

The Continuing Cost of Discipleship

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Somewhere between the dogmatism that cannot stand the insecurity of uncertainty and the indecision that cannot stand the insecurity of commitment, there is the possibility of faith and courage adequate for our times. We will not easily capture it. But if we cease to flee from it, such a faith may capture us.

Roger L. Shinn

It is Pentecost in the life of the church. Thank goodness!! The difficult journey to Jerusalem is over. We have made it through the bout with the devil in the desert, the encounter with the woman at the well, the charges of the chief priests, the fickleness of the Palm Sunday crowd, and the oppressive power of Rome. The rocky road to glory is behind us, at least homilectically speaking. We can still hear the haunting sound of hammer striking nail through flesh. But it is growing faint as the Hallelujah chorus sings in our ears.

Now is the time for celebration. The new wine of the kingdom is chilled and with gusto we are ready to drink up and sing!

Alleluia! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, has come into his kingdom! Let us rejoice, let us be glad with all our hearts. Let us give him the glory forever and ever. Amen.

If you listen carefully, you will hear a collective sigh of relief. There is something comforting about celebrating the power of the Holy Spirit. With the coming of Pentecost we feel relieved from dealing with those hard sayings: "Take up your cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). "Whoever does not bear their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Oh what a relief to put these sayings behind us at least for awhile.

The cost of discipleship is not a popular topic for twentieth century Christians. It is a cultural phenomena to avoid pain at any cost. I walk into the dentist's office with my mouth open begging for Novocaine. Aspirin is a constant companion. Furthering the peace and purity of the church may provide an excuse for not dealing with our differences. Conflict leaves me upset and exhausted. What a relief it is to be on this side of Easter!

Yet a faithful recounting of the Pentecost story brings a quick end to our tranquility. The Pentecost experience empowers the church to be witnesses to God's power in the world as transforming agents. As Paul says, it is no joy ride: "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison" (Acts 16:37). The charge brought against those first Christians was that they "had turned the world upside down." It sounds like another verse to the Lenten song rather than a Pentecost celebration. Empowering by God to witness to God's power as transforming agents of

God's love and justice is an activity that does not go unnoticed by those in power. Turning the world upside down is a dangerous vocation. Tradition tells us that those in power return the favor and Peter "head down was crucified."

In the church of Jesus Christ the cost of discipleship continues into Pentecost. Yet, it is not simply in the Acts of the Apostles that we are reminded of its continuing cost. Recent history reminds us of the price. Fifty years ago on May 29-31, 1934, at the Synod of Barmen, a group of disciples stated clearly their allegiance to Jesus Christ in contrast to the prevailing devotion to Adolph Hitler. This crucial witness to the transforming power of God is a challenge to our conformity to those in power. Barmen reminds us that faith is costly. Martin Niemoeller, German pastor who was a leader of the Confessing Church died on March 6, 1984, at the age of 92. Niemoeller was arrested in 1937 for preaching that loyalty to Jesus Christ must come before all things, even life itself. Unlike many who joined him in opposition to Hitler, he survived the Dachau Concentration camps.

The German church's struggle under Hitler is an example of how the church responded to the cost of discipleship. It is a helpful reminder to us that every age must be prepared to pay the price of faith in Jesus Christ in concrete situations. When the stakes are high so is the cost. It is a temptation for us fifty years later to consider the Barmen Declaration as a response to an obvious crisis in which the lines were clearly drawn. Even though the stand against Hitler was costly and unpopular, it seems clear to us in retrospect.

Arthur Cochrane has written an article entitled "Barmen Revisited" in which he argues that the choice was not as simple as hindsight suggests. In 1984, Hitler has become synonymous with evil as the architect of the Holocaust and a devastating world war. In 1934, Hitler appeared to some as a paragon of virtue and a political messiah. Hitler stood for honesty, industry, love of family and country. He restored law and order, ended unemployment, and stood against communism along with building the Volkswagen and Autobahn. Cochrane says:

I marvel that the church did not wholly succumb to the temptation and give its unconditional allegiance to Hitler. No American Christian should easily boast that if he had been in Germany in 1933, he, as a German, would have opposed Hitler—not when famous Lutheran theologians like Paul Althaus were writing that "our evangelical churches have welcomed the turning point of 1933 in Germany as a gift and miracle of god."¹

It is not enough for us to admire the insight and courage of those in the confessing church who stood against Hitler. We must ask what enabled their stand.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was at the heart of the resistance. When in 1933 the government required the church to introduce anti-Jewish legislation into its own life, thus excluding those of Jewish extraction from the Christian community, Bonhoeffer stood almost alone in rejecting this demand for racial purity in the church. Bonhoeffer reviewed the Reformation term "status confession" arguing that these demands endangered the integrity of the confession of the church.

