

# FOLLOWING JESUS: AN ASSESSMENT OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP

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The theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) has generated considerable comment, both contemporaneous and during the present day, from theologians of all persuasions. While it may be admitted that his untimely execution at the hands of the Nazi regime on 9th April 1945, together with his clandestine resistance work for the opposition *Abwehr* movement, has given added interest to 'Bonhoeffer studies', nevertheless the potency of his theological pronouncements has captured the attention of a spectrum of theological observers. This can be seen especially with respect to Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship. Central to this particular aspect of his theology is his work *Nachfolge* ('Discipleship') published in 1937 and regarded as seminal in its discussion of the church's responsibility towards its following Christ in the modern, secular world. Indeed, his later work, *Gemeinsames Leben* ('Life Together'), which reflected on the practical outworking of discipleship within the confines of seminary life at Finkenwalde, Pomerania, must also be considered crucial towards gaining an understanding of Bonhoeffer's thought. However, one cannot gain any overall insight into his theology of discipleship unless one delves into his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in which his most enigmatic and explosive theological statements are found. Thus, these three works will be examined in order to attempt a comprehensive analysis of Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS BONHOEFFER'S 'NACHFOLGE' BASED ON A THEOLOGICALLY VALID BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF DISCIPLESHIP?

When we examine *Nachfolge*<sup>1</sup> we must try to analyse its teaching before we examine its broader scriptural basis. Thus, we must begin with

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<sup>1</sup> We shall use the German title throughout this article.

Bonhoeffer's discussion of grace. For Bonhoeffer, the real struggle for the church is not external but from within in its struggle for costly grace because cheap grace is the 'the mortal enemy of the church'. He defines cheap grace as 'grace without a price, without costs' and considers cheap grace to be mere doctrinal assent, with love merely a 'Christian idea of God' (43). This cheap grace is sterile and introverted Christianity and, as such, a 'denial of God's living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God'. Thus, the Christian who has cheap grace is no different from the world; the cheap grace of inactivity and worldly security means that such a practitioner feels he 'need not follow Christ since the Christian is comforted by [cheap] grace!' (44). Bonhoeffer surmises that 'cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ' (44). By implication, cheap grace is not grace at all but a self-bestowed sense of grace without the reality of true grace to change the individual into a follower of Jesus.

On the other hand, costly grace is 'the call of Jesus Christ which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him' (45). Grace, according to Bonhoeffer, is costly in that it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. Grace is 'costly to God because it costs God the life of God's son'. Thus, Bonhoeffer (45) defines costly grace as the incarnation of God, and so centralizes the problem of 'how we are to live as Christians today' within the christocentric perspective.

Certainly, Bonhoeffer provides much biblical support for his theology of discipleship. His promotion of 'costly grace' emanates from a hermeneutical understanding of Jesus' call to discipleship in scriptural *Sitze im Leben*. Bonhoeffer analyses those instances of calling where true discipleship is evident on the basis of obedience and not on confession alone.

We can see this when he discusses the call of Jesus to Levi (Mark 2:14) where, in response to Jesus' command, 'Follow me', Levi got up and followed him (57). Bonhoeffer notes the syntax of the sequence:<sup>2</sup> *Jesus said, 'Follow me'* ('the call') and ('without any further ado') *he got up and followed him* ('the obedient deed of the one who follows'). That Levi's obedience was demonstrated by the act of immediate compliance and not by any 'spoken confession' is central to Bonhoeffer's premise that 'there is no other path to faith than obedience to Jesus' call' (58). He sees the close proximity between 'call and deed' only through the authority of Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> The quotation from the biblical text is placed in italic script and the corresponding elements in Bonhoeffer's citation are placed in quotation marks within brackets.

Christ and argues that the act of following is not centred on the follower so much as on Jesus who has called. It is because Jesus has called that the follower leaves all; it is because real security is found in Jesus that the follower leaves the former 'security' of a Christ-less life; it is because Jesus is the complete content of the follower's existence that there is complete commitment to him and not to any legalistic control.

Bonhoeffer insists that discipleship is not following any 'idea about Jesus, nor is discipleship following a doctrinal system or a general recognition of grace and forgiveness. Rather, discipleship is being in 'the right relationship' to Jesus Christ. Thus he regards discipleship as an organic, living, active relationship with Jesus, the mediator between God and humanity.

However, there has been criticism of Bonhoeffer's apparent relegation of doctrine for practice. Huntemann notes that in the 1930s Bonhoeffer was accused of 'betraying the Lutheran heritage in his emphasis on discipleship and sanctification' by his apparent questioning of Luther's *sola fide* and *sola gratia*.<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Van Til<sup>4</sup> (164) describes the 'costly grace' in *Nachfolge* as 'cheap grace' because, he argues, Bonhoeffer denies the presupposition of humans as sinners under God's wrath and of Christ's vicarious sacrifice as paramount in forming discipleship, while Lane<sup>5</sup> asks, rhetorically, 'is not cheap grace to be identified with Luther's justification by faith alone?' Indeed, when we read in *Nachfolge* (64) Bonhoeffer's dialectical insistence that faith is only possible according to two equal propositions: 'only the believers obey' and 'only the obedient believe', this seems to be contrary to the Reformed position that the sinner is justified by faith and not by works. Indeed, Article IV of the great Lutheran Confession, the Augsburg Confession (1530), states clearly that 'men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favour'.

