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DISCIPLESHIP IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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At the heart of the biblical text which provided the motivation and shaped the practice of modern Protestant missions is the summons of the risen Christ to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19). The influence of this 'Great Commission' has been enormous and the history of the Western missionary movement reveals that obedience to what was seen as Christ's command became the driving force which sent an army of evangelists to every corner of the globe. Despite the existence of other motives for missionary witness within the Gospels, the idea of obedience to a command, of the *duty* of mission, tended to overwhelm alternative texts with the obvious danger that service for Christ, even when involving great personal sacrifice, might become compromised by a spirit of legalism.¹

In relation to our subject, we may ask whether, or to what extent, the missionary task identified in this favoured text has been properly understood? In many of the debates which have taken place in Evangelical circles concerning the relationship between evangelism and social action, appeal has been made to this passage in defence of the priority of evangelism as though the passage self-evidently justifies such a position. But, reading this text within the context of Matthew's Gospel as a whole, we must ask what is implied by the activity of 'making disciples', and whether this is the same thing as multiplying 'converts' by means of a verbal presentation of the gospel, often shorn of any mention of the call to discipleship. Or again, and perhaps even more disturbingly, we must surely ask whether it is possible to 'make disciples'; whether, that is, we can engage in faithful mission, without first reflecting on whether we ourselves meet the criteria by which we might credibly claim to be disciples.

Questions like these are both necessary and urgent in view of the fact that in this same Gospel Jesus is heard repeatedly warning that many people who confess him as 'Lord' and claim to be his disciples have no

¹ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 341.

valid grounds for such confidence. His warnings make it abundantly plain that neither a correct form of words, nor the apparent ability to preach with prophetic power, nor even the exercise of charismatic gifts are sufficient criteria to claim the name 'disciple'; that title belongs only to those who *do the will of my Father who is in heaven* (Matt. 7:21-23). Discipleship then is defined in a fundamental way in relation to *praxis*; it involves a distinctive way of being human in which the unique life of Jesus of Nazareth continues to be visible before a watching world as individuals and communities confessing him as 'Lord' endeavour to 'walk as Jesus did' (1 John 2:6).

THE CHALLENGE OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

If the teaching of Christ compels us to look afresh, with humility and trembling, at the familiar words of the 'Great Commission', so too, I suggest, does the witness of Christian history. In 1937 in the deepening shadows of pre-war Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer completed a series of studies on the subject of discipleship which were published under the title *The Cost of Discipleship*. In a socio-political context in which German Christians were making terrible compromises with an evil and idolatrous ideology, Bonhoeffer subjected his own Lutheran tradition to a searching critique, arguing that Martin Luther's liberating stress on the grace of God had hardened into a lifeless dogma which divorced his doctrine from its 'inevitable corollary, the obligation of discipleship'.² In language that has become familiar, Bonhoeffer claimed that German Christianity had turned the costly, demanding grace of God into 'cheap grace without discipleship'. Thus emptied of its ethical and moral demands, Christianity had achieved 'success' – in that it became socially acceptable – but at the immense cost of 'secularizing the Christian religion as never before'. Christianity, Bonhoeffer said, had become indistinguishable from 'bourgeois respectability', reduced to weekly religious acts which provided spiritual reassurance to the comfortable, for whom 'cheap grace' offered a way of avoiding the need even to attempt to follow Christ. In a sentence we may well ponder, Bonhoeffer concluded: 'It is terrifying to realise what use can be made of genuine evangelical doctrine.'³

Tragically, Bonhoeffer's testimony went largely unheard, but as Europe was engulfed in the mechanized violence of modern warfare and the

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

atrocities of the Holocaust, his critical analysis was vindicated as German Christianity proved itself powerless in the face of a pagan ideology. Ernst Christian Helmreich, at the conclusion of a massive study of the responses of the German churches to the rise of Hitler, concluded that they were slow to react 'and cannot be said to have won any glorious battles against Nazi activities and Weltanschauung'.⁴ On April 8, 1945, Bonhoeffer's prophetic voice was silenced by a Nazi execution squad and he sealed his testimony to 'costly grace' with his own blood.

