



DISCIPLESHIP

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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER WORKS — READER'S EDITION

Preface

In times of church renewal holy scripture naturally becomes richer in content for us. Behind the daily catchwords and battle cries needed in the Church Struggle, a more intense, questioning search arises for the one who is our sole concern, for Jesus himself. What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. Rather, we want to know what Jesus wants. When we go to hear a sermon, his own word is what we want to hear. This matters to us not only for our own sakes, but also for all those who have become estranged from the church and its message. It is also our opinion that if Jesus himself and Jesus alone with his word were among us in our preaching, then quite a different set of people would hear the word and quite a different set of people would again turn away from it. It is not as if our church's preaching were no longer God's word, but there are so many dissonant sounds, so many human, harsh laws, and so many false hopes and consolations, which still obscure the pure word of Jesus and make a genuine decision more difficult. We surely intend our preaching to be preaching Christ alone. But it is not solely the fault of others if they find our preaching harsh and difficult because it is burdened with formulations and concepts foreign to them. It is

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simply not true that every word critical of our preaching today can be taken as a rejection of Christ or as anti-Christianity. Today there are a great number of people who come to our preaching, want to hear it, and then repeatedly have to admit sadly that we have made it too difficult for them to get to know Jesus. Do we really want to deny being in community with these people? They believe that it is not the word of Jesus itself that they wish to evade, but that too much of what comes between them and Jesus is merely human, institutional, or doctrinaire. Who among us would not instantly know all the answers which could be given to these people and with which we could easily evade responsibility for them? But would an answer not also demand that we ask whether we ourselves get in the way of Jesus' word by depending perhaps too much on certain formulations, or on a type of sermon intended for its own time, place, and social structure? Or by preaching too "dogmatically" and not enough "for use in life"? Or by preferring to repeat certain ideas from scripture over and over and thus too heedlessly passing over other important passages? Or by preaching our own opinions and convictions too much and Jesus Christ himself too little? Nothing would contradict our own intention more deeply and would be more ruinous for our proclamation than if we burdened with difficult human rules those who are weary and heavy laden, whom Jesus calls unto himself. That would drive them away from him again. How that would mock the love of Jesus Christ in front of Christians and heathen! But since general questions and self-accusations do not help here, let us be led back to scripture, to the word and call of Jesus Christ himself. Away from the poverty and narrowness of our own convictions and questions, here is where we seek the breadth and riches which are bestowed on us in Jesus.

We desire to speak of the call to follow Jesus. In doing so, are we burdening people with a new, heavier yoke? Should even harder,

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more inexorable rules be added to all the human rules under which their souls and bodies groan? Should our admonition to follow Jesus only prick their uneasy and wounded consciences with an even sharper sting? For this latest of innumerable times in church history, should we make impossible, tormenting, eccentric demands, obedience to which would be the pious luxury of the few? Would such demands have to be rejected by people who work and worry about their daily bread, their jobs, and their families, as the most godless tempting of God? Should the church be trying to erect a spiritual reign of terror over people by threatening earthly and eternal punishment on its own authority and commanding everything a person must believe and do to be saved? Should the church's word bring new tyranny and violent abuse to human souls? It may be that some people yearn for such servitude. But could the church ever serve such a longing?

When holy scripture speaks of following Jesus, it proclaims that people are free from all human rules, from everything which pressures, burdens, or causes worry and torment of conscience. In following Jesus, people are released from the hard yoke of their own laws to be under the gentle yoke of Jesus Christ. Does this disparage the seriousness of Jesus' commandments? No. Instead, only where Jesus' entire commandment and the call to unlimited discipleship remain intact are persons fully free to enter into Jesus' community. Those who follow Jesus' commandment entirely, who let Jesus' yoke rest on them without resistance, will find the burdens they must bear to be light. In the gentle pressure of this yoke they will receive the strength to walk the right path without becoming weary. Jesus' commandment is harsh, inhumanly harsh for someone who resists it. Jesus' commandment is gentle and not difficult for someone who willingly accepts it. "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Jesus' commandment has nothing to do with forced

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spiritual cures. Jesus demands nothing from us without giving us the strength to comply. Jesus' commandment never wishes to destroy life, but rather to preserve, strengthen, and heal life.

But the question still troubles us: What could the call to follow Jesus mean today for the worker, the businessman, the farmer, or the soldier? Could it bring an intolerable dilemma into the existence of persons working in the world who are Christian? Is Christianity, defined as following Jesus, a possibility for too small a number of people? Does it imply a rejection of the great masses of people and contempt for the weak and poor? Does it thereby deny the great mercy of Jesus Christ, who came to the sinners and tax collectors, the poor and weak, the misguided and despairing? What should we say to that? Is it a few, or many, who belong with Jesus? Jesus died on the cross alone, abandoned by his disciples. It was not two of his faithful followers who hung beside him, but two murderers. But they all stood beneath the cross: enemies and the faithful, doubters and the fearful, the scornful and the converted, and all of them and their sin were included in this hour in Jesus' prayer for forgiveness. God's merciful love lives in the midst of its foes. It is the same Jesus Christ who by grace calls us to follow him and whose grace saves the thief on the cross in his last hour.

Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it? What decisions and painful separations will it entail? We must take this question to him who alone knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure. Discipleship is joy.

Today it seems so difficult to walk with certainty the narrow path of the church's decision and yet to remain wide open to Christ's love for all people, and in God's patience, mercy, and loving-kindness (Titus 3:4) for the weak and godless. Still, both must remain together,

or else we will follow merely human paths. May God grant us joy in all seriousness of discipleship, affirmation of the sinners in all rejection of sin, and the overpowering and winning word of the gospel in all defense against our enemies. "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).