

DISCIPLESHIP AND OBEDIENCE (FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2005)

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In the first lecture we began our exploration of the call to discipleship by attempting a theological reading of the narrative of Jesus' summons of the first four disciples in the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel, that extraordinarily compelling event in which Jesus comes and claims others for himself, turning their world upside down and establishing them as his followers. Three questions guided our thoughts on the material. First, who is the one who calls to discipleship? He is one who has been marked out at his baptism as the definitively new and unsurpassable revelation of God; he is God's only Son, the one in whom and as whom God's rule is perfected; he is the gospel of God in person. And so in him the course of human life and history is decisively reordered, for he is the fulfilment of time and the presence in the world of the kingdom of God. The one who calls is 'God with us', summoning us with unconditional and wholly legitimate authority. Second, what is the substance of his call? It is drastically simple and drastically compelling: 'Follow me'. In that call, those who are summoned encounter the self-establishing word of God's love and grace: love and grace in their imperative force, as decree and therefore as command. What is decreed and so commanded is that those called must *follow* Jesus, walking behind him, not as his equal but at a distance; and they must follow *Jesus*: not some principle, truth or cause illustrated by him, but Jesus himself as he goes on his way. Third, who are those who are called by him? They are in and of themselves nothing: no readiness or disposition makes them suitable recipients of the call. Rather, they are made disciples by his summons alone. In that summons, the divine determination is brought to bear upon them, and they are appointed to a task, namely, the task of following the one who manifests himself as their Lord and directs them to life in this movement.

This second lecture will be taken up with giving a theological description of this movement, viewed this time not primarily from the side of the one who issues the call but from the side of those who are determined and directed by it. What is to be said of this movement of discipleship as a human reality? What is it to follow this determination and

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take this direction? Once again, we shall be led in our reflections by the witness of Mark, finding in the apostolic testimony not simply a distant echo of Jesus' calling of his disciples in the past, but also his present summons, the call of the one who as Lord is indefatigably alive, our contemporary, speaking to us and making us his own.

THE MOVEMENT OF OBEDIENCE

Most generally described, the human movement of discipleship is a movement of *obedience*. How can this obedience be characterised?

First: discipleship is a matter of obedience because to encounter Jesus is to encounter his purposive will. His only words to Simon and Andrew, and later to Levi, are imperative. Jesus makes himself present, and his presence carries with it a requirement. Grace – that is, Jesus himself, the actuality of God's rule, order and blessing – includes within itself a summons to action. As Jesus comes, so he makes those to whom he comes into *followers*. They are not *beati*, those who already possess all blessedness and from whom nothing is required; they are not simply *illuminati*, those on whom the light of revelation shines. They must stride out towards their coming blessedness; they must walk in the light. They are summoned to movement, because they are *in via* not *in patria*. The self-revelation of Jesus includes the revelation of his resolve that human life should be life in this direction. In the Christian faith, Calvin reminds us, knowledge is 'knowledge not only of God but of the divine will'.¹ Put rather differently: the conclusion under which these first disciples are placed by the reality of Jesus, by the coming of the one who is God's gospel and kingdom, is also and necessarily an imperative. It is an imperative which rests upon a conclusion, which directs them to Jesus' enactment of that which is decreed by God; but what is decreed is, precisely, human action or movement in accordance with the conclusion under which we have been placed.

Some care is needed at this point, however. If it is important to stress that the divine conclusion under which we are placed by the reality of Jesus encounters us with imperative force, it is no less important to stress that the imperative by which we are met in Jesus is rooted in and brings to bear upon us a divine conclusion. Grace commands obedience; but obedience is commanded by and only made possible by grace. Calvin, once again:

¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.2.ii, p. 545.

From what foundation may righteousness better arise than from the Scriptural warning that we must be made holy because our God is holy? Indeed, though we had been dispersed like stray sheep and scattered through the labyrinth of the world, he has gathered us together again to join us to himself. When we hear the mention of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be its bond; not because we come into communion with him by virtue of our holiness! Rather, we ought first to cleave unto him so that, infused with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls.²

The movement which the disciples make in following Jesus rests, therefore, on a prior action of God, that is, upon the work of mercy in which 'he has gathered us together again to join us to himself'.