LESSONS FROM THE HOLOCAUST

We will return to Bonhoeffer's work later, but first, I want to introduce a profoundly searching analysis of Western culture which will serve to underline the urgency and seriousness with which the subject of discipleship needs to be examined today. We will discover that Bonhoeffer's clarion call has lost none of its relevance and power and the failure of German Christianity in the 1940s, instead of being a kind of aberration of merely academic interest to us, is in fact a startling wake-up call to the Christian movement in the age of globalization.

While Dietrich Bonhoeffer was immersed in the struggles of the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1940s, a teenage Polish boy named Zygmunt Bauman was studying the works of Karl Marx as a member of the Red Army in Soviet Russia. Driven by a Jewish passion for social justice, the young Bauman became a Communist, but quickly concluded that the Marxist vision of a humane society was being betrayed in the Soviet Union. He became a sociologist, teaching at the University of Warsaw until 1968 when an anti-semitic purge forced him and his wife Janina into exile in Israel. This was a shattering experience, made more difficult by the inability of the Baumans to settle in the Jewish state. Israel, Bauman says, 'was a nationalistic country, and we had just run away from nationalism'.⁵ An invitation to become head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Leeds in 1972 provided a way out of the impasse and led to his long exile in Britain, which he has described as 'my second home'.⁶ Now 80 years old, Zygmunt Bauman continues to lecture

⁴ Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 463.

⁵ Madeleine Bunting, 'Zygmunt Bauman: Passion and Pessimism', *Guardian Literary Review*, 5 April 2003, p. 23.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000 [2nd ed.]).

and write, producing on average one major book every year, all of them characterised by an extraordinary degree of critical insight and undiminished moral passion.

In 1991, Bauman published *Modernity and the Holocaust*, a volume that created a tremendous stir, being warmly welcomed in Germany but provoking fierce controversy in Britain, America and Israel, where the author was accused of 'letting the Germans off the hook'. Bauman wrote this work as the result of the publication of his wife's memoirs, *Winter in the Morning*, in which she recalled the horrors of the 1940s and (in his words) 'opened my eyes to what we normally refuse to look upon'.⁷ In the introduction to *Modernity and the Holocaust* he confesses that he had previously accepted the widespread assumption that the ghastly events of that period were correctly understood as 'an interruption of the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity'.⁸ The Holocaust was, in other words, an *aberration*. It constituted a terrible and almost inexplicable *interruption* of the 'ascent of man', a *reversal* to the unbridled passions and barbarism from which modernity has, mercifully, delivered us. However, Bauman's reflections on the subject led him to the surprising and alarming conclusion that, since the Holocaust 'was born and executed in our modern, rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement', it could not be explained away as simply 'a Jewish problem', but is a problem belonging squarely within *modern 'society, civilization and culture'*.⁹ Bauman's thesis then, is that the Holocaust must be seen as 'a rare, yet significant and reliable test of the hidden possibilities of modern society'¹⁰ and that, as such, the warnings it contains need to be heeded wherever modernization is occurring and should provoke serious critical examination of some fundamental and largely unquestioned assumptions concerning the culture of the modern world.

I wish to suggest that this remarkable analysis of the culture of modernity can illuminate the problems that Christians appear to have in

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 208. The German sociologist Hans Joas, commenting on the impact of Bauman's work in Germany, says that *Modernity and the Holocaust* 'struck the German debate like a bolt of lightning' and that it is 'one of the very few truly sociological attempts to interpret this most horrible fact of modern history'. Hans Joas, *War and Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 163.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. viii.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. x. (Italics in the original text.)

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 12.

living as the disciples of Christ in the context of Western culture. At the same time, it highlights the urgent need to discover ways of recovering the revolutionary *praxis* by which such discipleship is expressed, while also suggesting that Bonhoeffer was exactly right to stress the *cost* of following Jesus.

Bauman refers several times to an 'etiological myth' which underpins modern Western culture and has become deeply embedded within the consciousness of modern people. According to this myth, humankind has emerged from pre-social barbarity and, despite lamentable lapses into primitive modes of behaviour, progress toward the time when the entire world will be 'civilized' is continuing. Viewed through the lens of this myth, the Holocaust can be understood in only one way: it was a ghastly eruption of primitive passions, a setback on the path of progress, and a summons to redouble our efforts to extend the control of civilized values across the world. But what if such a reaction ignores and suppresses evidence that there are fundamental errors in the modern worldview? And what if our failure to submit our theory of modernity to serious critical scrutiny and a determination to simply press on with the modern project may actually increase the possibility that human tragedies on the scale of Auschwitz and the Gulags *will be repeated in the future*?