Bonhoeffer does, however, give sufficient evidence that his theology of discipleship is not existential (67). For example, he is unhesitant in his espousal of justification by faith alone. He cites Romans 1:17 with respect to Luther's translation of *ek pisteos eis pistin* as 'out of faith into faith'

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<sup>3</sup> G. Huntemann, *The Other Bonhoeffer. An Evangelical Reassessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 188.

<sup>4</sup> C. Van Til, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Review Article', *WTJ* 43:2 (1970), 164.

<sup>5</sup> A. N. S. Lane, *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1996), 205.

thus showing that righteousness comes out of [a situation in which one can have] faith into true faith in Jesus Christ. He argues that discipleship is the outworking of faith seen in following Jesus. That 'only the believers obey' is not, for him, a contradiction of *sola gratia* in favour of a works theology, but rather a confirmation of faith alone as the vehicle for obedience. For Bonhoeffer, believing is 'leaving everything and going with the incarnate Son of God' (62). That 'only the obedient believe' is, for him, an affirmation to believers that their obedience is demonstrated by their following Jesus. Indeed, as Bethge notes, Bonhoeffer, by making such pronouncements regarding faith, was restoring the validity of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* to their 'concreteness here on earth'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer's intention is to decry a cheap grace where assent to doctrine is considered sufficient for faith; rather, costly grace must be seen in the action of the believer in following where Jesus leads.

This costly grace, Bonhoeffer asserts (85), is manifest in suffering. Again, he uses Scripture to support his thesis that 'just as Christ is only Christ as one who suffers and is rejected so a disciple is a disciple only in suffering and being rejected'. He cites Mark 8:31-38 to show the exemplification of costly grace in Christ's suffering and cross-bearing with the incumbency of Christ's disciples to take up their crosses. He asserts that in the cross-bearing of Christ's followers there is participation in the crucifixion. Indeed, he contrasts the readiness of Christ to take up his cross, and so exemplify costly grace, with Peter's rejection of Christ's suffering (Mark 8:32); he asserts that Peter's rejection of Christ's suffering 'shows that from its very beginning the church has taken offence at the suffering Christ. It does not want that kind of Lord and as Christ's church it does not want to be forced to accept the law of suffering from its Lord' (85).

Moreover, he (87) contends that the way of the cross is central to discipleship in its motif of suffering because the way of the cross 'is laid on every Christian'; the cross, Bonhoeffer argues, 'stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ' because the call of Christ is inexorably linked to death.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, he considers the cheap grace of those who do not want to take up their cross 'who do not want to give their lives in suffering and being rejected by people' (89); he writes that these people

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<sup>6</sup> E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 454.

<sup>7</sup> The earlier English translation of 'Jeder Ruf Christi fährt in den Tod' was rendered 'When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.' However, a more literal translation reads 'Every call of Christ leads into death.'

'lose their community with Christ. They are not disciples.' Thus, for Bonhoeffer, it is the cross of Christ that determines discipleship because cross-bearing involves suffering without which no one can be called a disciple.

It is this self-denial that Bonhoeffer develops more fully in his treatment of the Sermon on the Mount, especially in his discussion of Matthew 5 where he considers the 'extraordinary' aspect of discipleship. He entitled his study of Matthew 5 'On the "Extraordinary" of the Christian Life', with 'extraordinary' being used as an adjectival noun in translating the adjective *perisson* in Matthew 5:47.<sup>8</sup> Immediately, Bonhoeffer presents a direct link between the cross-centred suffering of Christ and the teaching of Jesus on discipleship contained in the Sermon on the Mount; Bonhoeffer considers the *perisson* to consist of 'the love of Jesus himself who goes to the cross in suffering and obedience' (144). He adds that the *perisson* is the cross itself. In a footnote, the editors of *Discipleship*, G. Kelly and J. Godsey, cite an earlier New Testament lecture given by Bonhoeffer in which he explained that 'the *perisson* is the cross which places Christians outside of the ordinary order of things'.<sup>9</sup> Thus when we examine the Sermon on the Mount we are considering the costly grace of discipleship as taught by Jesus whose teaching was cross-orientated. For example, Bonhoeffer (103) considers the first Beatitude ('Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven') as referring to Christ's disciples who, for Christ's sake, have lost all earthly security when they followed Jesus. They are considered blessed because they are inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, received 'at the cross... given them in the complete poverty of the cross'. Bonhoeffer considers Christ's blessing to be 'for the sake of the cross' in contradistinction to that of 'the Antichrist' who, also, declares the poor to be blessed but only for a political ideology intended to 'fend off the cross'. Here, he does make an overtly political comment against the ruling Nazi Party which glorified the poor German peasant farmer in its 'Blood and Soil' ideology and, at the same time, adhered to its Party Programme of 1920 that 'as such the Party represents a positively Christian position without binding itself to one particular faith'. Bonhoeffer reckoned that such 'cross-less' ideology was an enemy of Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Luther translated *perisson* as 'something strange' ('*sonderliches*') in his 1545 edition of the New Testament; Bonhoeffer, however, used another adjectival noun: '*außerordentlichen*' as a dynamic translation.