Discipleship is no exception to the rule that in all things Christ is pre-eminent. Grace does not fall away when we begin to talk of obedience to the call to be followers of Jesus, as if the divine conclusion were simply an initial impulse or cause, propelling us into autonomous action. The human venture of obedient discipleship, both in its beginning and in its continuation, is wholly enclosed by one fact: Jesus Christ is in our place. He has once for all replaced our corruption and disobedience by his pure embrace of the Father's will; as substitute, representative and head of the human race, he has achieved our rescue and done what our ruined humanity cannot do: he has rendered obedience to God. If there is a corresponding human obedience – if James, John, and all the others, including we ourselves, do indeed obey his call and follow him – it is not in order to secure fellowship with God simply by fulfilling some command. It is because this movement and direction is one which has already been established in Jesus; what remains, therefore, is only that it be echoed, filled out and attested in our own obedience. To obey Jesus' command is to follow him; it is not to start a fresh movement but to enter into one which precedes us and catches us up into itself. Calvin, again, sums the matter up with customary clarity and brevity: Scripture, he says, 'finds occasion for exhortation in all the benefits of God'.³

The necessity of clarity in this matter of the relation of grace and obedience in a theology of discipleship can be illustrated well from Bonhoeffer's well-known and highly-charged reflections in *Discipleship* on what he terms 'costly grace'. 'Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church' runs the famous statement: 'Our struggle today is for costly

² Calvin, *Institutes*, III.6.ii, pp. 685f.

³ *Ibid.*, III.6.iii, p. 687.

grace.⁴ Bonhoeffer's book in its entirety is directed against a perverted conception of grace as entirely undemanding, as 'the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit'.⁵ Conceived in this way, grace simply leaves the world as it is, 'everything can stay the same'.⁶ This conception of grace is the counterpart of a church which has made its peace with the world by eliminating any sense that grace carries with it an imperative. Bonhoeffer believed that this conception of grace as limitless and unconditional absolution from responsibility had assumed a deeply corrupting form in twentieth-century Lutheran theology and church life in Germany. Grace had become what he called a 'presupposition'⁷ – an excuse, absolution in advance, and therefore 'the bitterest enemy of discipleship'.⁸ The large-scale collapse of Christian witness in the Third Reich is directly attributable to the fact that 'we absolved an entire people, unquestioned and unconditionally'.⁹ And so: 'Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us.'¹⁰

What are we to make of this remarkable judgement? Bonhoeffer grasped what most others in his situation failed to grasp, namely that the disarray and distress of German church life was part of a larger theological and spiritual defection, a warping or narrowing of the church's understanding of the gospel in which the sheer unconditional character of grace was allowed to expand beyond all bounds into the total content of the Christian message. The power of his book is the transparency and concentration with which he insists that the gospel does indeed carry an imperative within itself, that gospel without law cannot really do the work of the gospel, which is to heal and restore human life. Like other writings from the middle period of Bonhoeffer's work, it is also impressive for its pastoral purity and simplicity, its unremitting exposure of the evasions by which men and women insert something between themselves and the command of God in order to deflect the summons of Jesus to discipleship. Yet might one not ask whether the force of Bonhoeffer's protest is such that he has not quite adequately integrated grace and obedience? There is much in the

⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

book which is still tied to the disintegration of gospel and law which sometimes threatens the Lutheran tradition. Bonhoeffer tries to struggle free from the antinomianism of the mainstream Lutheran Christianity of his day by relentless emphasis on 'cost'. Yet we may ask, at one level, if the cost of discipleship can be properly understood without the kind of extended description of grace as *gift* which Bonhoeffer is unwilling to provide, precisely because he fears it may be perverted into an excuse. Does Bonhoeffer really demonstrate that law flows from gospel, from election and calling? Does it really emerge with the right kind of profile that discipleship – *costly* discipleship – is rooted in a conclusion, an eternal indicative which is itself also an imperative? Is such talk of the conclusion under which the disciple stands always a compromise, an evasion, as Bonhoeffer fears? May it not also and most properly be the ground on which the disciple stands, that which makes the 'cost' of discipleship more than a demand? At another level, we may perhaps register a worry about Bonhoeffer's handling of the notion of the 'costliness' of obedience to the summons to discipleship. Of course, as we shall see, obedient discipleship entails cross-bearing, the loss of self. But cost is not all: to lose one's life is indeed to save it; mortification is the obverse of vivification; obediently to follow Jesus is to come alive. There is, in other words – perhaps because of the pressure of circumstance – a certain loss of teleology, a foreshortening of the movement of discipleship, to be corrected, maybe, by a richer theology of resurrection.

