



Bonhoeffer – Discipleship Away from the World

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Asking Bonhoeffer to answer the question...

- ▶ What does the next 500 years hold for Christianity generally and Lutheranism specifically?
- ▶ I believe he offers one facet of the overall answer – no pretense towards comprehensiveness.
- ▶ Bonhoeffer bequeaths to us an aporia – a generative conundrum that stimulates us to think well about the future.
- ▶ Like the end of the gospel of Mark – Bonhoeffer's theological trajectory is interrupted at a key question, not a solution or program to be followed.



Bonhoeffer's theological trajectory

- ▶ Born in a household largely indifferent to religion
- ▶ Becomes fascinated with theology as a teenager
- ▶ Receives first doctorate at age 21
 - ▶ German liberal theology – he diagnosed it as reduction of Christian discipleship to bourgeois citizenship ethics
 - ▶ Enlightenment and Romanticism had both reduced the “supernatural” elements of Christianity to generalizable, formalist ethical schema (as with Bonhoeffer’s teacher Adolph von Harnack)
 - ▶ Foreshadowing – when Christianity is reduced to citizenship ethics, then the state and not the church decides the CONTENT of Christian ethics. “If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction.”



Christology

- ▶ Berlin University Christology lectures (occasionally published separately as "Christ the Center," also in BW 12)
 - ▶ Christ is at the center of the church's life, but Christ is found at the margins. Therefore the church's center must be the margins
 - ▶ Sermon on the Mount: How to hermeneutically interpret what Christ is saying?

Sermon on the Mount and Lutheran Hermeneutics: The Crux of Cheap and Costly Grace

- ▶ “I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this idiocy sky-high- like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt-out shells behind. The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount”.
- ▶ Bonhoeffer feared an application of Lutheran hermeneutics that would render the Sermon on the Mount solely in terms of the second use of the law (exposing sin) rather than as an actual formative ethical mandate (Wilken story)
- ▶ A key problem dating back to the Reformation: clarity of scripture vs. law/gospel commentary

Cheap vs. Costly Grace

- ▶ "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap?..."

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. 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.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

Political Context

- ▶ Dynamicity of discipleship – already in *Discipleship*, key notions of following a dynamic Christ as opposed to a static form of ethics are starting to emerge
- ▶ However, this often leads to Bonhoeffer adopting the idiom of the Christian life as a life set apart from the “world” – again, in the context of his seeing the Christian gospel sell out to worldly ethics
 - ▶ We do not have an ethic. We follow a living Christ.



Life Together as instance of “thick” Christian practice – private confession and forgiveness

- ▶ In confession there occurs a breakthrough to assurance. Why is it often easier for us to acknowledge our sins before God than before another believer? God is holy and without sin, a just judge of evil, and an enemy of all disobedience. But another Christian is sinful, as we are, knowing from personal experience the night of secret sin. Should we not find it easier to go to one another than to the holy God? But if this is not the case, we must ask ourselves whether we have often not been deluding ourselves about our confession of sin to God – whether we have not instead been confessing our sins to ourselves and also forgiving ourselves. And is not the reason for our innumerable relapses and for the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living from self-forgiveness and not from the real forgiveness of our sins? Self-forgiveness can never lead to the break with sin. This can only be accomplished God's judging and pardoning Word.

Who can give us the assurance that we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God in the confession and forgiveness of our sins? God gives us this assurance through one another. The other believer breaks the circle of self-deception. Those who confess their sins in the presence of another Christian know that they are no longer alone with themselves; they experience the presence of God, the reality of the other...The other Christian has been given to me so that I may be assured here and now of the reality of God in judgment and grace. As the acknowledgment of my sin to another believer frees me from the grip of self-deception, so, too, the promise of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by another believer as God's command and in God's name.

- ▶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtress (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 112-13.

“Thick” Christian practice as a formation in worldly distinctiveness

- ▶ The Bible does two things: convey the living Christ and form the church.
- ▶ Emperor's new clothes question: what does it mean to follow Christ? Christ followed in the actual Christian community made up of embodied beings who will bring me up short.
- ▶ Against projection
 - ▶ “Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idolized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands set up by their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly. It is not we who build. Christ builds the church. Whoever is minded to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it, for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess he builds. We must proclaim, he builds. We must pray to him, and he will build. We do not know his plan. We cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are the times of collapse are for him the great times of construction. It may be that the times which from a human point of view are great times for the church are times when it's pulled down. It is a great comfort which Jesus gives to his church. You confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is not your providence. Do what is given to you, and do well, and you will have done enough.... Live together in the forgiveness of your sins. Forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.”