<sup>9</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (G. Kelly and J. Godsey, eds; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 144.

It is, however, in his discussion of the church of Jesus Christ and discipleship that Bonhoeffer makes his more controversial christological assertions regarding the theological underpinning of discipleship. He wishes to contemporise Jesus' call to discipleship by demonstrating that the same call given to the disciples in New Testament times is the same call Jesus gives to present-day disciples. Thus, he uses Pauline terminology to convey discipleship (arguing that Paul's writings present a risen, living Saviour) in two senses: baptism and the body of Christ. Indeed, he argues (207) that whereas the Gospels describe discipleship as hearing and following the call to discipleship, Paul expresses discipleship in terms of baptism. Thus, he considers baptism as something passive for the believer because it is 'grounded solely in the will of Jesus Christ, as expressed in his gracious call' (207). Consequently, those who are baptized belong to Christ and not to the world; thus those who are baptized are **dead** to the world in, through and with Christ and are, hence, in community with Christ. This dying to the world is only possible through the death of Christ; thus 'those who become Christ's own must come under his cross' and 'suffer and die with him'. The call of discipleship is the call to those who are baptized in a daily dying only through 'the power of the death accomplished by Christ' (208). Bonhoeffer thus equates the call of discipleship to the first disciples with the call of Christ in baptism by the notion of death. The first disciples were followers of Jesus 'in the community of the cross' (209); the call of Jesus after his death is the call received through baptism into the death of Christ. Bonhoeffer adds that the Holy Spirit is the gift given in baptism and that 'the Holy Spirit is Christ himself dwelling in the heart of the believers... it is through the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ remains present with us and that we are in community with him' (209). Therefore, disciples being 'in community with Christ means that discipleship cannot be hidden' but has 'become externally visible through active participation in the life and worship of the church community' (210).

Notwithstanding Bonhoeffer's crucicentric emphasis and his position on baptism as indicative of discipleship, it is his discussion of the body of Christ that poses most problems in relation to the disciple being in community with Christ. He refers to 1 Corinthians 12:13 when he links baptism with the body of Christ and thus contends that those who are baptized are 'still meant to live... in the bodily presence and community with Jesus' (213). However, one must analyse what the 'bodily presence' of Christ means to Bonhoeffer, biblically and theologically. Thus, his Christology must be examined both from a historical angle (in terms of

his own antecedent thought on Christology) and from a biblical perspective.

Certainly, one can trace a christological development in Bonhoeffer's thought from his 1927 dissertation, *Communio Sanctorum*, through his 1933 lectures on Christology, to his *Nachfolge* in 1937. For example, in his discussion in *Communio Sanctorum* (138-9) on the idea of 'Christ existing as community' Bonhoeffer rejects the notion of a second incarnation of Christ; rather, he sees Paul's terminology regarding the body of Christ in relation to the church as indicating an organic relationship between believers and the head, Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer does speak of Christ as 'at all times a real presence [German: *real gegenwärtig*] for the church' (*Communio*, 139). Indeed, in his 1933 lecture on Christ as sacrament, he spoke of Jesus Christ being 'wholly present in the sacrament' (*Christology*, 54). One might assume that Bonhoeffer would follow Luther's eucharistic Christology when Luther argues for the ubiquitous presence of the risen Christ in the 'repletive' sense, i.e., being everywhere yet immeasurable and unable to be defined. However, he avoids the question of the 'how' of Christ's presence, but rather focuses on the 'who' of the presence in the eucharist: the 'who' being Christ *pro me*. Thus, Bonhoeffer argues that 'Christ exists in such a way that he is existentially present in the sacrament' even as he is present in the preaching of the Word because Christ is the Word (*Christology*, 58).

Indeed, in *Christology*, Bonhoeffer moves from placing the presence of Christ in the Word and in the sacrament to the same presence in the community. He uses the same concept as in *Communio* (1927) of 'Christ as community'; indeed, he adds, in *Christology* (1933), the notion of Christ being community by virtue of his being *pro me* (*Christology*, 59). Moreover, he asserts his belief that Christ is at the right hand of God in heaven and that this fact 'makes possible his presence in and as the community' (*Christology*, 60).

Certainly, Bonhoeffer's language regarding Christology in *Nachfolge* reflects that of his 1933 Christology lectures. Again, he refers to the body of Christ being his church community (*gemeinde*) using 1 Corinthians 12:12 as his supporting text (217). Indeed, he further argues that the 'church is the present Christ himself' and that the church, far from being considered as an institution must now be considered 'a person with a body'. It is as the body of Christ that the church community takes part in Christ's suffering because 'Christ's cross is laid upon the body of the church community'. Bonhoeffer (214-15) bases his identification of Christ with the community of followers (*Nachfolgegemeinde*) on his understanding of

Christ having assumed 'the whole of our sick and sinful human nature' and therefore having a 'bodily bond' with his disciples.