None of this should deflect from the enduring significance of this astonishing book. But it may, perhaps, suggest that rather than speaking of *costly* grace it might be better to speak of *commanding* grace. The grace of God is identical with Jesus and the fulfilment of the divine resolve in him as he takes our nature upon him, and overcomes all that thwarts God's purpose for his creatures. That grace regenerates; it recreates and so restores us to life in fellowship with the holy God who calls us to holiness and so to obedience. The grace in which our obedience is rooted is God's purposive will as conclusion and command, by which we are quickened to life.

THE BEGINNING AND CONTINUATION OF DISCIPLESHIP

From here we proceed to a second characterisation of the movement of obedience to which we are summoned by the command of Jesus to follow him. It is a movement which has a beginning and a continuation. It is characterised by a very particular kind of commencement, and it unfolds in a very particular direction.

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Both the beginning and the continuation are aspects of the same basic reality, namely regeneration. Regeneration is the entire conversion of the fallen creature away from self-will and self-direction towards glad embrace of the divine will and direction which is set forth in Christ. The beginning of discipleship is, as it were, the most concentrated moment of regeneration; it is the abandonment of a ruined way of life and setting out on a new way. The continuation of discipleship is the repetition, outworking and extension of regeneration, what the older divines called *conversio continuata* or *conversio secunda*, continued or second conversion, in which the turning of repentance is expanded into a movement of life. At the beginning of discipleship, the one called is summoned to a decisive turn to the law of our being which has been decreed and effected for us by the mercy of God in Christ; in its continuation, the disciple lives from and under that law of our being in persistent obedience. We now turn to some description of each of these moments.

First: how does obedience take its rise? What is the human form of its beginning? 'Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him' (Mark 1:18-20). The repeated word 'immediately' is striking in Mark's presentation. There is no interval between the call of Jesus and the movement of following on the part of the disciple. Jesus' summons does not come as an invitation to be considered at leisure by those to whom it is issued; the response for which it calls is not the weighing of alternatives or the construction of a moral judgement. Indeed, those who respond to the call of Jesus with reluctance ('let me first go and bury my father'; 'let me first say farewell to those at my home' [Luke 9:59-62]) are simply not fit for the kingdom of God. Jesus' summons excludes all temporizing. His summons looks for what Bonhoeffer calls 'simple obedience',¹¹ obedience in which we do not insert our deliberative reason between ourselves and the command, subduing that command to our discrimination. To heed Jesus' command conditionally, with some measure of reservation, patronizing it with our favour at some points and holding aloof at others, is simply not to hear it as what it is, the command of God. Obedience is immediate obedience.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 77-83.

Yet we may wonder if this is entirely adequate. Does it not risk making obedience a mere reflex action, eliminating any sense of intelligent moral participation in this event? Can such a response really be the recovery of human life and vocation, or is it simply handing oneself over to divine tyranny? In response, we may perhaps put the matter thus. The immediacy of response which is commended in Mark's presentation indicates the fact that the beginning of discipleship is the coming into being of a *new* reality. For the one called to discipleship to pause, reflect upon the call, or seek to tidy up a previous existence, would be to fail to grasp that discipleship does indeed mean regeneration, the rebirth of the person. There is no significant continuity with the old; that which has gone before is not the basis for what lies ahead nor the power in virtue of which the one called is able to make the turn which is required by Jesus. The old has, indeed, been set aside as hopelessly compromised, as flight from God, as death. To stand beneath Jesus' summons, is to exist in a wholly new determination, to hear the declaration of an eschatological condition which precedes any attitude which the hearer may take up towards it. To be called by Jesus is to be established in the domain of regeneration, not invited to consider its possibility. And therefore to obey the call and immediately to follow Jesus is the only possibility; there is no old life worth continuing. At the moment of the call, we have the moment of new creation; in following Jesus, the disciple does not continue an old life in a new direction but, responding 'immediately', enters the domain of life.

