant theology as well. They hoped to create a Reich Church, united under a Reich bishop and sympathetic to the Nazi cause and its dreams of a Nazi empire united by blood and battle. Throughout the 1930s, the internal church battles between the Confessing Church, the German Christians, and "neutral" church leaders polarized German Protestantism. While the Nazi regime steered clear of much of the controversy, there were clear political consequences for Confessing pastors who spoke out against Nazi policies.

During the period in which he wrote *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer was teaching seminarians at Finkenwalde, a Confessing Church seminary, and he dedicated the work to his seminarians. While Bonhoeffer was disturbed by many of the issues arising under Nazism

and their consequences for Christians and their church, *Discipleship* was written primarily as a text for the spiritual formation of seminarians within the unusual context of dictatorship. Bonhoeffer's opening questions were shocking in their directness: What does Jesus want to say to us? What does he expect from us? How does he expect us to be faithful Christians today? Bonhoeffer's attempts to ascertain "what Jesus wants" became the *leitmotif* of every chapter that followed.

Discipleship is conceptually related to his earlier works *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, but the insights and inspiration of this book go far beyond the philosophical-theological convictions he had worked out in those earlier writings. *Discipleship* was set, not in the comfortable academic university setting where he had taught, but in the steamier cauldron of political conflict and ecclesiastical fecklessness—troubled times that called for more than faith seeking to understand church dogma, purify ritual, or gauge attendance at worship.

More than any of his other writings, *Discipleship* reveals a Bonhoeffer who vehemently expressed his disappointment and frustration at the failure of Christians and their churches to react against the entrenched injustices of the Nazi government. In harsh rhetoric he described what he sensed was a lethal battle between the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ and the diabolical realm of Nazism. Bonhoeffer's weapons were the word of God, the unyielding commands of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, the Pauline exhortations to imitate the exemplary deeds of Jesus in the face of inevitable suffering, and acceptance of the paradoxical power of Jesus in the "weakness" of his cross.

These central themes of *Discipleship* are held together by Bonhoeffer's personal conviction that the freedom of a Christian

is rooted in the Reformation principle of faith, lived in complete reliance on God's word in the Bible for direction and support. The Christocentrism of this book is unmistakable. The Christ encountered in *Discipleship* does not avoid the dangers of returning to Jerusalem to confront the wrath of his enemies. This is a Christ who frees the disciple to be a genuine person of faith, liberated from the bondage of self-centeredness and self-serving infidelity to the word of God. By his sacrificial death on the cross, Christ enables his followers to live by the gospel and to resist the words of a seductive earthly leader.

Following Christ through the Costly Grace of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer believed that the churches had become accomplices of Hitler and the Nazi ideology. *Discipleship* makes it clear that the puffy, self-serving statements of some church leaders, eager to preserve their clerical privileges, were in sharp contrast to the fearless castigation of systematic evil found in the inspiring words and example of Jesus Christ. In the very first sentence of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer threw the gauntlet at what he viewed as the real source of the crisis. "Cheap grace," he declared, "is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace."

Christian discipleship must be lived with utter seriousness, but Bonhoeffer lamented that in typical German parishes he detected only "cheap grace." Their sermons were nothing more than timid accommodations to the Nazi regime, and they offered only a cheapened, bargain-basement grace, which Bonhoeffer described as "grace without the cross" and "grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ."

The grace of discipleship was possible for those willing to overcome their fears and hesitations, but Bonhoeffer noted that Jesus

offers no set program, no set of principles, no absolutized dogmas, no new set of laws that preserved purity of doctrine. Rather, such grace demands “nothing other than being bound to Jesus Christ alone.” This takes place in the very world that is loved, judged, and reconciled in Christ.