In a sermon on "The Consequences of Discipleship," Jürgen Moltmann suggests Bonhoeffer's role in the formation of faith adequate for the challenge which faced the Confessing Church. Moltmann says that the idea of discipleship is a Cinderella of Protestantism especially in the established churches—"Ever since Luther's time, the idea of discipleship and its practices have been left to the 'voluntary' groups on the left wing of the Reformation, the people who were notoriously slandered as 'enthusiasts', 'fanatics', 'dogooders' or 'radicals'. It was really Dietrich Bonhoeffer who made the word fit for polite society with his book *The Cost of Discipleship*."²

It was Bonhoeffer who introduced me and I would guess many others like me to the idea of discipleship. I am not sure that he succeeded in making it a commitment "fit for polite society." As a college student preparing to enter seminary there was something appealing about Bonhoeffer's claim that the Christian faith was not only worthy of a vocational commitment, but it was worth your life. An historical perspective sheds some light on the appeal of Bonhoeffer's description of the cost of discipleship. In the 1960's there was an idealism which challenged us to make sacrifices for the building of a better world. A young President was challenging us to join the Peace Corps and to take seriously what we could contribute for the common good. A young black minister was challenging the nation to live out its creed and calling on the church to be a leader in the struggle for justice and reconciliation. Dr. King often suggested that if you were going "to talk the talk" you needed to be willing "to walk the walk." It was a call for the church and the nation to examine our "status confession." It was a call for churches and individuals to be true to their confessions and commit themselves to show through daily witness and service that God had empowered them to live as God's people. By his words and his witness, Bonhoeffer was not only central to the witness of the Confessing Church in Germany, his challenge to take seriously Christ's call to discipleship enabled many of us to wrestle with our responsibility.

What about the Cost of Discipleship for Pentecost, 1984? There is certainly appreciation for the witness of the Confessing Church and its impact on our struggle to be faithful to the gospel in the 1960's. I am convinced that there is a continuing cost of discipleship which enables us to clarify the confusion about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ today.

Let me explain the confusion. It is evident in the experience of a young woman who was walking by a church. These words on the marquee caught her attention: "Come unto me all Ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The invitation was appealing because she was tired. Not only was she physically tired, she was spiritually tired. She was looking for rest for her soul. No sooner had the door shut behind her and she had taken a seat than she heard: "Take up your cross and follow me."

The woman is a fictional character, but like many characters in good fiction, she is very real. There is some of her in each of us. We come to church seeking comfort and we encounter a call to discipleship. What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? In seminary we were told that our task as preachers was "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." The statement is attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, and I agree with the sentiment.

However, it is not easy to distinguish between the afflicted and the comfortable.

There is some of both in each of us. We have the highest standard of living of any people in human history. Most of us spend more on entertainment in one month than a majority of the people on this planet spend for food, clothing, and housing in an entire year. On the other hand, we are living in a time described as "the age of anxiety." We have big fears and little confidence in our future. Are we the comfortable or the afflicted? Are we both at once?

It seems to me the danger facing us as preachers is to conclude that the best way to comfort our congregations is to avoid the cost of discipleship. We are led to believe that those preachers who are "successful" (i.e. put chairs in the aisles) are comforting. This means a continual affirmation of how much God loves us without involving an account of our lives. The message that God's love for America has no relation to the support of death squads in El Salvador, the plight of the poor, the ability of women to earn a fair wage is popular. But is it comforting?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace. "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." In a helpful way Bonhoeffer called the church to a costly grace which cares about the shape of our lives as individuals and as a society. A revealing test of whether we live by cheap grace or costly grace is to list the important decisions you make in a week and ask what impact your commitment to Jesus Christ had on your deliberation. How are the values of God's kingdom reflected in the decisions we make in our nation or in our churches? For Bonhoeffer, a faith commitment was central to the way we commit our resources and our lives.³

This distinction between cheap grace and costly grace is important. It sounds heavy in a society where we are encouraged "to do our own thing." However, the greatest cause of anxiety in "an anything goes" environment is the fear that it does not matter how we live. To tell people who are comfortable but afflicted with fear about the future that it does not matter how they live is to confirm their worse fears. They feel condemned to more of the same. Listen as Thomas Oden describes the effects of such cheap grace:

As if having watched too much television, we have become dazed and addled with an oversimplified gospel that most laypersons easily recognize as innocuous-looking pabulum with highly toxic side effects: God loves me no matter what. Nothing is required by this merciful God. Don't worry about any response to God in order to feel completely OK with yourself and God. Feelings of guilt are considered neurotic. God turns out to be a naive zilch who permissively turns his eyes away when we sin. How strangely different from the Holy One of Amos, Isaiah, and Jesus.⁴

How strangely different also from the God whom Bonhoeffer describes in *The Cost of Discipleship*. The Christian faith requires discipline because not "anything goes" in the kingdom of God. The Lord requires mercy, justice, and some humility (Micah 6:8). The conviction that there is a shape to the Chris-

tian life which does not bend in order to conform to the latest political poll or popular trend is comforting even when it means we must shape up. Such a discipline is based on the assumption that our choices, commitments, and sacrifices are important because “behind the dim unknown” stands God. Communities of faith who seek to be shaped by God’s will and to challenge the injustices and oppression in our society understand that the peace of God is often stressful but it is the only peace that counts.

Our response to God’s claim is crucial. In a day when growing militarism threatens our survival and consumerism threatens our soul, the claims of the gospel to reshape our lives are a hopeful sign. Jürgen Moltmann believes we have paid too much attention to the cost of discipleship without due respect for the consequences of nondiscipleship. As a German pastor and theologian, he reminds us of these consequences for postwar Germany which continue to haunt them: “With the continual unconscious repression of that failure, with the continual unconscious compensation of guilty fear through an obtrusive self-confidence in that faith.” Moltmann concludes that “the consequences of non-discipleship—the consequences of truth repudiated, justice shattered, humanity betrayed—are catastrophic, both in our church and in our nation.”⁵ Southerners are painfully aware of such consequences and how long they affect our common life. What do we fear most, the cost of discipleship or the consequences of nondiscipleship?

The cost of discipleship continues into Pentecost. In the company of the Risen Christ we are not spared the way of the cross. Lesslie Newbigin puts it well: “What is required is a faithful discipleship, following Jesus on the road he went, and living by the hope of which his resurrection is the outward pledge and the gift of the Spirit the inward foretaste. Such discipleship will be concerned equally in the private and in the public spheres to make visible that understanding and ordering of life which takes as its ‘fiduciary framework’ the revelation of himself which God has given in Jesus.”⁶ This may sound like a heavy burden, and no one in his or her right mind should neglect counting the cost. Someone has suggested that the Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting but tried and found difficult. Bonhoeffer and the Barmen Declaration are supporting evidence. It is difficult and costly to bring our lives into conformity with the gospel’s call for simplicity and justice and to confess our complicity with oppressive forces.

Where communities of faith are counting the costs, there is no resignation to live under clouds of fear and hopelessness. People and congregations are coming alive with a new boldness. Jim Wallis, of *Sojourners*, recently wrote to Christians in this country concerning signs of hope:

Dear Friends,

The government is worried about what is happening in the churches. A new wind is blowing among Christians. Like on the first Pentecost, the wind of the Spirit is transforming lives, causing conversions, establishing communities, bringing a new love for the poor, creating a hunger for justice, bringing lives toward peace, filling hearts with worship and praise.

Pentecost without discipleship is only a hollow celebration. It is a poor

substitute for what God's Spirit can do among us. Therefore, let us prepare for the Pentecost not with a sigh of relief but in a spirit of expectancy. The One who has invited us to come unto him with our fatigue and unfinished business, expects us to take on his yoke and learn of him. But the yoke is easy and the burden is light. Bonhoeffer reminds us that such discipleship is where the afflicted and the comfortable meet and find hope:

Happy are they who have reached the end of the road we seek to tread, who are astonished to discover the by no means self-evident truth that grace is costly just because it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. . . . Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship. For them the word of grace has proved a fount of mercy.⁷

NOTES

¹ Arthur Cochrane, "Barmen Revisited" *Christianity and Crisis* (December 24, 1973): 269.

² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless*, (San Francisco:Harper and Row, 1983), 79.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 35-47.

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 9.

⁵ Moltmann, *Power of Powerless*, 83.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984* (New York, 1984), 37.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 47.