Moreover, the beginning of discipleship is characterized by immediacy because it is the human side of election. Here, in the turn of life towards the command of Jesus, the divine decree becomes visible. The alacrity and lack of reflection in the response of Jesus' hearers indicates how discipleship is an answer to an antecedent decree. Jesus' call says, in effect: this is what has been determined from all eternity; this is the law of your being, the existence granted to you by the creator and reconciler of all things; in this alone your perfection will consist. What corresponds on the human side to the summons of Jesus is thus not choice but action in accordance with the truth established by the purpose of God. This is why, as Barth notes,¹² the beginning of discipleship can never be a matter of self-selection. 'Follow' does not mean 'choose to follow'. If it did, it would simply be a continuation of the old order of self-determination. The call of God in Jesus is not one more object of my self-direction, one more opportunity held out to me as a path to self-fulfillment. To follow, and to do so immediately, means to do the only thing which is legitimate and in

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, p. 535.

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correspondence with the law of one's being; it means to move towards the perfecting of one's nature, not to select or invent a nature for oneself. A chosen good is no good; a chosen god is no god. This absence of self-determination in the beginning of discipleship is offensive to natural reason. But, like the death which precedes resurrection in Christian baptism, it is the other side of coming alive. The absence of self-will is the chastening and displacement of the creature's pride, not in order to humiliate the creature but precisely so that the creature may live and have its being in turning towards and moving after Jesus. Already at the beginning of the life of discipleship, that is, we have the law of Christian existence: to lose one's life is to gain it; to seek to retain one's life is to lose everything.

The immediacy of the beginning of the life of discipleship seems utterly hazardous, indeed irresponsible. Yet although from a human point of view it is so, in truth it is secure and well-grounded, precisely because it does not have its rise in the creature but in the divine determination. What guarantees and legitimates the human wholesomeness of the turn to Jesus is not any kind of creaturely vigilance, but the purpose of God. Exactly because the one who is called to discipleship hears *this* summons from the mouth of *this one* ('Follow me'), there is no need for the anxious interval in which once again we take up responsibility for ourselves and our own protection. Our following can be immediate, our welfare need not concern us, because the divine call is intelligible, trustworthy, wholesome and self-evidently for our good. It is the law of our *being* – not the law of our destruction – which announces itself in this call at the beginning of the life of discipleship. What, next, is to be said about following which succeeds this initial turn?

THE FORM, SHAPE AND DURATION OF DISCIPLESHIP

The beginning of the disciple's life is not an act which constitutes obedient discipleship in its entirety. It is, rather, a beginning which reaches towards a future, a turn which is the first act of a movement or history. That history cannot be collapsed into the moment of its inception. There is a beyond and a goal to the call of Jesus. The conclusion under which he places those whom he calls is not such that it simply shifts them at a stroke from one category (non-disciple) to another (disciple). It is a conclusion which is a determination for life, and therefore it takes form as human history with shape and duration. What is to be said of this form, shape and duration?

First: in speaking of the persistence of the life of discipleship, we are not speaking of a continuation which leaves behind the moment of beginning. The continuing history of the life of discipleship does not mean that over the course of time the arresting immediacy of its beginning is left behind, so that between us and the call of Jesus we interpose some knowledge which we have acquired over the course of time, some disposition which has been built up steadily over long experience and which inclines our lives in obedience to the call of Jesus. Immediacy does not fall away, to be replaced by reliance upon accumulated experience or achieved maturity. The disciple is always a beginner, always starting out afresh, always the *new* creation. This is because discipleship is always a matter of 'receiving the kingdom of God like a child' (Mark 10:15). Here, of course, to be a child is not to be innocent but to be utterly without competence or acquired status, to possess nothing on which one might rely, to be utterly contingent. Discipleship involves permanent contingency. This is why investment in the language of practice, habit and virtue in the theology of the Christian life – such language enjoys renewed prestige in contemporary theology – is in important respects unwise. Unless carefully deployed, it can import a theology of the human person in which the movement of the new creation does not figure large, in which regeneration is less an eschatological moment which enacts a new form of life, and more a process which can be attributed to the disciple in a relatively unproblematic way. But, once again, the law of the disciple's being, the path along which the disciple moves, is not grounded in the disciple; it is in Jesus and the divine decision enacted in him.