Bauman's critical analysis of modernity in the light of the Holocaust focuses first on the emergence of the kind of technical rationality which made possible the speedy and efficient accomplishment of defined goals within modern organizations. Nation states and business corporations alike require forms of bureaucratic organization in which precision, clarity, absolute discretion, and submission to authority become central features. In the classical period of sociology Max Weber had identified the emergence of bureaucrats operating according to such a technical rationality and 'without regard to persons', as a crucial factor in modernity. Weber himself recognised the dark side of this development and, in a famous passage, wondered whether the human spirit would eventually rise up in revolt against the restrictions and humiliations it suffered in such a technical culture. The emergence of an army of 'specialists without spirit', combined with the power which the possession of material goods had come to exercise over the lives of modern people, resulted in human beings finding themselves trapped in what Weber called 'an iron cage':

The rosy blush of... the Enlightenment seems to be irretrievably fading and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.... No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new

prophets will arise, or whether there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance.¹¹

According to Zygmunt Bauman, once we understand this central feature of the modern world, the Holocaust stands revealed as an almost quintessentially modern event: the systematic extermination of vast numbers of people was possible only in a context in which a veritable army of bureaucrats functioned efficiently and without regard to the ultimate outcomes of their individual actions. Thousands of Germans who, outside business hours were respectable members of society, carried out their work under the influence of 'moral sleeping pills', acting as functionaries in a vast bureaucratic system. As Bauman says, most participants simply composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, talked on the telephone, destroying a whole people 'by sitting at their desks'.¹² Indeed, after the war many of those accused of crimes against humanity argued precisely that their actions had been done in the line of duty and so possessed *no moral value*. And they had a point, says Bauman, when we realise that such arguments differed little from what 'sociology has been saying all along, or from the seldom-questioned, and still less frequently assailed, common sense of our modern, rational society'.¹³

Bauman's critical reflection concerning the way in which his own academic discipline had marginalized issues of ethical and moral concern broadens out into a remarkable discussion of science in general which he describes as being '*a language game with a rule forbidding the use of teleological vocabulary*'.¹⁴ From its beginnings modern science raised the flag of value-freedom on its standard as it marched into the future, abandoning the binding force of all normative thinking, particularly that of religion and ethics. Once having attained a position of cultural dominance, science effectively 'silenced the preachers of morality' and in the process became 'morally blind and speechless'.¹⁵ But having thus dismantled the barriers that might have closed off the route to genocide, science became compliant with unscrupulous power and proved itself impotent in preventing the state from engaging in systematic crimes against humanity. The Holocaust thus exposes the dangerous vacuum that exists at the heart

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin, 1985 [1930]), p. 181-2.

¹² *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 24.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 170. (Italics in the original.)

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 108.

of modern cultures in which the power to inflict unimaginable levels of destruction on the world is developed while normative philosophical and ethical questions are placed off-limits at the very point at which they most need to be the subject of serious and urgent discussion. The Holocaust is thus revealed, in the words of the German historian Hans Mommsen, as the *mene tekel* of the modern state.¹⁶

THE ROOTS OF ETHICS

In 1990 Zygmunt Bauman's book on the Holocaust was awarded the European Amalfi Prize and he delivered a lecture at the prize-giving ceremony entitled 'Social Manipulation of Morality'. He confessed himself happy that the central message of the book had been recognised as vitally important, a message he summed up as being 'about the hidden and unseemly face of our confident, affluent, brave world, and the dangerous game this world plays with the human moral impulse'.¹⁷ Modern societies divorced morality from utility and, while this separation lies at the foundation of many spectacular scientific successes, it must also be linked to civilization's 'most terrifying crimes', so that the reconciliation and reuniting of science and ethics 'is the one chance our world may have to come to terms with its own awesome powers'.¹⁸

How might such a reconciliation be brought about? In the first place, Bauman insists that we need to revise our understanding of the nature of the moral impulse within human beings. In the modern world ethics (like religion) has been treated as a purely human invention designed to function as the glue that holds society together. Morals are socially constructed and fulfil a strictly utilitarian purpose. But the inadequacy of such an understanding of morality is clearly exposed by the horrors that have scarred the history of twentieth-century Europe. What is more, it becomes impossible to speak about 'right' and 'wrong' when passing judgement on people who had complied with whatever was decreed as 'moral' within the society of which they were part. In a devastating sentence Bauman comments that sitting in judgement on the perpetrators of Auschwitz 'was not an easy task for those who guarded the secrets of the Gulag and those who were secretly preparing for Hiroshima'.¹⁹ What is required then is a fundamental rethink of the nature and source of morality and a search for a

¹⁶ Quoted by Bauman, *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁷ The lecture is printed at the end of the second edition of the book: *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

new theory open to the possibility that normative ethics belong to 'the very modality of human existence'.

In a remarkable passage toward the end of the Amalfi lecture, Bauman reflects on the consequences of the loss of belief in God for modern societies. The era which witnessed the unleashing of unprecedented technological powers was the period in which the world was declared to be *disenchanted* by Max Weber, and released from the moral restraints linked to belief in the Creator by Nietzsche's announcement of the *death of God*. The removal of God 'created a vacancy': the office of 'supreme legislator-cum-manager, of the designer and administrator of the world order, was now horrifyingly empty' and this vacancy on the throne became 'a standing and tempting invitation to visionaries and adventurers'. Now humanity, unaided by normative ethics and unrestrained by a sense of accountability to the Creator, set about the task of restraining chaos and recreating the world. The 'classless society, the race-pure society, the Great Society were now the task of man'. But precisely the combination of enormous technological power and a determination to use this in the service of a series of humanly-conceived, mundane visions of utopia made the Gulags, Auschwitz and Hiroshima possible. There are, Bauman concludes, many tasks human rulers may perform, but constructing 'a perfect world order is not... one of them'.²⁰

Zygmunt Bauman writes as a sociologist, not as a theologian. Using the imagery of the world as a garden to be controlled, designed and managed, he says, perhaps wistfully, that in a world densely populated with knowledgeable gardeners 'no room seems to be left for the Gardener Supreme, the gardener of gardeners'. Nonetheless, it is clear to him that the roots of morality have to be sought 'beneath societal arrangements' and that far from being the product of human society, the origins of morality transcend any and all merely local, particular contexts. He constantly

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-19. This passage serves as a reminder of other secular analyses of modernity which focus attention on the problem of defining 'right' and 'wrong' in the absence of God. For example, Albert Camus' penetrating critique of revolution in *The Rebel* contains very similar language to that used by Bauman: 'When man submits God to moral judgement, he kills him in his own heart. And then what is the basis of morality? God is denied in the name of justice but can the idea of justice be understood without the idea of God? Have we not arrived at absurdity?' Elsewhere Camus states this same problem in a memorable phrase: 'The sky is empty, the earth delivered into the hands of power without principles.' Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 57, 117.

repeats the view that powerful moral drives 'have a pre-societal origin' and that human societies, far from magically creating ethical standards and behaviour, have often made 'immoral conduct more, rather than less, plausible'.²¹

The implication of this is that it is perfectly possible to behave ethically and to find oneself in *conflict* with societal norms. Indeed, acting morally may frequently involve 'taking a stance dubbed and decreed anti-social or subversive by the powers that be *and* by public opinion'. Ethical convictions do *not* necessarily contribute to social cohesion and unity; indeed they may in many situations become profoundly counter-cultural. Doing what is 'right' may involve 'resistance to societal authority and action aimed at weakening its grip'.²² At this point Zygmunt Bauman meets Dietrich Bonhoeffer as sociological analysis of the Holocaust and its lessons for the modern world begins to overlap with the experience of the isolated German pastor who wrote, 'Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord's suffering and rejection and crucifixion.'²³

THE CHALLENGE OF DISCIPLESHIP

In what ways then can my earlier claim that Bauman's work illuminates the problems that Christians have in living as the disciples of Jesus in the context of the modern world be justified? Bauman is obviously aware of the ethical failure of German Christianity at the time of the Holocaust, observing that the churches failed to resist the evils of the time and that the exceptions were limited to a relatively small number of isolated individuals. It seems to me that Bauman's exposition of the power of a technical rationality, accompanied by the rigid separation of life into private and public spheres, and the exclusion of ethical and religious discourse from the latter, helps to explain *why* Bonhoeffer's contemporaries had secularised the Christian faith, making it indistinguishable from 'bourgeois respectability'.

And this was far from being a failure of the pre-war German churches alone: Western Christianity in general has been profoundly shaped by the modern culture which is the subject of Bauman's searching critique.

²¹ *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 198. On the same page he makes the significant observation that moral people can be driven into immoral action 'provided that they are convinced that the experts... have defined their actions as necessary'.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 71.

Evidence of this (if any is required) can be found in Peter Berger's sociological analysis of twentieth-century American Christianity, published in 1961 under the title, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*. Berger discusses the core values that dominate American life, including the crucial acceptance of the need to operate smoothly within 'the large bureaucratic structures that dominate most of our life today'.²⁴ In this context, American Christianity remained strong and prosperous and church leaders were inclined to assume that it continued to exercise considerable influence over the American people. The reality, says Berger, is that 'the person listening to the minister in church is a radically different one from the person who makes economic decisions the next day' because in the professional sphere actions become determined 'by a radically different logic – the logic of business, industry, politics, or whatever other sector of public life the individual is related to'.²⁵ Berger's conclusion, which is strikingly similar to Bonhoeffer's in the German situation forty years earlier, is that 'church membership in no way means adherence to a set of values at variance with those of the general society; rather it means a *stronger and more explicitly religious affirmation of the same values held by the community at large*'.²⁶

With an insight that now appears to have been prophetic, Berger suggested that the task of American Christianity in such a context was that of securing its *disestablishment*; it needed to break free from a fatal entanglement with a culture that guaranteed it prosperity, but at the terrible cost of making discipleship all but impossible. In words that set the agenda for our further discussion, Berger observed that the informal 'religious establishment' in America was 'designed to prevent the encounter with the Christian message'.²⁷ He continues:

To say the least, it is difficult to imagine how the religiously mature, and psychologically adjusted church member in our situation can come to terms with the naked horror of Calvary, or the blazing glory of Easter morning. Both his religion and his culture compel him to sentimentalize, neutralize, assimilate these Christian images. If he did not do so, they would challenge

²⁴ Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies: Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41. (Italics mine.)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

his religiosity and his respectability and might even threaten his so-called mental health.²⁸

The root cause of the problems identified here, I suggest, is that the centuries-long assumption that Western Christianity exists within a cultural context compatible with the faith of Christ meant that it largely failed to recognise the significance of the changes brought about by modernity, and so ended up, in Lesslie Newbigin's words, as 'an advanced case of syncretism'.²⁹ Newbigin's claim that European Christianity has lived so long in a state of peaceful co-existence with a post-Enlightenment culture that it is almost impossible for it to recover the standpoint of a genuinely missionary approach to that culture, corresponds both to Bonhoeffer's critique of the church in the 1930s, and to Bauman's description of the privatization and domestication of ethical imperatives within modern culture.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the challenge of the call to discipleship in a world within which the kind of culture analysed by Bauman is being globalized, is more urgent than ever. Much of Bauman's later work is focused on the emergence of post-modernity and the human consequences of economic globalization.³⁰ These books seem to me to offer a most valuable resource for the understanding of the times in which we live and they serve to highlight both the great urgency of the call to discipleship, and the opportunity presented by the situation today. Commenting on the positive responses of many young people to Bauman's work, his fellow sociologist Richard Sennett has said: 'Contrary to all the clichés about young people being disengaged and not interested, they are attracted to the idea of ethical action ... they want something with teeth. So it really appeals to them when someone tells them that they're responsible for relating to others in an ethical way.'³¹

This surely suggests to us that a Christianity faithful to the call of Christ, a call that (to quote Bonhoeffer) drags the disciple 'out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity', and involves a faith that

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), p. 22-3.

³⁰ See, for example, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); *Liquid Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); and *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

³¹ Quoted in Bunting, 'Zygmunt Bauman: Passion and Pessimism', p. 20.

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becomes real in acts of ethical obedience, so offering an alternative way of being human to that seen as normative within the modern world, can respond to the deep longings of a generation wearied by the superficiality and greed of the hollowed-out culture of the West. Almost the last words Lesslie Newbigin uttered in public in 1996 were these:

I have said that this so-called Western, modern, scientific, free market culture is the most powerful in the world at the present time.... And it seems to me that in the century that lies ahead of us these are the three major factors that will compete for the allegiance of the human family: the gospel, the free market, and Islam.... As to Islam: while the other great world faiths are deeply significant and worthy of respect, none of them makes that same claim for universal significance. As to the free market: the crucial question is going to be whether the Christian Church can recover its confidence in the gospel in order to be able to challenge with confidence the enormous power of this ideology that now rules us.³²

Or, to revert to Weber's imagery: is it possible that Christians can break out of the 'iron cage' in which they, along with other people, find themselves imprisoned? Is it conceivable that 'entirely new prophets will arise', able to speak a liberating word that breaks open the confined, one-dimensional worldview in which we are trapped? And, in this context, will Christians give serious and sustained attention to the question of what it might mean to be the followers of Christ, seeking to fulfil the unchanged mandate to make disciples 'of all nations' in a globalized world?

DISCIPLESHIP IN A MISSIONARY CHURCH

In now turning to consider the challenges facing Christians in the Western world who seek a recovery of genuine discipleship, I want first to notice some significant changes that have taken place in recent years and have set this discussion in a rather different context to that within which Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*. Not that his exposition has lost any of its power and relevance; on the contrary, it seems to me that the flow of history since the 1940s may mean that we are now in a situation in which Christians are better able to hear Bonhoeffer's voice and more likely to respond to his call.

In the first place, the demise of Christendom is now widely recognised, and from every side one hears calls for the creation of new forms of the

³² Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 118-19.

church in which the demands of discipleship will be treated seriously. As far back as the middle of the twentieth century the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner had recognised that European Christians now found themselves in a *diaspora* situation in which the faith that once dominated the continent would 'cease to be a religion of growth and would become a religion of choice'. The time had arrived for Catholics to wake up to the fact that a 'homogeneous Christian West' was a thing of the past and to find the courage to abandon 'the old facades which have nothing or very little behind them'. In a remarkable passage that challenges Christians within and beyond the Catholic tradition, Rahner pleaded:

Let us get away from the tyranny of statistics. For the next hundred years they are always going to be against us, if we ever let them speak out of turn. One real conversion in a great city is something more splendid than the spectacle of a whole remote village going to the sacraments.³³

In the meantime, in North America, despite the continuing strength of the kind of culture-religion discussed and critiqued by Peter Berger, an ever-growing number of Christians have recognised the changed historical and cultural context within which they are placed and are now engaged in the search for new models of the church-in-mission. Douglas John Hall speaks for many when he says that the Christian movement in the West can have a significant future in which it will rediscover faithfulness to the apostolic vision and be of 'immense service to our beleaguered world', but that this will happen *only* if Christians stop trying to have 'the kind of future that nearly sixteen centuries of official Christianity in the Western world have conditioned us to covet'.³⁴ Elsewhere Hall has responded to the challenge posed by Berger's earlier work and has discussed at great length exactly what theology, worship and mission might look like in the context of a disestablished Christianity in North America. In such a situation Christians would be freed to live as a community of disciples whose life together would be shaped by kingdom values.³⁵

³³ I have quoted Rahner from Douglas John Hall's book, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 221-2. The original source is Rahner's *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

³⁴ Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. ix.

³⁵ See his three volumes of contextual theology under the general title *Christian Theology in a North American Context – Volume 1, Thinking the*

The second development that has placed us in a changed context relates to the emergence of what is now called 'World Christianity'. At the Lausanne Congress in 1974 the implicit assumption held by many Western Christians that their faith was a culture-free expression of the gospel was repeatedly called into question by fellow-believers who, coming to Christ from other cultural situations, recognised the absurdity of such a claim. The electrifying address of Rene Padilla in which he exposed an Evangelicalism which peddled 'cheap grace' around the world and lived in an easy compromise with ideologies that were in conflict with the gospel, can still stir the spirit and trouble the conscience more than a quarter-of-a-century after it was delivered. Padilla challenged his hearers to leave Lausanne 'with a repentant attitude with regard to our enslavement to the world and our arrogant triumphalism, with a sense of our helplessness to break away from our bonds, and yet also with great confidence in God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ...'.³⁶

In the decades that have elapsed since that historic event, Christianity has continued to grow across the Southern hemisphere and the historical significance of this remarkable phenomenon, and its likely importance with regard to the future of our world, is increasingly recognised. In relation to our concern with discipleship, the new Christian heartlands in Africa, Latin America and Asia are home to millions of believers who belong to churches of the poor. As in the past, the gospel has taken root in contexts characterised by suffering and deprivation where it enables vast numbers of people to survive in appalling social and economic conditions with great dignity and with an extraordinary sense of hope. However, as the members of these growing and maturing churches become aware of the fact that their poverty is not unrelated to the spread of Western modernity and the impact of an economistic worldview on their traditional cultures, they may well wonder why Christians no longer live as the 'Third Race', displaying to the world an alternative economics and a distinctive understanding of what it means to be a human being. There are many indications that Christians in the South feel a growing sense of impatience with their brothers and sisters in the North for the illicit compromises they appear to make with a secular, materialist and frequently violent culture,

Faith (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); *Volume 2, Professing the Faith* (1993); *Volume 3, Confessing the Faith* (1998).

³⁶ Rene Padilla, 'Evangelism and the World' in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *Let The Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: Worldwide Publications, 1975), p. 145-6.

and their questions simply increase the urgency with which the issue of discipleship needs to be addressed.³⁷

There is a third factor at work today which places discipleship high on our agenda, namely the deepening sense of crisis *within* modern, Western culture and the indications of a growing search for alternatives to a way of life that creates such profound unhappiness and threatens the very future of our beautiful planet. We have noted earlier the evidence of a positive reaction to the work of Zygmunt Bauman on the part of Western young people and there *is* evidence (to use the subtitle of a book by John Carroll) that the Western world is *dying for want of a story*.³⁸ Jeremy Seabrook, in a profoundly moving study of the problem of ageing, articulates a question that is asked by a growing number of people in the modern world:

When we consider the condition of the elderly, and the way in which they are disproportionately represented among the disadvantaged of the earth, a central question, which many had thought laid to rest by the global triumph of industrial society, returns to haunt us. Is the creation of ever more wealth synonymous with the betterment of human lives? Is the well-being of vulnerable people really dependent upon perpetually rising incomes, or does the creation of wealth itself militate against social cohesion, belonging and solidarity?³⁹

Surely in a world where the centuries-old institutional forms of Christianity are crumbling, where millions of new believers in the churches of the poor demonstrate the reality of a radical faith in God and ask why we are so wedded to an excess of material things, and at a time

³⁷ For example, consider the words of Alex Araujo, a Brazilian Christian, spoken at the Iguassu Consultation in 1999: 'the Western church may not be able to escape the strong grip of economic globalization without the help of the emerging church. What does the church look like when it is so heavily influenced by material affluence and driven by the mechanistic values of growth and efficiency? How do brothers and sisters who live at the margins of this worldwide globalization pattern experience communion with Christ and his family? We must learn to listen to and learn from them.' Araujo's paper was entitled 'Globalization and World Evangelism', in William D. Taylor (ed.), *Global Missiology for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 64.

³⁸ See John Carroll, *The Western Dreaming* (Sydney: Harper/Collins, 2001).

³⁹ Jeremy Seabrook, *A world growing old* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 51. Seabrook is an extraordinarily insightful writer, see his earlier book *The Race to Riches: The Human Cost of Wealth* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1988).

when Western young people seek for ethical values and a sense of purpose in life, we must respond to Bonhoeffer's challenge that 'faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience'.⁴⁰

FACING THE CHALLENGE

So then, where do we discover the real challenges in following Jesus today and what kind of changes will be needed if we and our churches are to make credible the claim that we are his disciples? The starting point, it seems to me, must be where we discovered it to lie at the beginning of this study, namely, with a focus on *praxis* and its central and defining role in discipleship. This is already a move that may disturb us given the fact that we have always insisted on the priority of *faith* and, for very good reasons, have been concerned that talk which puts deeds in a primary position is in danger of subverting the gospel.

However, it is not a matter of here displacing faith in the order of salvation, but rather of insisting with the Epistle of James that the faith which truly saves *can never remain alone*, otherwise grace is cheapened. As Bonhoeffer put it: 'We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way is hardly ever heard. Where were those truths that impelled the early church to institute the catechumate, which enabled a strict watch to be kept over the frontier between the church and the world, and afforded adequate protection for costly grace?'⁴¹ The linkage between faith and works in the early church is surely incontrovertible; the followers of Christ are the people of *the Way*, they model in both personal and social life a revolutionary love which both attracts and repels a watching world. It attracts by its sheer beauty, but repels because it seems beyond the reach of those who have yet to discover the Source of this new life. Everywhere in the New Testament the distinctive ethical life of Christians is seen as being fundamental to their witness and is watched over and guarded with an apostolic zeal which flows from the conviction that the honour of Christ is at stake here. Those who claim to belong to Christ *must walk as Jesus did*; they have abandoned the world and its desires and now *do the will of God*. Those who fail to see the repeated stress on *praxis* in the letters of the New Testament must be wearing the wrong glasses! 'He who *does what is right* is righteous' and those who fail to do what is right are *not* children of God. This is clearly

⁴⁰ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 44.

difficult language for Christians reared in a culture-religion which leads them to expect a close fit between their belief and practice and that of the surrounding world. But such Christians must either relearn the language of the New Testament or run the risk of finding themselves unable to join a community of faith determined to follow the Son of God.

In the light of this I want to propose that the call of discipleship requires us to revisit our understanding of the nature of conversion and the process whereby converts are *initiated* into the Christian faith and community. We have heard Bonhoeffer referring to the catechumate in the early church, and it is worth asking whether in a post-Christendom context we have lessons to learn from those who followed Christ in the hostile world that existed before the coming of a 'Christian society'. In the first centuries of Christianity preparation for baptism was a crucial aspect of enabling converts to make the transition from the dominant culture to another culture 'patterned on the way of Christ'. I have reflected often on the relevance of two accounts of conversion that have come down to us from this period, those of Justin Martyr and Origen. Here is Justin:

After being persuaded by the Word [we] renounced them [demons] and now follow the only unbegotten God through his Son. Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in self-control alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes... now, after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they, living according to the fair commands of Christ, may share with us the hope of receiving the same things.⁴²

The reference to demonic powers, to addiction to sex and money, and to a way of life characterised by greed and selfishness, all suggest that the cultural context being described here is similar to the one in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Jeremy Seabrook, who was quoted earlier, observes that modern culture is now so dominated by owning and consuming that it imposes upon people a 'compulsion to wealth that has nothing to do with human need, but is part of a soulless

⁴² Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in Andrew Bradstock & Christopher Rowland (eds), *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 2.

system that we must inhabit and which inhabits and animates us'.⁴³ This he says, is a form of *possession* which renders people incapable of distinguishing between their own unappeasable hunger and the insatiable search for profit within the world system. In this context, conversion can never be reduced to a mere decision of the will, a mental adjustment that involves no real transformation of life; there is a *cost* to be met, a *transition* to be made that may prove long and painful, a *way of life to be learned* that demands perseverance, a teachable spirit, a desire to become a *new person*.

The extent of this challenge is seen clearly in the second example of conversion from this period. Here is Cyprian, writing to Donatus and describing how utterly impossible the Christian ideals seemed to be to him:

While I was still lying in darkness and gloomy night... I used to regard it as a difficult matter, and especially difficult in respect of my character at that time, that a man should be capable of being born again.... How, said I, is such a conversion possible, that there should be a sudden and rapid divestment of all which, innate in us has hardened in the corruption of our material nature, or acquired by us has become inveterate by long-accustomed use? These things have become deeply and radically ingrained within us. When does he learn thrift that has been used to liberal banquets and sumptuous feasts?⁴⁴

Once again, the extent of the change required in coming to Christ is evident; conversion seemed to the unregenerate pagan an utterly impossible barrier. Cheap grace solves the problem by divorcing faith from discipleship, but, as Bonhoeffer said, such a move, while leaving the church nominally orthodox, casts doubt over whether it any longer 'follows its Lord'. Is it not then clear that if we are to recover the practice of discipleship in the context of deeply pagan culture, we need to review both our understanding of conversion and the means by which we prepare enquirers for initiation into Christ and into the life of the disciple-community?

⁴³ Jeremy Seabrook, *The Race to Riches: The Human Cost of Wealth* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1988), p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.