To be sure, there is much that has been criticised in Bonhoeffer's theology. Hopper implies a defective Christology in Bonhoeffer's works when he contends that a christocentric emphasis does not always equate with a 'well-defined Christology'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Hopper criticises Bonhoeffer's Christology for focussing overmuch on the person of Christ in his humiliation but not enough on Christ's atoning work.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, one can see in Bonhoeffer's discussion of 'Christ as community' the danger of a consubstantive view of Christ with humanity by a literalist interpretation of the church as the actual 'Body of Christ'. Moreover, in reading Bonhoeffer, we might be inclined to subordinate the divinity of Christ to the humanity of Christ when considering Bonhoeffer's over-emphasis of the existential Christ in his relation to humanity as a human, thus questioning his christological orthodoxy.

Notwithstanding, we must be aware of interpreting Bonhoeffer through any simplistic denunciation of his Christology without considering both the theological context of his pronouncements and a biblical exegesis of key texts such as 1 Corinthians 12:12; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:20-23 and Matthew 25:35-40.

Furthermore, it must be emphasized strongly that Bonhoeffer as a theologian is foundationally Chalcedonian in his holding to the two natures of Christ in one person, and indeed can be seen to be Chalcedonian in his christological foundation as it is demonstrated in his Christology lectures of 1933 and applied in *Nachfolge*. Thus, in his Christology lectures Bonhoeffer acknowledges the mystery of the person of Christ in the indivisibility of the divine and human natures in the one person, and that this mystery is understood only in faith. He agrees that the theologian must 'keep within the conceptual tension of this negative formula [of the Chalcedonian Definition: 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'] and preserve it'. Thus, there is no attempt by Bonhoeffer to separate Christ's natures: indeed he protests against the monophysite tendencies of Luther's *genus majestaticum* whereby Luther argued that 'those things which are predicated of the eternal Godhead may and must be ascribed to the human nature' (*Christology*, 94). He applauds the Calvinistic emphasis of the Logos entering human flesh while remaining within the Trinity 'and therefore *extra carnem*'. Thus,

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<sup>10</sup> D. Hopper, *Dissent on Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 81.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.



Bonhoeffer (*Christology*, 97) asserts, 'the incarnation remains, even within the Trinity, eternal' with the 'starting point' being the 'fact that the man Jesus is the Christ, is God' (*Christology*, 102). For Bonhoeffer, that Chalcedon has established the fact of the God-man must lead on beyond the question of 'How [Christ's natures are different yet his person is one]?' to the 'Who is Christ?' question which Bonhoeffer addresses in *Christology* and develops in *Nachfolge* as 'Christ *pro me*'. That Christ is 'for me' involves a relational transaction by which Christ acts as mediator between individuals and God and between one individual and another.

Notwithstanding Bonhoeffer's Chalcedonian credentials, he can be criticised for two aspects of his assumptions regarding 'Christ *pro me*'. Firstly, in order to identify Christ with humanity Bonhoeffer argues that 'the flesh borne by Christ was sinful flesh' (*Life Together*, 214). However, as Warfield rightly comments, we must see that, although Christ was fully human, being 'in the likeness of human flesh' (Rom. 8:3), he was distinct from other men thus being free 'from the sin which is associated with flesh as it exists in lost humanity'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Macleod notes that if Christ had taken a fallen nature then he would 'be in a state of sinfulness' and thus we would have to conclude that 'the Son of God was fallen'.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, we may suggest that at this point Bonhoeffer was consistent with Barth's view on the 'fallen' nature of Christ and that, theologically, Bonhoeffer, as Barth, held an untenable opinion on this matter. Nevertheless, one must be careful not to demolish Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship on the basis of a defective theological understanding of the 'fallen' nature of Christ. Bonhoeffer's salient teaching on costly grace is not dependent on a theology of Christ's nature but rather is based on a theology of the call of Christ to follow him according to the revelation of the Word of God.

Another valid criticism of Bonhoeffer concerns his existential Christology. Hegarty argues that while Bonhoeffer's Christology presupposes Chalcedon 'he veers too much towards an existential Christology in seeing Christ as community *pro me*'.<sup>14</sup> Hegarty considers that Bonhoeffer's Christology is imbalanced in his avoiding discussing the ontological Christ in Christ's Being (thus answering the 'How?' of Christ) in favour of the existential Christ in relation to the church community.

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<sup>12</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 45.

<sup>13</sup> D. Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 228.

<sup>14</sup> C. Hegarty, 'Christ in the Theology of Bonhoeffer', *Anglican Theological Review* XLIV (1967), 367.