Second: the continuation of discipleship is one in which the turning of the disciple to Jesus in obedience to his command takes form as a history. In that history there is reiterated the primal movement which characterises its beginning, namely the abandonment of a way of life which has been set aside by the call of Jesus and the taking up of a new way as his follower. Both in its beginning and in its continuation, discipleship involves dying and coming to new life.

This theme receives one of its most perceptive and authoritative expositions at the hands of Calvin in Book 3 of the *Institutes*, in the opening description of mortification and vivification as the structure of Christian existence:

If we ... are not our own but the Lord's, it is clear what error we must flee, and whither we must direct all the acts of our life. We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for

us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal. O, how much has that man profited who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken away dominion and rule from his own reason that he may yield it to God! For, as consulting our self-interest is the pestilence that most effectively leads to our destruction, so the sole haven of salvation is to be wise in nothing and to will nothing through ourselves but to follow the leading of the Lord alone.¹³

The idiom is Pauline; but what Calvin finds in Paul is very close to what can be found in Mark, especially in the long central section of his Gospel (Mark 8:27–10:45, and especially Mark 8:27–9:1; Mark 10:32–45) where the theme of discipleship in relation to Jesus' passion is explored at length. 'Jesus called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.'" (Mark 8:34f.). In summary form: obedience to the command to follow the Son of Man involves self-denial and cross-bearing. To be a disciple is to lose one's life and so – and *only* so – to save it. How may this be spelled out a little more closely?

The movement of discipleship is mortification; to obey the summons to follow Jesus is to face the necessity of continuing renunciation. Peter sums the matter up in his perplexed and sorrowful statement in Mark 10:28: 'we have left everything and followed you'. Taking its rise in complete renunciation, discipleship continues as relinquishment, a death which is also a dying. Having been separated from their past by the call of Jesus, the disciples are now required to enact and repeat that separation as a way of life. Four forms of this mortification deserve particular mention.

1. The disciple is required to renounce the confidence and prestige conferred on those who have possessions. 'Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"' (Mark 10:23–25). 'Those who have riches' are those whose possessions – not just material, but social, intellectual,

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.7.i, p. 690.

personal – are enjoyed as a kind of power or solidity, as bestowing firmness of identity, as instruments which make their possessors *safe*. Such possessions, possessed in this way, make the rich into a kingdom to themselves; and precisely in this way they are kept outside the kingdom of God. Put differently: possessed treasure impoverishes, because it prohibits us from having treasure in heaven. The movement which the disciple is required to make thus intervenes between possessor and possessions, and in this way presses home to the fullest extent the turn which has taken place in response to the initial call. Having left everything, the disciple must continue to leave everything behind.

2. The disciple is required to renounce absorption in human relationships. James and John leave their father Zebedee; the disciples, Jesus says, are to leave brother, sister, mother, father, children. There is much more at play here than a call for the disciples to join themselves to Jesus the itinerant prophet, of which some recent New Testament historians have made much. The call to renunciation of natural patterns of kinship is directed to a deep disorder of human life, by virtue of which relations with others may bear within themselves the possibility of destructiveness. Those relations are, of course, forms of created being, and so signs of the order and blessing which come from God. But in the light of the summons of Jesus, they are not a sphere apart from him, a natural and self-evidently safe and unquestionable reality into which the call of the gospel does not trespass. They are relative to Jesus. He is not simply a factor alongside these relations, an additional element in the network of human association, a possible extension of its range. He is their Lord; he therefore dispossesses them of any claim to finality. This being so, the disciple is to eschew the kind of captivation by them which gives them absolute value or dignity. By the summons of Jesus, the entire world of absolute human attachments has been dissolved. 'What is questioned is the impulsive intensity with which he allows himself to be enfolded by, and thinks that he himself should enfold, those who stand to him in these relationships. What is questioned is his self-sufficiency in the warmth of these relationships, the resolving of their problems, and the sphere of their joys and sorrows. What is questioned is his imprisonment in them...'¹⁴ Jesus' call to fellowship with himself outbids and relativizes all other forms of human belonging.