Christ’s Call to Death

In the sections of *Discipleship* that follow Bonhoeffer’s call for “costly grace,” he describes how a renewed sense of discipleship could lead Christians so serve those in need, overcome evil, and honor Christ’s person and teachings. Acts of inconveniencing oneself to serve others are a “liberating force” in the spiritual life. Bonhoeffer believed that true freedom must include utter devotion to those in need, after the manner of Jesus, whose self-sacrifice was the ultimate example of what it means to be as Christ in relationship with others. Bonhoeffer urged Christians not to be smug in their proclaimed justification by faith. Rather, out of that faith and simple obedience to God’s word, they should assume responsibility to bring about peace in their turbulent earth: “The commandment ‘You shall not kill,’ the word that says, ‘Love your enemies,’ is given to us simply to be obeyed.”¹

Bonhoeffer acknowledged, however, that following Christ in full obedience to the gospel meant enduring suffering patterned after Jesus’ own experience. Reminding would-be disciples of Jesus’ words, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34), Bonhoeffer noted that every Christian worthy of the name must be prepared to bear the cross: “Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death” (p. 000; D, 87). This “death” could mean the daily struggle against sin, acts of forbearance and mutual forgiveness, even open persecution and martyrdom. “Discipleship,” wrote Bonhoeffer,

“is being bound to the suffering Christ” (p. 000; D, 89), yet Jesus’ spiritual nearness transformed even grotesque torments into the blessed joy of knowing that one suffers in union with Jesus Christ.

The Beatitudes

For Bonhoeffer, this union with Jesus’ suffering included the daily acts of renunciation that define the Beatitudes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In *Discipleship*, the Beatitudes are the point of convergence where discipleship and the cross, the sufferings of Jesus and the power of Christian community, faith and love of neighbor, come together. Here Jesus proclaimed that his followers are blessed amidst what the world would call misery, poverty, rejection, persecution, even death at the hands of one’s enemies. This, Bonhoeffer wrote, is the paradox of joy in suffering, life in death, brought about by graced intimacy with Jesus Christ.

In the context of Nazism’s malicious grip on Christians in Germany, Bonhoeffer was providing paradoxical guidelines for an authentic Christian life. Those who mourn are blessed, for example, because they are unwilling to conform to society’s standards or join in arrogant celebrations of Nazi military might. Christians were called to be strangers in that phony world. In the name of the only true peace of Jesus Christ, they were to be disturbers of that false peace, based on belligerent arrogance toward weaker nations.

Bonhoeffer likewise wrote in *Discipleship* that the death of Jesus Christ parallels the death to self-righteousness endured by those who would be merciful. Christians join the ranks of the disenfranchised by making common cause with those reprobated and marginalized by their government. He praised those who, despite their own needs, “have an irresistible love for the lowly, the sick, the suffering, for those who are demeaned and abused, for those who suffer injustice

and are rejected, for everyone in pain and anxiety. . . . The merciful give their honor to those who have fallen into shame and take that shame unto themselves” (p. 000; D, 106–7).

Bonhoeffer’s Call to Peacemaking

The beatitudinal blessing on peacemakers is a central theme in *Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer makes it clear that the grace of following Jesus as peacemakers confers a strong mandate to oppose violence with nonviolent means, as Jesus would. “Now they are not only to have peace, but they are to *make* peace. To do this they renounce violence and strife. Those things never help the cause of Christ” (p. 000; D, 108). How far do they go? Bonhoeffer’s answer is that “Jesus’ disciples maintain peace by choosing to suffer instead of causing others to suffer. They preserve community when others destroy it. Their peace will never be greater than when they encounter evil people in peace and are willing to suffer from them. Peace makers will bear the cross with their Lord, for peace was made at the cross” (p. 000; D, 108).

Christian peacemaking is coupled with the need to forgive and pray for their enemies. Bonhoeffer insists that Christians are not to repay in kind the evil done to them, but to overcome injustice with nonviolence and forgiveness. It was a radical challenge to Christians under Nazi laws that were dominated by a vengeful, violent spirit. Bonhoeffer insisted that Christians’ attitudes toward their enemies must reflect the extraordinary love manifested by Jesus himself; this was why Jesus commanded his followers to pray for those who abused and persecuted them. The extraordinary love, self-denial, and espousal of nonviolence and forgiveness of enemies is what had to set Christians apart.

Nowhere was this attitude expressed as forcefully as in Bonhoeffer's declaration toward the end of *Discipleship* that Christian responsibility includes seeing Christ in all peoples, even in those declared to be one's enemies. There he writes that Christ "became like human beings, so that we would be like him. In Christ's incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance" (p. 000; D, 285).

Discipleship: The Controversies and Their Significance

Some critics of *Discipleship* have disdained this book as an interruption in the straight line from Bonhoeffer's early activism against the Hitler regime and the subsequent affirmations of a worldly-engaged Christianity and the pragmatic activism found in *Ethics* and the prison letters. Some critics, too, judged this phase of Bonhoeffer's life in which he was involved in seminary education at Finkenwalde as indicative of a desire to withdraw from the world and enjoy relative spiritual peace within the sheltered enclave of the seminary. These studies portrayed Bonhoeffer as a theological Hamlet, torn between the impulse to separate the church from the world and the humanistic urge to affirm the goodness of that same world.² Hanfried Müller, a Marxist theologian from what was then East Germany, criticized *Discipleship* for expressing a "catholicizing" tendency and escapism.³

These critics failed to appreciate Bonhoeffer's dialectical approach, which pitted Christian discipleship against the wiles and twisted values of a world infected with the malevolent ideology of Nazism. When he wrote *Discipleship* Germany had succumbed to the totalitarian, anti-Christian, but wildly popular regime of Adolf Hitler.

While many expected the Lutheran Bonhoeffer to emphasize Luther's insistence on faith alone, Bonhoeffer instead offered the values of Christ's Sermon on the Mount and his prophetic teachings to a church that had bartered away the gospel for the cheap grace of a salvation without the cross of Jesus Christ.

In counseling Christian submission to the will of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer believed that the power engendered by following Christ's command led to active resistance to the evil of National Socialism. Far from being passive, Bonhoeffer was relentless in urging the Christians of Germany to "confess" their faith and to resist.

There are in fact many continuities between *Discipleship* and Bonhoeffer's writings during his resistance period. The final section of *Discipleship*, where Bonhoeffer speaks of being formed in the image of Jesus Christ, parallels the "Ethics as Formation" manuscript in *Ethics*, where Bonhoeffer declares that becoming like Jesus occurs only by being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen. This happens "as the form of Jesus Christ himself so works on us that it molds us, conforming our form to Christ's own (Gal. 4:9)."⁴

There are unmistakable echoes in the prison letters as well, particularly in Bonhoeffer's theology of a suffering God and his description of God's paradoxical power in weakness.⁵ *Discipleship* stands as a pivotal text that helps explain Bonhoeffer's path from the academic podium to his imprisonment. One can best understand Bonhoeffer's final word on *Discipleship*, in fact, by reading his letter to Eberhard Bethge on July 21, 1944, the day after the failed assassination attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler.⁶ Bonhoeffer recalled his conversation at Union Theological Seminary years before with Jean Lasserre, a young French pastor:⁷ "We had simply asked ourselves what we really wanted to do with our lives. And he said, I want to become a saint (—and I think it's possible that he did become

one). This impressed me very much at the time. Nevertheless, I disagreed with him, saying something like: I want to learn to have faith. For a long time I did not understand the depth of this antithesis. I thought I myself could learn to have faith by trying to live something like a saintly life. I suppose I wrote *Discipleship* at the end of this path. Today I clearly see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by it.”⁸

Here Bonhoeffer explored the questions he had raised in his own preface to *Discipleship*: how to live a life of Christian discipleship and how to have a life of faith while immersed in the duties of one’s worldly calling. In the preceding letter of July 18, 1944, he shared with Bethge what he felt were the different ways one was “pushed” into following Jesus Christ and how the experience was never partial or a merely “religious” act but “something whole and involves one’s whole life,” adding that “Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life.”⁹ In the letter of July 21, Bonhoeffer knew that the threat to his life had become much greater. When Bonhoeffer spoke of the possible “dangers” that he had come to see in *Discipleship*, he undoubtedly referred to the first step that Christians took when they acted on what they had heard in God’s word, living as Jesus Christ despite the dangers of the world to which they were called to minister. That first step was absolutely necessary if they were to learn to have active faith in strict obedience to Jesus Christ, expressed by the dialectic in *Discipleship*: “Only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe” (p. 000; D, 63).

Obedience was the first step. Without taking this step, the person called by Christ cannot learn to have faith. Bonhoeffer was himself learning to have faith while living fully in his world as a co-conspirator. In his July 21, 1944 letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer sensed this in his words on having recognized the possible misleading elements in his analysis of Christian discipleship. His desire to live

a holy life might puzzle people of faith, leading them to confuse the risk-free step into the ultimate with the penultimate complexities of “living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. . . . And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.”¹⁰

Bonhoeffer’s final word about *Discipleship* was not so much a cautionary word about the risks of human agency in the life of faith as a statement of a renewed awareness that his Christian discipleship, by leading him to involvement in the anti-Hitler conspiracy, had brought about a new beginning through his bond with Jesus Christ in discipleship. His life’s journey had changed. He was in the hands of the God who called him into discipleship. As he wrote in his prison poem, “Stations on the Way to Freedom,” written around the same time as his letter of July 21, his life had, indeed, been given to God:

Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet touch of freedom,
Then you gave it to God that God might perfect it in glory.¹¹

The Essence of *Discipleship*

Bonhoeffer’s book *Discipleship* is a spiritual classic. While written in the specific context of National Socialism, his experiential exposition of the Christian spiritual life has spoken to Christians around the world ever since. From beginning to end, *Discipleship* is a call to follow Jesus along the paths already illuminated by God’s word and the cross of Christ. This book is as much about what being a genuine Christian demands of those who claim to follow Christ as it is an exhortation to live and enjoy the only true freedom of a Christian. In his preface, Bonhoeffer stated clearly his conviction that following the paths set by Jesus’ command was at the center of the free, fulfilling

life to which every Christian aspires. “In following Jesus,” he writes, “people are released from the hard yoke of their own laws to be under the gentle yoke of Jesus Christ. In the gentle pressure of this yoke they will receive the strength to walk the right path without becoming weary. . . . Jesus demands nothing from us without giving us the strength to comply. Jesus’ commandment never wishes to destroy life, but rather to preserve, strengthen, and heal life” (p. 000; D, 39). Bonhoeffer ends *Discipleship* with the remarkable plea to obey the commands that govern one’s Christian calling. To be like Christ is to follow his life’s example and live in union with Christ’s own spirit—as Bonhoeffer concluded, to be “able to do those deeds, and in the simplicity of discipleship, to live life in peace and personal fulfillment enjoyed in the likeness of Christ” (p. 000; D, 287).

Notes

1. *Berlin: 1932-1933* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 12), 260.
2. Geoffrey B. Kelly, *Liberating Faith: Bonhoeffer’s Message for Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 114–15.
3. Ibid., 16. Hanfried Müller made this argument in his *Von der Kirche zur Welt* (From the Church to the World) (Leipzig: Herbert Reich Evang. Verlag, 1966), 244ff.
4. *Ethics* (Reader’s Edition), 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 6, 93)
5. See especially *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Reader’s Edition), 000–000 and passim (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 478–82).
6. Ibid., 000–000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 485–86).
7. Lasserre strongly influenced Bonhoeffer’s attitude toward pacifism and the peace ethic. Lasserre, a pacifist, was the secretary of the French-speaking section of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation.
8. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Reader’s Edition), 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 486).

9. Ibid., 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 482). In the Bonhoeffer Works edition of this volume (p. 482, note 67) editor John de Gruchy noted that in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer had written “Jesus Christ is life itself” (see *Ethics*, 000; Bonhoeffer Works volume 6, 249).
10. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Reader’s Edition), 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 486).
11. Ibid., 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 513).