This is essentially a correct judgement; Bonhoeffer in *Nachfolge* does emphasise the existential relationship between Christ and his disciples in their following him. Bonhoeffer does not dwell on the ontological Christ in his Being, regarding that as a 'How?' matter rather than a 'Who?' priority. Notwithstanding, we must argue that the whole point of *Nachfolge* was more existential than ontological. Following Jesus involves a relationship with Christ as Son of God; moreover, Bonhoeffer's theology, it could be argued, was never fully developed because of his early death in 1945. His concern in *Nachfolge* was the person of Christ and the reaction of the church to the Christ of revelation in his suffering obedience to his Father.

However, this still leaves the problem of a literalist interpretation of Christ as community. Bonhoeffer certainly appears to suggest that the church is the Body of Christ, not in a figurative or metaphorical sense, but in a real sense. However, the immediate 'knee-jerk' reaction of some may be premature. The claim that Bonhoeffer's equating of the church with Christ is 'pantheism'<sup>15</sup> must be challenged by Bonhoeffer's own theology and by a biblical overview. Bonhoeffer (*Life Together*, 220-1) is emphatic that the church only exists through the work of the Holy Spirit. Green<sup>16</sup> comments that this shows Bonhoeffer's view of the Christian community as a *Geistgemeinschaft* (Spirit-community). Thus, Christ is present in the church community by his Spirit. As Bonhoeffer (*Life Together*, 221) states, 'The church of Christ is Christ present through the Holy Spirit.' This statement concurs exactly with Reformed writers such as Hugh Martin in his work, *The Abiding Presence*, who wrote, in relation to Galatians 2:20, that 'Christ lives in His people by the Holy Spirit.'<sup>17</sup> Thus, we must be cautious when desecrating a literal equation of Christ with his church without seeing the church as a spiritual entity because of the indwelling of its people by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we might also refer to Matthew 25:35-40 where Jesus refers to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, as 'me'. The 'me' of these verses cannot be taken as literally Christ but rather as a metonym of Christ. Indeed, when considering some of Bonhoeffer's more audacious statements about Christ as community such as 'the church is the present Christ himself' (218) we must balance these with the sense of the mystical union of the church as

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<sup>15</sup> B. Demarest, 'Devotion, Doctrine and Duty in Dietrich Bonhoeffer', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991), 403.

<sup>16</sup> C. Green, *Bonhoeffer, the Sociality of Christ and Humanity* (Missoula: Scholar Press, 1972), 181.

<sup>17</sup> H. Martin, *The Abiding Presence* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, no date), 199.

the Body of Christ with Christ as Head of the church. For example, with reference to 1 Corinthians 12:12, Lenski<sup>18</sup> (513) argues that the union of Christ with his church 'constitutes a unit just as the human body is a unit;' thus the mystical union of Christ, demonstrated by Paul, 'is not pantheistic but truly spiritual...'. Therefore, we cannot assume any kind of pantheistic intention on Bonhoeffer's part when he speaks of Christ as community; rather we must be prepared to see in his pronouncements a plea that the church exercise the costly grace of discipleship in that spiritual union with Christ who, as mediator of God's people, suffered death in order to secure their salvation.

#### SUMMARY

We have argued that in *Nachfolge* Bonhoeffer demonstrates a valid biblical understanding of discipleship in his christocentric emphasis on obedience to the call of Christ. While some, such as Hopper and Demarest, have claimed that Bonhoeffer's overall Christology is defective, nevertheless we have demonstrated that, despite a particular error in positing the incarnate Christ having assumed a sinful human nature, nevertheless we must support Bonhoeffer's central argument that discipleship is costly because it is cross-centred obedience to Jesus, whose suffering demands that his disciples follow, as Christ, in their being for others even as Christ is for others.

#### TO WHAT EXTENT DO BONHOEFFER'S PRISON WRITINGS PRESENT A COHERENT THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP?

Perhaps some of the most enigmatic of Bonhoeffer's writings are found in his prison letters, while he was a prisoner at Tegel Prison, Berlin, between 1943 and 1945. Expressions such as 'religionless Christianity' (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 280); 'before God and with God we live without God' (360) and 'the world that has come of age' (327) have puzzled theologians both at the time of their writing and since. For example, in a letter written in 1952, Karl Barth described the prison letters as a 'particular thorn' with 'enigmatic utterances'.<sup>19</sup> R. A. Finlayson considered that phrases such as 'religionless Christianity' were 'deliberately chosen to

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<sup>18</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 513.

<sup>19</sup> John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World* (London, Collins, 1967), 250-1.

alarm and shock'.<sup>20</sup> Others have grasped the apparent disdain Bonhoeffer expresses for religion and so incorporated Bonhoeffer's words from prison into their own interpretations of secular Christianity. For example, John A. Robinson<sup>21</sup> clutched at Bonhoeffer's seeming rejection of religion to support his thesis that men can 'get along perfectly well without "religion", without any desire for personal salvation, without any sense of sin...'. What, then, are we to make of Bonhoeffer's pronouncements from prison?