3. The disciple is required to renounce status, honour and fame. 'Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men

¹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, p. 550.

exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45). The movement of the life of the disciple, that is to say, involves renunciation, not only of pride of possessions and security of personal relations considered as absolute claims, but also of prestige, particularly the prestige which comes from ranking higher than others. The summons of Jesus overthrows this ordering of human life: among his followers, precedence and subsequence, first and last, above and below, the arrangement of persons in hierarchies, no longer has definitive significance. These stations, and the entitlements which go along with them – self-worth, the esteem of others, privilege of access to goods and power – are no longer of any account. Among those who follow Jesus, it shall not be so. It shall not be so because the condition and movement of discipleship is determined by the reality of the Son of Man who came as servant: to follow him is to drink his cup, share his baptism, serve, renounce life itself.

4. Enclosing all these renunciations, however, is the most fundamental abandonment: the loss of self. Self-loyalty, self-disposition, self-affirmation, obedience to that intense impulse to survive: in the movement of discipleship, all this is to be laid aside. ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’ (Mark 8:34). Mortification means denying oneself, extracting oneself from the entire bundle of attachments which resists conversion and the movement of following Jesus. It means taking up one’s cross, dispossession to the extent of precisely not securing one’s own life from destruction. It means to follow him: to set off and to continue in the direction of the one who calls us into the fellowship of his sufferings. To defy the command to follow Jesus at this point would be simple ruin for the disciple. ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it’ (Mark 8:35). All this renunciation must be; but it *must* be because it *can* be, because the great renunciation has already taken place. Jesus himself has made this mortification possible by giving his life. Renunciation is not, therefore, an insecure gesture or wager. Like the conversion which stands at the beginning of the life of discipleship, it is simply the enactment of what has already taken place. The old has passed away, the new has come. Because this is the disciple’s condition – because the time is fulfilled, because the kingdom of God is utterly real and unshakably established – then the disciple can engage in this movement of renunciation, knowing that to do so is not to die but to

come alive: 'He who loses his life for my sake and for the gospel's will save it' (Mark 8:35).

DISCIPLESHIP AS COMING ALIVE

So far, I've tried to suggest that the movement of discipleship is one which entails renunciation in the different realms of human existence – the realms of goods, of personal and domestic relations, of honour and the public sphere, and, above all, renunciation in the little kingdom of my relation to myself. Being a disciple means losing one's life across all these domains. But precisely as such it is a matter of *saving* one's life: of coming alive, vivification. This further statement is crucial to an understanding of the nature of Christian discipleship; indeed, not to see this is to fail to discern the movement of grace in which the obedience of discipleship is caught up. To stop short at mortification, and make the continuation of discipleship simply into extended dying, is radically to misperceive the direction of the grace of God which reaches us in Jesus' call. God's grace, as it presents itself here in imperative form as his command, is the gift of life. Let me explain this point.

We have seen that both the call to discipleship, and the disciples' obedient response to that call, rest on God's foreordination of his creatures. The call of grace announces the election of grace. But God's foreordination of humankind is nothing other than his purposive love. Election is love, creating and delighting in that which is created, giving reality, integrity, shape, form and direction to that which is not God; what election gives is, in a word, *life*. God's determination of humankind is not only a pre-temporal decision, but also teleological; it has a goal, and its goal is the perfection of the creature. Creaturely perfection is the creature coming to be itself, without restriction, complete in fellowship with God.

