Dietrich Bonhoeffer – The cost of discipleship

Much of Bonhoeffer's work was collected and edited by his close friend Eberhard Bethge, a former student and the author of the definitive Bonhoeffer biography. Bethge writes that Bonhoeffer's adult life can be divided into three phases: that of the theologian, the Christian, and the “man of his times.”

The first period lasted until 1930/31, when Bonhoeffer studied in New York, where he experienced a conversion. The second continued through the 1930s. It was characterized by his participation in the church struggle (together with Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, and others), his pastorate in London, and his work at the illegal Finkenwalde seminary. During this period he published his two most popular writings, The Cost of Discipleship and Life Together. The third phase began around 1940 and lasted until his death in April 1945. His major work now was the Ethics, which remained unfinished at the time of his death. In these years he also introduced the ideas that would later be used to claim him as the father of various “progressive” theologies.

In this article I focus on the second period, giving special attention to his view of Scripture, his work at the seminary, and his book on discipleship, which contained his New Testament teachings at the seminary.

Back to the sources

Bonhoeffer cherished his work at Finkenwalde. In 1935, at the end of the first term, he wrote to his students that the months spent with them had constituted the fullest time of his life, both professionally and personally. At Finkenwalde he found the type of work to which he could give himself whole-heartedly. In view of the Nazification of the universities, he had already given up on the academic life and decided to concentrate on the practical work of pastoring. His concern continued to be with the church struggle and the seminary enabled him to prepare young men for service in the beleaguered Confessing Church. It also allowed him to put into practice his conviction that education for the pastorate should focus not only on the teaching of theological knowledge and preaching skills, but also on spiritual training. Important means of realizing that ideal were his New Testament course on the Sermon on the Mount and discipleship and the organization of the Finkenwalde seminary as a religious community.

Two characteristics that stand out in Bonhoeffer’s writings are his Christology and his submission to the authority of the Bible. With respect to the first, he puts great emphasis on the fact that in the Christian faith we do not meet with a mere set of ideas or a mere system of doctrine. Ideas and doctrinal systems require only intellectual assent, rather than personal commitment. In Christianity, however, we meet with a person, namely with the living Christ, the Son of God incarnate, who was crucified and rose from the dead. Christology therefore demands personal commitment, a concrete following of the person Jesus Christ. This is what the rich young ruler had to learn, and the repentant publicans, and all those who came to Jesus.

The second characteristic is Bonhoeffer’s conviction that in the Bible we are given the actual Word of God and that this Word is reliable. It is true that he did not formally reject the historical-critical tradition of his training. Acceptance of it, he thought, was a matter of academic honesty. And so he could welcome even the bible-critical work of a man like Bultmann, even though he made it clear that he disagreed with Bultmann’s conclusions. But if not formally abandoning this theoretical stance, Bonhoeffer in practice turned away from it.
Noteworthy in this connection is a letter of April 1936 to his brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, who wondered how one could possibly live the Christian life in the twentieth-century world. Bonhoeffer answered that the Bible alone is the answer to our questions and that we need to ask “persistently and humbly” in order to receive that answer. We have to be persistent in our prayer because God answers us only when we ask and we must be humble because God requires submission to his Word. This means that we are to read the Bible not as a human document but indeed receive it as God’s Word to us. It also means that we let God determine the place where He is to be found. That place is not at all pleasing to the natural man – for it is the place of the cross of Christ. It tells us that we are sinners who can be saved only because of Christ’s sacrifice. It also tells us that those who want to find God must themselves take up the cross, as the Sermon on the Mount demands. This message, in short, is “strange” and contrary to our natural desires; yet it is the only answer to our questions. Bonhoeffer asks his brother-in-law:

Is it ... intelligible to you if I say I am not at any point willing to sacrifice the Bible as this strange word of God, that on the contrary, I ask with all my strength what God is trying to say to us through it? Every other place outside the Bible has become too uncertain for me...

Since I have learned to read the Bible this way – which has not been long at all – it becomes more wonderful for me with each day... You wouldn't believe how happy one is to find the way back from the wrong track of some theologies to this elemental thing.

It was with this conviction, which remained with him for the rest of his life, that Bonhoeffer did his work at Finkenwalde. It is evident in his writings of this period, including his work on discipleship.

The Sermon on the Mount

The Cost of Discipleship consists of four parts. The first is about Jesus’ call to his disciples and the implications of that call; the second deals with the Sermon on the Mount; the third with the sending of Jesus’ disciples to preach the gospel in Israel; and the fourth with church and discipleship as described in Paul’s letters. Although only one part concerns itself with the Sermon on the Mount proper, the entire book, as Bethge writes, owes its style and momentum to that Sermon.

Bonhoeffer’s interest in the Sermon on the Mount predated his appointment at the seminary. He had already dealt with it during his pastorate in Spain in the late 1920s. At that time, however, he had still explained it in the conventional manner, which took the sting out of it. According to this interpretation, the Sermon described a life of sanctification that no mortal could attain and was therefore not to be applied in a literal sense. To do so would be legalistic. All Christ intended was to convince Christians of their inability to keep God’s law and so teach them that they had to rely on grace alone.

After his conversion, however, Bonhoeffer rejected this interpretation. He now began to stress the relationship between faith, obedience, and discipleship and to express the conviction that the Sermon on the Mount was to be taken literally. This was true for both the individual believer and the church. Both had to follow Christ not only in their words, but also, and especially, in their deeds. Bonhoeffer did not elevate the Christian life above doctrinal faithfulness. Doctrine was more important than life. But this was not to say that the two could be separated. Nor was it to say that one would be justified by holding the right doctrine – any more than one would be justified by works.

“We can never appeal to our confession or be saved simply on the ground that we have made it. Neither is the fact that we are members of a Church which has a right confession a claim to God’s favour... God will not ask us in that day whether we were good Protestants, but whether we have done his will.”

Doctrinal orthodoxy, then, had to result in a life of discipleship. And this, Bonhoeffer feared, was lacking among many who called themselves Christians. It was lacking even within the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer supported that church throughout his life, but he found it increasingly necessary to speak out against its shortcomings. Especially distressing to him were the church’s hesitation in openly denouncing the lies and abuses of Hitler’s regime, its failure to give public
support to those who were oppressed and persecuted – Jews and others – and the fact that whenever it did speak up, it was always on its own behalf. “We confess that, although our Church is orthodox as far as her doctrine of grace is concerned,” he wrote, “we are no longer sure that we are members of a Church which follows the Lord.”

**Costly grace**

The cause of the church’s apostasy, Bonhoeffer believed, was the preaching of cheap grace. It was with this topic that he opened *The Cost of Discipleship*. He defined cheap grace as grace that is taught as a mere principle. Making forgiveness into a general truth, cheap grace teaches that those who give intellectual assent to the doctrine of forgiveness automatically receive remission of sins. In a church that preaches cheap grace “the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.” Opposed to this is the costly grace the Bible teaches. Costly grace is “the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has... It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.” Such grace is the grace of discipleship, the grace that costs a man his life but that at the same time gives him the only true life.

Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer writes, established itself in the medieval church. It was under the preaching of cheap grace that the world was “Christianized,” while at the same time the Christian message was secularized. At the time of the Reformation Luther returned to the gospel of costly grace, but the Lutheran church soon forgot his message and example. The effect of the teaching of cheap grace became obvious in the collapse of the Evangelical Church under Hitler. Bonhoeffer compares the three thousand Saxons Charlemagne put to death in his attempt to spread the gospel with the millions who have become “spiritual corpses” because of the message of cheap grace and concludes that that message has been the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works. For cheap grace means disobedience, and disobedience is the enemy of faith.

**Discipleship and obedience**

Bonhoeffer devotes two separate chapters to the call to discipleship and, in connection therewith, to the relationship between faith and obedience. It is here that he makes the well-known statement that “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.” This statement surprised his students who had been taught, in Bethge’s words, to distinguish between faith and obedience: “First comes faith, faith, faith and then perhaps obedience.” Wasn’t Bonhoeffer denying the two great principles of the Reformation, *sola fide* and *sola gratia* – by faith alone and by grace alone?

Bonhoeffer agrees that faith must be placed before obedience, for it is faith that justifies, rather than acts of obedience. But he adds that it is not possible to make a chronological distinction between them. They are inextricably linked and the two propositions must therefore always be placed alongside each other: obedience to the call of Christ is the consequence of faith, but it is also its presupposition and condition. No one should therefore be surprised, Bonhoeffer warns, at his inability to believe if there is a part of his life where he consciously resists or disobeys Jesus’ command. The two go together.

“If the first half of the proposition stands alone, the believer is exposed to the danger of cheap grace, which is another word for damnation. If the second half stands alone, the believer is exposed to the danger of salvation through works, which is also another word for damnation.”

The truth of *sola fide*, *sola gratia* remains. Simple obedience does not imply a doctrine of human merit. “Obedience to the call of Jesus never lies within our own power. If, for instance, we give away all our possessions, that act is not in itself the obedience he demands. In fact, such a step might be the precise opposite of obedience to Jesus, for we might then be choosing a way of life for ourselves, some Christian ideal, or some ideal of Franciscan poverty... The step into the
situation where faith is possible is not an offer which we can make to Jesus, but always his gracious offer to us.” As the work of Christ in the believer, faith and obedience, justification and sanctification are inseparable, and are gifts of grace. “Justification is the new creation of the new person, and sanctification is the preservation and protection of that person until the day of Jesus Christ.”

**Discipleship and the cross**

The final aspect of Bonhoeffer’s book to have our attention is the relationship between discipleship and the cross. Because the believer is “in Christ,” he shares in Christ’s suffering. That suffering implies rejection, for Jesus was a despised Messiah and one is a disciple only by sharing in his rejection and cross. Cross-bearing begins with severing the ties that bind a person to this world. It is the dying of the old nature. “As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

That death can take many forms. In the case of the first disciples it began by leaving their homes and work in order to follow Jesus; in the case of Luther it began by leaving the safety of the monastery and preaching the gospel in a hostile world. And the dying continues for the Christian. “Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ’s sake.” Since it is a result of the believer’s allegiance to Christ, suffering is not surprising, nor is it an unbearable burden. We can, Bonhoeffer writes, refuse to bear it:

> But only to find that we have a still heavier burden to carry – a yoke of our own choosing, the yoke of our self. But Jesus invites all who travail and are heavy laden to throw off their own yoke and take his yoke upon them – and his yoke is easy, and his burden is light....

> Under his yoke we are certain of his nearness and communion. It is he whom the disciple finds as he lifts up his cross.

Rather than being misery and desperation, therefore, discipleship under the cross is “peace and refreshment for the soul, it is the highest joy.”

Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge, distinguishes three periods in Bonhoeffer’s adult life, namely that of the theologian, the Christian, and “the man of his times.” We have paid attention to the second period, which lasted through the 1930s. These are the years of the “orthodox” Bonhoeffer, the man whom many evangelicals considered as one of them. Such was not the case with the Bonhoeffer of the third period, that of the 1940s. At this time, and especially during the prison years, Bonhoeffer introduced ideas – such as “this-worldliness,” “religionless Christianity,” and especially the “weakness and suffering of God” – that disturbed orthodox believers and were, in turn, used by liberal theologians to claim him as the father of their “progressive” and “death-of-God” movements.1 For some decades their interpretation was widely accepted. Evangelicals distanced themselves from Bonhoeffer.

Since the 1980s and ’90s, however, the situation has changed again. Studies have appeared showing the extent to which liberal theologians have misinterpreted and indeed exploited the Bonhoeffer of the later years.2 These studies have gone a long way in restoring his image as a man who in word and deed sought to be guided by God’s Word. They have not, it is true, succeeded in presenting him as a Reformed theologian. The influences of his liberal training are more evident in these final years than they were in the second period. To avoid one-sidedness, it is therefore necessary to speak of the later writings. I am doing this, however, not only to give a more balanced picture of the man. As I hope to show, even in the controversial writings we find insights of enduring value.

**Reclaiming the Old Testament**

Among the differences with the earlier period is the stress Bonhoeffer places in these later years on the Christian’s life in the world. This development is connected with his growing interest in the
Old Testament. It is not so that in his early writings and teachings he ignored that part of the Bible.
Ever since his conversion he had given much attention to the Book of Psalms, which he saw as the
book of Christ and the prayer book of the church. At the Finkenwalde seminary his students were
taught to pray the psalms, as he did himself in his private devotions. Nor was his concern only with
the psalms; other books of the Old Testament had his attention as well in the earlier years.

His interest in the Old Testament increased, however, with time. This was in part a result of the
Nazi ideology, according to which the Old Testament as the book of the Jews was unworthy of the
Christian’s attention. The attack provided a strong impetus for Bonhoeffer and other theologians,
including Karl Barth, to reclaim the Old Testament as book of the Christian church. We will look
here at two aspects of Bonhoeffer’s view of the Old Testament. In the first place there is his
conviction that God is the one God of the entire Bible, of the Old Testament as much as the New.
He is the Father of Jesus Christ, and the Old and New Testament together are the book of Christ.
This means that the Old Testament has an authority that is binding on the interpretation of the
New, just as the New Testament illumines the message of the Old. That confession was not initially
based on exegesis but was a presupposition, a statement of faith, from which Bonhoeffer never
departed, even when other theologians accused him of a “naïve biblicism.”

**Christian this-worldliness**

His intensive reading of the Old Testament caused him in the second place to stress the
importance of the present, earthly, natural life. We live in the present, in what he called the
penultimate, namely that which comes before the last things. From this position we anticipate the
ultimate, that is the resurrection of the dead and the world to come. The ultimate claims our final
allegiance. But this does not mean that we are to disregard the penultimate. On the contrary; the
importance of the earthly life is a biblical given. In the Old Testament God’s blessings often take
the form of earthly goods and redemption in the Old Testament — from Egypt and from the
Babylonian exile — is historical redemption, taking place on this side of death (111-113).

Bonhoeffer does not want us to spiritualize such teachings. Jesus Himself healed people of bodily
infirmities and the Christian hope of resurrection speaks of life on an earth that, although purified
and renewed, is nevertheless this present earth. The Christian hope of the resurrection does not
allow for a renunciation of a world that God created and declared to be very good. The gospel is
not just about the salvation of man; the universe itself will be redeemed. Biblical this-worldliness
must therefore be seen, Bonhoeffer believes, as a condition of the Christian faith. The Christian
hope of resurrection and the new earth can only be properly experienced by those who share the
Old Testament love of the earth and believe in the renewal of God’s entire creation. The
resurrection hope “sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more
sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament” (112).

To clarify his idea of the relationship between the present world and the world to come, between
penultimate and ultimate, Bonhoeffer liked to use the metaphor of polyphony in music. He writes
on May 20, 1944:

> God requires that we should love him eternally with our whole hearts, yet not so as to
> compromise or diminish our earthly affections, but as a kind of cantus firmus to which the
> other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. Earthly affection is one of these contrapuntal
> themes... Where the ground bass is firm and clear, there is nothing to stop the counterpoint
> from being developed to the utmost of its limits (99f.).

**Religionless Christianity**

His Old Testament studies not only influenced Bonhoeffer’s view of Christian this-worldliness, they
also played a part in his demand for a “religionless Christianity.” His use of this term has caused
questions among the orthodox and was explained by liberal theologians as referring to a
Christianity without Christ and without the supernatural.
They could do so, however, only by ignoring much of the rest of his writings. Bonhoeffer defined the “religion” he rejected not as the essence, but as the enemy of biblical faith. For him the word refers in the first place to an overriding concern with the salvation of the individual soul. “Are we not really under the impression,” he writes, “that there are more important things than bothering about such a matter? (Perhaps not more important than the matter itself, but more than bothering about it)” (94). He also points out that a concern with the saving of one’s soul is not known in the Old Testament. Righteousness and the Kingdom of God on this earth are central there. They are still central today. Moreover, as already mentioned, the gospel speaks of the redemption of not only the believer, but of all creation.

The word religion refers for Bonhoeffer also to a turning to God only in times of human weakness; it implies a seeking of him simply as a “God of the gaps” and as a crutch in times of suffering. Bonhoeffer makes clear, however, that God is not a deus ex machina – a means whereby, in Bethge’s words, “we can be rescued from dangers, have our mysteries solved, and hear our questions answered.” As he writes on April 30, 1944, he wants to speak of God “not on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man’s suffering and death but in his life and prosperity” (93). Similarly, Christ’s office is not simply to fulfil our religious needs; he is Lord of our entire life.

In stating that God is not to be sought as a crutch in times of suffering, Bonhoeffer did not imply a disparagement of Christian prayer, nor did he deny that God is a present help in times of need. His entire life makes such a negative interpretation impossible. He himself prayed constantly and he thanked others for their intercessory prayer. He was convinced that God’s promise to give strength and encouragement is sure, but that to receive these gifts the believer has to ask for them – “lest we rely on ourselves and not on him alone.” On August 10, 1944, a few weeks after the failure of the conspiracy, when he knew that a death sentence was a near-certainty, he wrote:

> God does not give us everything we want, but he does fulfil all his promises, i.e. he still remains Lord of the earth and still preserves his Church, constantly renewing our faith and not laying on us more than we can bear, gladdening us with his nearness and help, hearing our prayers and leading us along the best and straightest road to himself. In this way, God creates in us praise for himself. (129)

> Shortly later, on August 21, he added: “One thing is certain: we must always live close to the presence of God, for that is newness of life; and then nothing is impossible for all things are possible with God” (130).

In short, for Bonhoeffer God is not “a stopgap for our fleshly thirst for miracles, but our helper, our ‘rod and staff,’ even in ‘the valley of the shadow of death’” (Huntemann, p. 153).

Yet a third negative connotation that the word religion has for Bonhoeffer is the nurturing of a Christian fortress mentality, a tendency to build walls around the church in an effort to protect it against a hostile world. Bonhoeffer’s experiences with the Confessing Church played a role here. Instead of opposing the anti-Christians policies of the Hitler regime and defending the oppressed, the church spoke up only when its own status and safety were at stake. But Christ, Bonhoeffer points out, is “the man for others” and the church must follow his example. In this connection he issued a criticism of his book The Cost of Discipleship.

> Although he stood behind the general message of that book, he now felt that he should have given more attention to the believer’s task with respect to the world.

Religionless Christianity, then, is for Bonhoeffer a Christianity wherein the believer lives out his faith in the midst of the world. It speaks of a following of Christ by being there for others; it demands of the believer that he take up his cross, so that Christ’s resurrection power may also become manifest; and it demands solidarity with a humanity lost in sin. It therefore implies a complete conversion – a dying of the old nature and a coming to life of the new. And it speaks of a discipleship that finds its strength not just in teaching and preaching, but also, and especially, in Christian deeds – “in praying for and doing right by our fellow men” (160).
The “weakness of God”

More questionable than the foregoing is Bonhoeffer’s speaking about a God who is weak and who suffers. He speaks like this, for example, in his prison letter of July 16, 1944, where he writes:

“Man’s religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world; he uses God as a Deus ex machina. The Bible however directs him to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help... The God of the Bible ... conquers power and space in the world by his weakness” (122).

As Reformed theologian B. Kamphuis remarks, it is at this point that the effects of Bonhoeffer’s Bible-critical education come to the fore. For one thing, in speaking about God’s suffering instead of Christ’s, Bonhoeffer fails to do justice to the doctrine of the Trinity by ignoring the difference between Father and Son. Kamphuis sees here also the consequences of a view (which he says Bonhoeffer shared to some extent) according to which the origin of revelation is not to be sought in God, but ultimately in man, so that whatever can be said about Christ’s being more than man must nevertheless be explained with reference to his humanity. “If in speaking of Christ’s divinity we take our starting point in his weakness as man,” he writes, “then this will influence the doctrine about God himself: God then appears in Christ in his powerlessness” (Kamphuis, “Een andere Bonhoeffer?”, pp. 182-4).

There is, however, another element in Bonhoeffer’s speaking of the weakness of God. It also served to express his thoughts about the mysteries of divine providence. He knew that “the weakness of God is stronger than man” – his entire life gives evidence of that conviction. But he also knew of God’s apparent absence. His situation was similar to that of Old Testament believers who experienced times when evil flourished and the righteous were oppressed; when it seemed that God indeed allowed Himself to be pushed to the sidelines. And it was not only the psalmists who pondered this mystery. Old Testament prophets also spoke of a God who concealed his omnipotence in apparent powerlessness. These prophets addressed those who failed to recognize God in present events because these events “seemed to reveal the power of the Assyrian and Babylonian gods. Even there, however, the prophets saw the action of God who judges his people through the Assyrians, the rod of his anger (Isaiah 10:5), and through Nebuchadnezzar, his servant (Jeremiah 27:6)” (Kuske, p. 151).

Theology of the cross

Finally, Bonhoeffer’s speaking of God’s apparent powerlessness and absence must be understood in light of his conviction that the Christian life is not a life of worldly triumph. It is, instead, a life of following Christ the crucified and therefore of cross-bearing. Christ has indeed been given all power in heaven and on earth, but in our present world that power is still hidden. In a country like Hitler’s Germany, where worldly success was worshiped even by many church members, the hiddenness of Christ’s power needed to be proclaimed. Christians had to be reminded that the church of Christ was still a church under the cross and that this would continue until Christ’s return. In this respect also, Bonhoeffer’s teaching continues to be relevant. Dr. Kamphuis (to turn to him once more) has related it to current discussions among Reformed and evangelical Christians about the gifts of the Spirit, power ministry, faith healing, and so on. He writes:

*I think it is very important that in these discussions we give attention to Bonhoeffer’s speaking about Christ who stands at the centre as the crucified. Of course, there are all sorts of other topics of interest in the discussions: the question whether we may still expect special spiritual gifts..., questions about the relationship between Christ and the Spirit and between Word and Spirit. But I do not think that these constitute the real problems and give rise to the deepest disagreements. What I fear especially is a theology of glory, one which now already possesses and is able to demonstrate the victory of Christ. But where is then Christ’s cross? The crucified one is the resurrected and present, living Lord. But he is present among us only as the crucified. Only in this manner can I speak rightly of the great things which God does in his congregation.*

(Kamphuis, “Christus in het midden,” pp. 11f)
Here we come once more to the essence of Bonhoeffer’s teaching from *The Cost of Discipleship* to the last of the prison letters: Christianity is not first of all a system of doctrine; it is about being “in Christ” the crucified and risen one and it therefore means that the disciple must die with Him in order that he may also be raised with Him. This theology of the cross relates to the Christian’s task with respect to the world, the task of proclaiming the message of salvation. It is not by miracles and displays of power, but by preaching the gospel of the cross that the church fulfills that task. Unless it does so, Bonhoeffer tells us, it will fail in its God-given mission with respect to a lost world.

FG Oosterhoff

© 2013

www.christianstudylibrary.org

1 Many of these ideas are to be found in Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge. References to this book will be given in the text by page number(s) only.

2 See, for example, the study by the Reformed German theologian Georg Huntemann, titled (in the English translation) *The Other Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 1993 (date of original German version: 1989). There are other Reformed theologians who have expressed sympathy with much of what Bonhoeffer wrote. Among them is Dr. B. Kamphuis, professor of systematic theology at the Theological University, Kampen, who gives, however, a more critical assessment of Bonhoeffer’s writings than does Huntemann.