To be sure, we must remember that when we are examining Bonhoeffer's 'new theology' we are dealing with fragments of theological statements written in private letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge while Bethge was stationed with the German Army on the Italian Front. We have no systematic compendium of a carefully thought-out theology; Bethge,<sup>22</sup> indeed, suggests that the theology of Tegel 'is not a mature fruit of a new branch in Bonhoeffer's work...' but, nevertheless, considers it as 'more than a vague random attempt'. We must be careful not to see Bonhoeffer's prison theology as a comprehensive statement of belief; nevertheless there is sufficient material in these letters to be able to analyse their intended meaning within the context of Bonhoeffer's own theology of discipleship. We must determine the evidence of continuity with Bonhoeffer's previous pronouncements and examine whether, indeed, he intended to 'shock and alarm' or whether he was proposing a coherent biblical pattern of discipleship for a 'world come of age'.

There is no doubt that Bonhoeffer himself did realise the 'shocking' impact of his thinking regarding religion. In his letter to Bethge, written on 30th April 1944,<sup>23</sup> he writes that Bethge 'would be surprised, and perhaps even worried, by my theological thoughts and the conclusions they lead to...'. Certainly, as Bonhoeffer unpacks his thinking, there is, at first glance, an alarming tone of pessimism regarding Christianity in the world of 1944. He asserts, 'we are moving towards a completely religionless time' when 'people as they now are simply cannot be religious any more'. He goes on to assess the historic existence of Christianity as having rested on the "'religious *a priori*" of mankind' (*Letters*, 280) but regards that form of Christianity as having been eroded to the point where there is now a complete absence of religion; this being so the question must be

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<sup>20</sup> R. A. Finlayson, *The Story of Theology* (London: Tyndale Press, 1969), 66.

<sup>21</sup> J. A. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 862.

<sup>23</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 279.

asked regarding 'what Christianity really is, or indeed, who Christ really is for us today' (*Letters*, 279). Indeed, as Bonhoeffer deduces, 'what is a religionless Christianity?' (*Letters*, 280); he asks whether the 'secret discipline' (*Arkandisziplin*) of worship and prayer becomes more important in this religionless context. Furthermore, if as he argues, the world has reached a religionless form of existence, then how does one talk of God without the metaphysical trappings of religion; and how does the Christian believer follow Christ in a religionless world? Later, in a letter of 8th June, 1944 (*Letters*, 327), Bonhoeffer amplified his thinking, regarding the stage reached in humanity's historic development as 'the world that has come of age'.

Such apparently explosive statements demand attention; therefore, we must examine them critically in order to deduce their significance for Christian discipleship. Thus, it would be best to consider historical and theological evidence for the context of Bonhoeffer's 'new theology' before embarking on particular analysis of his theological statements. These statements will be considered, firstly, from the broader perspective of the 'world come of age' then focussed more directly on 'religionless Christianity' and the role of '*Arkandisziplin*' in the life of the Christian disciple.

Historically, we may trace Bonhoeffer's 'new theology' from his own immediate experiences of church life in Germany. We have already noted the decline of vital Christianity in Germany at the start of the twentieth century. However, Bonhoeffer's own experience of church life, especially in the formation and role of the Confessing Church during the Nazi years, was to affect his perception of the church in the world. He had been increasingly distanced from and disillusioned with the Confessing Church after the decision of the Confessing Synod of the Old Prussian Union on 31st July 1938 to give permission to pastors to swear an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer considered his own church as having caved in to the Nazi regime. Moreover, after his return from America in 1939 he became involved with the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. In this, Bonhoeffer worked with many non-church people. Through this disillusionment with the Confessing Church and his intimate work with men who were prepared to sacrifice their lives in the face of evil, Bonhoeffer sought to grasp the position of the church and believers in relation to the changing, secular world around him. Moreover, the prospect of a new world order after war was concluded was, for Bonhoeffer, in Tegel prison, a stimulus to consider 'the necessary basis for making it possible to reconstruct the life of the nations, both spiritually and materially, on Christian principles' (*Letters*, 146).

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, while Bonhoeffer had become disillusioned with the church in its relation to the world, he was firm in his christocentric perspective throughout his prison letters. Bethge<sup>24</sup> stresses that all the seemingly 'explosive' maxims such as 'religionless Christianity' and 'world come of age' must be seen within the framework of Bonhoeffer's question, 'Who are you, Christ?' posed in his 1933 Christology lectures. After all, Bonhoeffer did begin his prison theology with the question of who Christ really is for us today. Thus, we must consider Bonhoeffer's 'new theology' within a continuum of christological thought regarding the relation of the church to Christ, with the prison writings presenting new insight into that christological perspective.

When we consider the expression 'the world come of age' we must not be confused with some kind of moral evolutionary progress of humanity. It is more a sense of 'growing up' with associated responsibilities. Bethge<sup>25</sup> sees in the phrase a Kantian formula, 'The Enlightenment is the emergence of humanity from self-imposed immaturity.' Bonhoeffer, indeed, welcomed the enlightened worldview as a 'coming of age in the name of the crucified and risen Christ'. Bethge further comments that Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the renewing power of the crucified Christ to the world come of age was a theological necessity; rather let Christ renew the world than 'let Hitler dictate the image of this world'. The world come of age is a *fait accompli* and, rather than be condemned as godless, should be engaged with the church's blessing. Thus, Bonhoeffer is using the maxim 'the world come of age' in a positive sense in the relationship between Christ and the world. Indeed, we must also realise Bonhoeffer's dialectic thinking in his approach. The thesis is the gospel tolerating the world come of age; the antithesis is that the world may deny the gospel; the synthesis is that the gospel 'finds its own position and essence'.<sup>26</sup>

This can be attested when we consider his well-known dictum: 'Before God and with God we live without God' (*Letters*, 360). On its own, this is a meaningless statement. However, in the dialectic context we may deduce Bonhoeffer's argument for a reappraisal of discipleship in a world come of age. The context of this statement is that God is with us yet God forsakes us. Bonhoeffer cites Mark 15:34 to support this, in relation to Jesus' cry of God-forsakenness on the cross. God, in a 'moment of

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<sup>24</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 866.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 867.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 868.

dereliction<sup>27</sup> forsook Christ, the Son of God. God was still with Christ yet God forsook Christ at the moment of sin-bearing. Bonhoeffer (*Letters*, 360) would appear to be saying that God who is with us is the same God who allows us to live in a world which has abandoned the 'working hypothesis of God'. The 'without-ness' of God in the world come of age is, in Bonhoeffer's argument, to the world's advantage, because God has allowed the world to push himself on to the cross where he appears weak and powerless. Yet, by the wonder of the divine paradox *par excellence*, it is in the weakness of the cross that we are helped by Christ who suffers for our sake. Thus, Bonhoeffer is arguing that discipleship involves a partaking of the world come of age, a world which the disciple should not disparage or condemn for its godlessness but welcome as part of the dialectic of God's being in the world and yet out of the world.

With this hypothesis, Bonhoeffer seeks to establish the character of the 'world come of age' as that of a world where religion has passed away. Again, we must ensure that this is interpreted within a christological framework. Religion, according to Bonhoeffer, has regarded the concept of 'God' as a boundary marker in human experience. 'God' has been the *deus ex machina*, brought in as a 'God of the gaps' hypothesis 'when human knowledge has come to an end' (*Letters*, 281). However, with the world having 'come of age' 'God' is no longer even a boundary marker; thus Christianity must reassert its role in the world, not according to the religious hypothesis of God as the *deus ex machina*, but God at the centre, in the person of Jesus Christ. This is borne out in Bonhoeffer's 'Outline for a Book', written in July/August, 1944, in which he makes radical proposals for the renewal of church life on the basis of religionless Christianity. Thus, the religionless Christian is one who does not regard God as a 'working hypothesis' or as a metaphysical entity but is one who follows God in Christ in Christ's 'being for others'. Woelfel sums up this secularization of Christianity as 'an existence defined by wholehearted response to the neighbor [*sic*] in the world'.<sup>28</sup> Thus, religionless Christianity is to exhibit the costly grace of being for others in a secular age. Indeed, Bonhoeffer presents a radical vision of this 'being for others' in his suggestion that the church give up all its property to those in need and that the clergy should 'live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations' (*Letters*, 382). Thus, he wishes to stress that the church in

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<sup>27</sup> Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 176.

<sup>28</sup> J. W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 183.

the world give up its ecclesiastical and traditional structures 'and become simply the confessing congregation living wholly in and for the world'.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, this summation of religionless Christianity in a world come of age has been heavily criticized. Hopper insists that Bonhoeffer miscalculated in his seeing the passing of religion and in his suggestion that the 'nineteen hundred years of Christian preaching rests upon the supposition of the "religious *a priori*"'.<sup>30</sup> Hopper considers that Bonhoeffer's statements 'opened a breach with the Biblical world of faith'.<sup>31</sup> To substantiate this argument, Hopper condemns Bonhoeffer's use of an anthropomorphic model to interpret the demise of religion through the dictum 'man come of age'.<sup>32</sup> He argues that the biblical evidence refutes any attempt to see any kind of evolutionary development towards a secularized world where humanity can 'cope with reality' without a working hypothesis of God.<sup>33</sup> For example, Hopper refers to the active sovereignty of God towards his people: Israel and the new Israel, with the intervention of God being 'the very ground of belief in God'. Thus, Hopper would appear to be arguing against Bonhoeffer's rejection of a religion where God is seen as a 'problem-solver'.

Certainly, we can agree with Hopper that Bonhoeffer overstated the demise of religion in the twentieth century for the simple reason that the evidence for the demise of *homo religiosus* is unsustainable as seen in humanity's continued 'indiscriminating search for religious experience'.<sup>34</sup> While Bonhoeffer was aware that the church in Germany had been virtually silent in its condemnation of Nazism, his sweeping analysis of religious change was premature. Notwithstanding, his belief in humanity having come of age can be substantiated scientifically. There is no doubt, as Bube points out,<sup>35</sup> that in areas such as medicine humanity is increasingly able, by God's providence, to make decisions and perform actions without recourse to a 'God of the gaps' scenario, thus gaining the knowledge to heal particular illnesses, especially those considered only curable 'in God's hands' during medieval times.

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<sup>29</sup> Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology*, 183.

<sup>30</sup> D. Hopper, *Dissent on Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 143.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>34</sup> R. Bube, 'Man Come of Age: Bonhoeffer's Response To The God-Of-The-Gaps', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 14:4 (1971), 206.

<sup>35</sup> Bube, 'Man Come of Age', 210.



Nevertheless, we must concur with Bube who challenges Hopper's overall thesis. Bube states that 'some will argue that if the God-hypothesis is abandoned, then there will be no room left for God at all' and that this 'must not be allowed to influence our response.'<sup>36</sup> Certainly, Bonhoeffer is not arguing against the removal of God as a working hypothesis in the life of the Christian. Rather, he is arguing that God must not be at the periphery of human experience but at the centre, in Christ. Indeed, Bonhoeffer testified to this in a personal sense in his last extant letter (23rd August 1944) to Eberhard Bethge, where he (*Letters*, 393) speaks of his being 'so sure of God's guiding hand' and that his life has been 'brim full of God's goodness'. Moreover, his statement in the same letter that 'my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified' indicates his assurance of faith grounded in Christ and that a personal relationship with Christ can only be through Christ's atoning work on the cross. Thus, far from rejecting the intervention of God in human experience, Bonhoeffer (*Letters*, 362) wishes to establish the christocentric existence of the follower of Jesus in a true *metanoia* which is seen in a 'sharing in the suffering of God in Christ' through a faith which involves the whole of one's life. Indeed, he wishes to steer clear of the perspective that focuses on 'the religious act' as the basis of true discipleship, considering even conversion as 'partial'. Rather, the Christian must, in Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship, move away from self-analysis towards the messianic perspective of Isaiah 53 where the suffering servant is portrayed.

Notwithstanding Bonhoeffer's quest to distance Christianity from a 'religious' association, he was adamant that the Christian church must be rooted in Christ through the discipline of prayer, meditation and worship. For example, he (*Letters*, 286) refers to the need to restore an '*Arkandisziplin*' (secret discipline) to protect the mysteries of the Christian faith against 'profanation'. Here, Bonhoeffer appears to be criticizing Barth's 'positivist doctrine of revelation' by which Barth presented Christian dogma as 'a law of faith'; Bonhoeffer rejects this positivism as leading to a 'profane' distortion of the essential centrality of Christ. This distortion, he argues, can be obviated by the practice of '*Arkandisziplin*'. This grounding in the acts of the believer in secret is further emphasized in his letter of 21st August 1944 when he calls for the church to 'persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus' (*Letters*, 391). Thus, as Woelfel (191)

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<sup>36</sup> Bube, 'Man Come of Age', 208.

indicates, ‘the idea that in the “religionless Christianity project” Bonhoeffer set the church to one side is simply without foundation’.<sup>37</sup>

## SUMMARY

To a great extent, therefore, Bonhoeffer’s prison writings were intended to ‘shock and alarm’. Even as late as 23rd August 1944 Bonhoeffer (*Letters*, 393) himself admitted that he was sometimes ‘quite shocked at what I say...’. Notwithstanding, he firmly believed that a sea change had occurred in Christianity which had to be addressed in order that the church be able to live a life of discipleship in the new world order. That his pronouncements appeared radical, however, reflected his perspective of the critical nature of the church as the body of Christ in a world where God was no longer even a working hypothesis. Moreover, while his prison writings appear incoherent and unsystematised theological ‘soundbites’, nevertheless we have shown that Bonhoeffer’s thoughts do display much theological insight into the importance of a God-centred, Christ-centred discipleship which looks away from self and is patterned on the suffering saviour motif of Isaiah 53. His proposal of a Christian faith ‘that is not “anti-” but “a-” religious’<sup>38</sup> reflects his theology of discipleship where faith is not rooted in an individualistic experience or metaphysical understanding of God but in a sharing of the sufferings of Christ.

## CONCLUSION

In providing an overall assessment of Bonhoeffer’s theology of discipleship we must draw on the salient aspects of his work which help, as far as can be reasonably possible, to define that theology. Of paramount importance is his unyielding emphasis on the centrality of the authority of Christ in calling disciples to follow him on the path of suffering. Moreover, the metanarrative of the cross of Christ overarches all of Bonhoeffer’s thought, from *Nachfolge* to his last extant letter to Eberhard Bethge. Thus, the costly grace of discipleship flows throughout Bonhoeffer’s theology, embracing a form of following Jesus which transforms the church from that of a moribund institution resting alone on a credal foundation to a dynamic spiritual force through its actively being the body of Christ. Certainly, his theology of discipleship contains much to challenge the church in its witness to a world that may well have ‘come of age’ in its

<sup>37</sup> Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology*, 191.

<sup>38</sup> J. De Gruchy, (ed.) *Bonhoeffer For a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 59.

apparent autonomy. Bonhoeffer offers the church a positive role in engaging with such a world in his emphasis that the church is there for others, offering a hope only found in the Saviour whose death on the cross brings life to all who would follow him.