Only within this larger understanding of the purpose of God to bless his creatures with life does it make sense to speak of mortification. In following the command of Jesus, in renouncing goods, relations, status and even life itself, what is happening to the disciple? The disciple is not engaging in some act of self-destruction, as if mortification were a value in and of itself, apart from any place it might have in the true end which God holds out to human life. Mortification is abandonment of what has already been disqualified, judged and set aside by the call of Jesus to new life. What the disciple leaves and loses is not the life-giving order of created existence, but disorder, the attachment and bondage which feeds on our creaturely substance and destroys us. 'Follow me!' This command, and the divine conclusion which it announces, is not to be understood only in terms of its

cost, but also in terms of the gift of life which it brings in its wake. To obey this summons is to act in accordance with the law of our being, to be what we are. And what we are is those who are appointed to *live*. Because God loves his creatures, willing that they should attain to full integrity of being, to perfection, then God commands us to lose our lives so that he may exalt us. 'Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.'" (Mark 10:29f.)

This emphasis upon discipleship as vivification should not, of course, be taken as compromise with a culture which values self-fulfillment and self-preservation above all things. There are different forms of fulfillment and preservation, and not all of them are noble. Those which press themselves upon us so insistently in the dominant civic and economic and sexual images of our culture are often pretty tawdry. They organize the private and the public spheres around choice and acquisition. What they hold out in the way of human fulfillment presents itself as a rather colourful and stimulating way of life, well-stocked with goods and experiences; but in reality, it is a sad affair. It has no deep sense of human nature or the ends of human life; it has little place for human fellowship and generosity; it trades away human worth with breathtaking ease. It diminishes, because it cannot fulfill or preserve. The summons to discipleship, by contrast, protects, vivifies and dignifies, by directing us to the perfection of our nature. It is from that summons that we are to learn what our nature is. Such learning is indeed costly. It begins with hearing a command; it continues in the realization that much needs to be laid aside. But precisely so does it set us free to live. 'Turn my eyes from vanities', prays the psalmist, 'and give me life in thy ways' (Ps. 119:37).

MAKING DISCIPLES?

By way of conclusion, let me offer a final remark about how the theology of discipleship which I have outlined relates to the church's task of making disciples.

In and of itself the church does not make disciples; God does. To talk about the making of disciples we need to talk first of all about God: about election and grace, about the coming of the Son of God, about his manifestation as Lord, about his summons. Only when we have done that long and hard, may we move on to discuss the command to go and make disciples of all nations. That, of course, is why a theology of discipleship

is necessary: to make sure that in talking about the church and its mission we keep talking about God. There is a concealed naturalism (sometimes it is not so concealed) in much of our thinking about the church, as a result of which everything can seem to hang on the church's assumption of responsibility for the work of the gospel. This naturalism has a deeply depressing effect on the church's mission, because it expects the church to be what it cannot be: the agent through whom God's purpose in the world is realized. It quickly casts the church into the role of being one more voluntary society seeking to persuade others to join its ranks, and devising all manner of strategies to make discipleship more attractive to a greedy culture. Disciples are not made in such a fashion. Disciples are made as the living Christ summons men and women to take up his call, fulfilling his eternal purpose of giving them life. Disciples are made as he strides through the world which he has reconciled to himself and does his own work among his creatures.

In this light what is to be said of the work of the church in making disciples? Jesus Christ speaks and acts. The task of the church is not to take upon itself his office as prophet, as if he had somehow retired from the scene. Its task is, rather, the twofold task of testimony and obedience. The church *testifies* to the call of Christ. It bears witness to his presence, to the eloquence of his grace as the risen one who speaks to us. It does not seek to make that eloquence clear or persuasive or authoritative, because his word is already all those things in itself. In the Spirit's power Jesus Christ himself is clear, persuasive and authoritative in his command to men and women to follow him. He does not require interpreters but witnesses, to attest to what he has already said and says, not to say it with greater cogency than he himself can manage. Second, the church *obeys* the call of Christ. In doing so, it gives practical attestation of his power to remake human life and direct it to perfection. The church obeys his call by doing what disciples do: by leaving everything and following him. It sets out in an ever-fresh act of beginning; it continues in the movement of renunciation, finding it none other than the way of life. Living this baptismal existence, the saints testify to the one who issues his summons both to them and to their fellows, to those who will suffer until they themselves leave everything for the sake of Christ. The saints' testimony and obedience are together a sign of life to the world. They attest the deeply *humane* character of the confession that we are not our own but the Lord's. The saints, moreover, know – or at least ought to know – that the work of attestation far exceeds their ability. That is why the first act of the ministry of the church is to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit.