

The Gospel-Given Life Discipleship Revisited

PART ONE: The Disciple and Christ: Faith Alone

Introduction: Discipleship and Death

“Every call of Christ leads unto death.”¹ With those words Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenges forever the course of Christian reflection on the topic of discipleship. Taken in light of his martyrdom,² he added a witness to those words that gives real world credibility and concreteness to them. Yet, it is my observation that virtually every would-be admirer of Bonhoeffer tends, in some way, to soften the shock value -- indeed, the scandal -- that is intended by this statement. Admirers of Bonhoeffer tend to single-mindedly focus on his outward life: admiring the heroic stance, political savvy and cautious actions he took in the face of real concrete evil. But they don't, in my judgment, do justice to what he *says* concerning his actions. Bonhoeffer is, above all, a man of the Word, a man of faith, and as such, he knows that actions are always at best ambiguous and often subject to misunderstanding. He knew actions were always in need of clarification with real confession. In that sense, then, Bonhoeffer was no glib Franciscan. His motto as a disciple might well be “Confession with your lips always that Jesus is Lord, for only then will the reasons for the actions that proceed from the heart be clear.” Following Jesus is at its core, in its essence, faith in Christ.

To be sure, Bonhoeffer was also cautious in his verbal confessing of his faith. And that's not only because of the semiotic limitation of words to grasp reality, including the reality of the gospel. It also has to do with an incipient unbelief that holds captive the human heart—an unbelief that might best be characterized as “self defense,” to use H. Richard Niebuhr's term,³ that inborn instinct to “save ourselves” as Jesus diagnoses it (Mt 16:25). He was quite aware that you do not cast pearls among the swine. Not because swine are morally worse off or any more unworthy than the disciple who has them, but because they are not yet spiritually ready to receive them and make use of them (cf. Mt 7:6). No. Bonhoeffer was also very aware that words -- including THE WORD -- can be as easily misunderstood as actions.

It is for that very reason, I believe, that Bonhoeffer could not tell even his closest church friends (except for Eberhard Bethge) about his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Many of his Protestant Christian friends and clergyman could not believe that a disciple could be involved in such a

¹ I am indebted to Marcus Felde for pointing out this more literal and provocative translation of Bonhoeffer's famous line in his work known in English as *The Cost of Discipleship: Jeder Ruf Christi furt in den Tod*. See The Crossings Newsletter entitled *Crossings*, Christmas 2011, p. 2. (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/christmas2011.pdf>)

² See Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004) for a discussion of this topic of martyrdom and whether the political character of Bonhoeffer's witness disqualifies it as “martyrdom” in the traditional sense of the term. I think it is, but not because of its political character, but because of its spiritual character, the faith, borne witness in his words to clarify his deeds, that informed his whole life and being.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers), 142.

morally ambiguous activity and still be a disciple. For Bonhoeffer this was a false pietism that harbored a Pelagian Soteriology, a form of “cheap grace,” that saw discipleship as the literal ability on the part of the disciple to avoid sin. Contrary to these false pietists, Bonhoeffer came to believe that, given all he knew (a knowledge that he correlated to the calling of Christ), not to become involved in the guilt of the plot was to host the false pietistic illusion that a he could “save himself” through escape from the world. That illusion was nothing less than the old monastic illusion, in Protestant garb, harboring the belief that discipleship meant escape from this world, a distortion of Luther’s Two Kingdoms Teaching into a Two Spheres Thinking. Such an idea was, to Bonhoeffer’s thinking, a contradiction of the gospel that justification is a justification of sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Justification entails the real death of the disciple as sinner. False pietism reduces to the idea of the death of the disciple to an escape from the world and God’s condemnation of it—indeed, as escape from real death itself. In truth, the death of the disciple happens in the world, with the world, as part of the world, even as that death happens at the hands of the world. What distinguishes the death of the disciple is denial of self (repentance) versus self assertion and faith in Christ (costly grace) rather than flight from world. This means that the disciple, while still in the world, is also one who is free to love and serve the world, as the moment calls for, because of the promise of the resurrection.

Because Bonhoeffer was so intent on exposing this false pietism, interpreters of Bonhoeffer, especially his greatest admirers today, often fail to see that he is equally concerned with a false activism, and for the very same soteriological reason. This false activism was characterized by Bonhoeffer as “ecclesiastical theocracy,” the idea that there is a “law of Christ,” of which the Church is in possession and that is meant to be imposed on the world to bring it into conformity with God’s will. As Robert Bertram notes, it is in response to this “legalistic interpretation” of the gospel of Christ that prompted Bonhoeffer to offer his most thoroughgoing interpretation of Luther’s Two Kingdom teaching as corrective.⁴ For Bonhoeffer, the false pietism separated the two kingdoms (God’s two authoritative ways of relating to the world) into two unrelated autonomous spheres; the false activism (of which Barthianism was the great offender) collapsed any meaningful distinction of the two kingdoms. Barth’s dictum is illustrative of this conflation: The gospel is the content of the law, and the law is the form of the gospel. For Bonhoeffer, spiritual authority (the authority by which God through Christ saves the world from what it is – sinful) and secular authority (the authority by which God restrains to preserves the world in the mean time as it -- sinful) co-exist in a “polemical unity” until the final death of the old age (the kingdom of this world) and the consummation of the new age (the Kingdom of God). For Bonhoeffer, therefore, the gospel is not a moral or social teaching, Christ is not a law giver and the disciple as disciple of Christ is not a social activist. Rather, the gospel is a call to sinners to die to self (and with Christ) so as to rise in Christ (to a new self). The outward form of action or inaction this call may engender in the world is open ended, depending on the moment, spontaneous and free.

So much for Bonhoeffer and discipleship. In what follows, I intend to present an understanding of discipleship that is rooted in the Gospel of Matthew and that seeks to address the so-called post-Christendom setting we find ourselves in. By post-Christendom, I mean the apparent irrelevance of the call to “follow Christ” today. As I do I will be sensitive to the way that both, a false pietism (whether in

⁴ Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2008), 93.

the form of new age spiritualities or prosperity gospels) and a false activism (whether in the form of social gospel movements of the left or the right or church programming schemes), are still distorting the message of the gospel today and still obscuring the meaning of discipleship today, even as they are purported as ways of making “following Christ” relevant. I choose Matthew because he, as much as any gospel writer, was concerned about the relationship of the disciple of Christ to the church and the world. My presentation, therefore, will be divided up into three lectures according to the three publics before which the disciple stands: Christ, the church and the world. The relationship with Christ is what constitutes the disciple as disciple and consists of faith alone. The disciple’s relationship to the Church is the means by which Christ nurtures the disciple and consists in fellowship in Christ. The relationship of the disciple to the world is the way Christ makes new disciples and it consists of witness and service to the world.

Discipleship as Accompaniment

In the Gospel of Matthew, the overarching framework for understanding the gospel, generally, and discipleship, specifically, is accompaniment: that is, *being with* God through Christ.⁵ Matthew’s Gospel opens with the announcement that Jesus is “Emmanuel,” “God with us” (1:23). At the center of his Gospel, when Jesus teaches on how the post-resurrection church conducts its business, he promises that “wherever two or three are gathered in [his] name, there [he] is among them” (18:20), leading the deliberations. Finally as Matthew’s Gospel closes, as Jesus authorizes his disciples and ascends into ubiquity (“everywhereness”), he assures them that he is “with them always, to the end of the age” (28:20). Nothing has changed. Accompaniment is still the essential framework for understanding Christian discipleship. Above all, discipleship is being with Jesus *always*. Though we no longer see him with the eyes, he is, nevertheless, with his disciples wherever they are -- by way of his promise and their faith. Moreover, this means, for Matthew, that the disciple is always a follower, never the leader. Therefore, “following me” is the signature statement for Matthew of what it means to be a disciple and the juxtaposition of Christ as leader and the disciple as follower is the structure of discipleship. Even as I stand before you here today at this podium, looking like I’m leading you, in truth, I am not. Jesus is. “[Y]ou are not to be called rabbi,” says Jesus, “for you have one teacher...one instructor, the messiah” (23:8-10). Therefore, I am standing here speaking as a follower, relaying to you what Jesus wants you to be heard. The measure of discipleship, then, is *faithfulness* to the Jesus who is *with us* as leader, not originality of thought or action.

To be sure, this abiding “with-ness” of Christ and the disciple makes being a disciple of Christ very different from being a disciple of other kinds of earthly leaders. The disciples of Freud, for example, no longer have Freud to guide them, and so in a sense, the disciples of Freud will surpass Freud. I say this neither because Freud was limited in his teaching and understanding nor because he couldn’t possibly have covered every scenario that might emerge. Both of which are true. But then, if we think about it, the earthly Jesus did not cover every possible scenario his disciples might encounter either. No. I say this because Freud is no longer *personally* with his disciples. He is dead and cut off from his

⁵Jack Dean Kingbury, *Matthew*, Proclamation Commentary Series, ed. Gerhard Krodel, 2nd ed. Revised and Enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 83.

disciples. Jesus, by contrast, is still *personally* with his disciples, *always*. Therefore, the confession of faith that Christ is the disciples risen and ascendant Lord is foundational to any Christian understanding of discipleship. This also means – and I apologize if this raises offense for Biblical Fundamentalists – that Christian discipleship is not about “following the bible” literally. On the contrary, Christian discipleship is always about “following the Jesus” whom the bible proclaims as the crucified and risen Lord, who is with us always. The heart of Christian discipleship, then, as the story of the transfiguration presents, is a matter of listening to Jesus (17:1-13). The challenge to Christian discipleship, as Matthew’s Jesus constantly warns is being led astray by other voices, whether that be of false messiahs (cf. 24:4-5), false prophets (7:15), the Pharsisees and Saducees (16:11) or by our own inner thoughts.

Indeed, as redaction criticism implies, the very character of the “gospel genre” presupposes that Jesus is *not* an absent figure but a present one, still teaching and guiding his disciples. The gospels, therefore, are not modern historical accounts of the activity of a past figure, dead and gone. Therefore, what looks to some modern historians like human manipulation of the historical Jesus is not that at all, and for one very important reason: Jesus is not dead and gone -- he is risen! The gospels are an account of how the historical Jesus -- now crucified, risen and ascended -- asserted that he is still present teaching the Church as it confronts new situations. That we moderns might wish Matthew to be more upfront about that fact is a fair criticism to make of him -- though anachronistic. Matthew is concerned about the continuity (not the replication) of the Church’s teaching in 90 A.D. with Jesus’ teaching in 30 A.D. and he employs the gospel genre for that purpose. The reason the teachings of Matthew’s Church in 90 A.D. are in continuity with the teaching of Jesus in 30 A.D. is because the same Christ is present among the disciples teaching them. That is consistent, says Matthew, with the fact that Christ is resurrected and ascended. He is not a figure who is dead and gone. He is still alive, present, and leading his disciples, just as he told them he would be.

Accompaniment, then, is still the overarching framework for understanding discipleship today, even as it was, for example, for Bonhoeffer. The true disciple of Christ, Bonhoeffer says, acts not on the basis of a set of rules or system of principles posited from start regardless of circumstance, but in the concreteness of the moment and in response to the imminent “command of Christ,” understood not as a law-imperative, but a grace-imperative, to use Werner Elert’s distinction.⁶ Of course, this should not be confused with a new age-type of spirituality or a sentential pietism or, even, a theological liberalism that equates an “inner voice” or an innate intuition or a naturally occurring *gefühl* with God.⁷ To hear the command of Christ in the moment presupposes Christian formation in the external Word or the *vox Christi* as something that has its origins from outside us and which happens through participation in Christian community and sacramental activity.⁸ But more on this later.

⁶Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 224.

⁷Philip Cary, *Good News for Anxious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 2-4. Chapter 1 and 2 in this book address this question from different angles.

⁸See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), 80-88. I am referencing here the two sections entitled “Conformation” and “The Concrete Place.”

Accompaniment and Faith

To accompany Jesus as one of his disciples means much more than simply being in his physical presence. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, numerous groups are identified as “following Christ” as he wends his way throughout Galilee into Samaria and finally to Jerusalem. Matthew is very playful with the word “to follow” (ἀκολουθέω). The crowds may follow him around for all kinds of reasons, from curiosity to wanting to cash in on his miracles. The scribes and Pharisees follow him around because, at first, they are wary of him and, later, they want to collect evidence to make their case against him. Especially, playful is the way the word is used when Peter (26:58) and “many women” (27:55), in a very anti-disciple-like manner, follow him “at a distance” as he undergoes his arrest, passion, and crucifixion. But when Jesus himself issues the call, “follow me,” it has one very specific meaning. It is a call to trust him with our whole being. It is a call that has as its correlate “faith.” Faith alone is the essence of discipleship.

Matthew’s view of discipleship as accompaniment, further defined as faith, is very different, in my judgment, from the dominant image of discipleship today: discipleship as the “imitation of Christ.”⁹ One popular expression of this view of discipleship in recent times has been the so-called “WWJD” movement, “What Would Jesus Do.” However, the view is so ubiquitous and so infused in contemporary Christian consciousness, that most Christians don’t even realize they are operating with it. This is true in all denominations, including those denominations, like Lutheranism, that subscribe to Confessional Documents that refute it.¹⁰

⁹See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, 1999), 133-144. The concept is by no means new and term *imitatione Christi* goes back at least to 14th Century and the so-called *Devotio Moderna* initiated by the movement known as the Brethren of the Common Life. That movement was highly critical of the opulent and power-oriented behavior of the church – and rightly so -- and advocated the life style of Jesus as a model for Christian behavior. Its most famous member, Thomas à Kempis, encapsulated the ideal of the movement in his famous devotional treatise call *De Imitatione Christi*. In the view of à Kempis, the imitation of Christ was seen as a highly interiorized spiritual devotion to the Eucharist, the “do this in memory of me,” and tended toward an otherworldly posture. During the period of the Reformation, through the influence of Desiderius Erasmus, the idea of the imitation of Christ shifted to the imitation of the kind of man Jesus was—the virtuous man—and the kind of lifestyle he lived. This, then, became the theological centerpiece of Christian Humanism in its attempt to Reform the corrupt institutional Church. While in the 16th Century, Luther’s and Calvin’s views of Christ as the atoner for sin verses the model of the godly life prevailed, the subsequent emerges of Pietism (against Lutheran Orthodoxy), Arminianism (against Calvinist Orthodoxy), and theological liberalism (against Classical Christianity) along with the modernist tendency to equate religion with morality, all served to reintroduce the imitation of Christ concept as a dominant view today.

¹⁰ In an insightful little book by Phillip Cary, entitled, *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don’t Have to Do* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), Cary notes how this mindset also permeates the contemporary consciousness of the American Evangelical tradition, generally. Calling it the “New Evangelicalism,” Carey correctly sees 1) how the subtle legalism of this theology is “anxiety-producing” and 2) how it desperately needs correction by the evangelicalism of Luther. The Gospel, Carey correctly notes, is burden relieving. Unfortunately, Cary comes close to Luther in his correction of the New Evangelical, but ultimately misses the mark. In my judgment he verges on the opposite problem of antinomianism. This is because he fails to include Luther’s Law-Gospel dialectic in his analysis. The oversight, if that is what it is, obscures the fact that God’s wrath on sinners is the most basic problem disciples face and is the primary reason why the crucified and risen Christ calls them fellowship with him.

At the risk of oversimplifying, let it suffice to say that in the imitation of Christ model of discipleship, Jesus is portrayed primarily as a “model of the godly life,” a life that the disciple is to study and emulate. “To follow,” in other words, means “to study or observe and to emulate.” The model by no means settles the debate about what that “godly life” might look like. For example, by piously focusing on depictions of Jesus as a man of retreat and prayer, some locate its meaning in acts of piety or in therapeutic health practices that are meant to bring peace in a hectic world. Others, by focusing on Jesus words and actions with regard to the poor, the sick, and the marginalized, locate its meaning in social activism and the correction of the world’s wrongs: whether that activism be confined to personal acts of charity (as Mother Theresa conceived it) or political acts of social reconstruction (as either “left leaning” or “right leaning” theologies might conceive it). Still others might focus its meaning on modes of personal conduct or attitudes of positive thinking or the development of life-skills that will help disciples to get “[their] best life yet” or realize their ultimate “purpose” in life. However the imitation of Christ model of discipleship is interpreted and enacted, Jesus becomes little more than a clarifier of values and an expert personal conduct or social policies. By extension discipleship becomes a mantra for perfecting these behaviors, attitudes and values and thus achieving life’s fulfillment.

The ubiquity of this way of thinking about discipleship is evidenced by the fact that the common response to the above description is, “What’s wrong with it?” So, what is wrong with it? The answer, in my judgment, is that it hasn’t sufficiently grounded biblical discipleship in biblical Soteriology. First, doesn’t give due recognition to the fact that salvation is by *faith alone* and, second, it doesn’t give due account that salvation is in a *crucified Christ alone*. I will finish this section by focusing on the first point, discipleship and faith alone. I will cover the second point, discipleship and the cross, in the concluding section

In contrast to the imitation of Christ model of discipleship, Matthew’s idea of discipleship as accompaniment has a very different picture of Jesus and a very different understanding of why he wants us to accompany him. Jesus states over and over again, in the face of persistent misunderstanding, that he invites people to accompany with him, first and foremost, *not because of what he wants them to do for him, but because of what he wants to do for them*. The saying, “the Son of man came into the world to serve and not to be served and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20:28), is emblematic of this. Faith as trust is a matter of letting Jesus do for us what he wants done for us. This faith is the essence of discipleship from the human side. When Jesus says “follow me” he makes no demands as such. Rather, he invites us to trust him to do for us what he desires for us.

At the risk of oversimplifying again, let me tell a story to illustrate this idea of faith and accompaniment. Once upon a time there was a basketball team that never won a game. They were simply lousy. One day Michael Jordan is seen working his magic with a basketball on the sidelines. Someone says to the team, “All you need to do is imitate Michael Jordan and you can’t lose.” But that’s just the problem. They are not Michael Jordan. They do not possess his skill and ability. They cannot do what Michael Jordan does. No matter how hard the team might try, they simply cannot be other than who they are--losers. But all is not necessarily lost. The solution to their problem lies elsewhere. It lies not in *imitating* Michael Jordan, but in having him as their teammate. That the sports version of

accompaniment: letting him lead the team, trusting him with the ball, and accompanying him up and down the court. Only then can the team defeat its opponent. And note. Only as long as they have him on their team will they be winners. With him they are a different team than without him. Moreover, the team's hope rests not in their performance, but in their abiding relationship with Michael Jordan and his performance for them.

The call to discipleship, I suggest, is like that. And it begins with a simple invitation. There is no coercion, no deal making, either by Jesus who issues it or by the disciple who receives it.¹¹ Matthew makes this clear, so it seems to me, in two separate healing encounters. In 8:1-4, a leper in the crowd, following Jesus, steps forward for healing, acknowledging that it was up to Jesus to decide whether or not he should have it. "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean" (8:2), he said. Jesus, in turn, says, "I do choose. "Be made clean!" And the partnership is made. In 9:27-31, a blind man calls out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus asks, "Do you believe I am able to do this?", implying that Jesus will not heal without his consent. The man said "Yes, Lord." And Jesus said, "According to your faith, let it be done to you." And the partnership is made. Together, these two periscopes illustrate that the faith relationship between Jesus and the disciple is by definition non-coercive and mutual. Jesus gives his services freely and the disciple receives that service freely.

This mutuality in the relationship between Jesus and the disciple explains why Jesus is *genuinely amazed* when people make the leap of faith and *deeply saddened* when they don't. Concerning the former, Chapters 8 through 15 of Matthew's Gospel contain numerous incidents of different people, from different backgrounds, under different circumstances all who make the leap of faith. The most striking illustrations of Jesus' "amazement" over this leap of faith are a Centurion, who comes to Jesus for help concerning his sick servant (8:10), and a Canaanite woman who doggedly clings to faith in spite of the brutally honest rebuffs she gets (15:28). Both are foreigners, by no means a part of the team, the house of Israel, to which Jesus was presumed to belong *de facto*. Yet both became healed, not because they imitated Jesus, but because they trusted him and received from him what he wanted to give them. Concerning the later, Chapters 19 through 23 give us a mix of people who reject Jesus. Some simply decline his invitation, as in the case of the so-called rich young ruler (19:16-30). Others outright oppose his invitation, illustrated by the numerous incidents of Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, lawyers and priests who all seek to discredit Jesus and try to dissuade others from following him. Jesus' sadness at this unbelief comes to a climax as he overlooks Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under wings, and you were not willing." (23:37).

What we also learn from these acceptance and rejection accounts is that the call to discipleship always confronts the hearer as a moment of decision. There is no such thing as an "anonymous Christian," as Karl Rahner has suggested, a notion which he, in my judgment, mistakenly advances in light of misinterpretation of passages like Matthew 25:31-46. (More on that later.) But, there is such a

¹¹I have become aware of this fact from my reading of Werner Elert, especially, his, *The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans., Martin H. Bertram and Walter R. Bouman (1974), Unpublished Manuscript, p. 77.

thing as a pseudo-disciple. Jesus says as much in his oft neglected closing paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount. It deserves to be quoted at length.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name. Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evil doers. (7:21-23)

Who are these pseudo-disciples who seem to say the right words, “Lord, Lord,” and who, to all appearances, seem to do the right things, including, things like, prophesying and casting out demons, and doing many deeds of power -- and even who do them “in his name”? They, I suggest, are those who misinterpret the Sermon on the Mount and reduce the call to discipleship to a call to *imitate* Jesus. But note, it is a truncated view of Jesus. In their litany, they boast that they can imitate Jesus the prophet, Jesus the exorcist, Jesus the miracle worker -- but note what they exclude. They cannot imitate Jesus the crucified. What the imitation of Christ model of discipleship fails to comprehend is that the essence of discipleship is not about emulating Christ, but receiving from him what he wants to do for us -- in a word, faith. And above all, what Jesus wants to do for us is *manage our death, so as to tally it into new life*. To trust Jesus to do this for us is what it means “to do the will of the [Jesus’] Father.” The heart of discipleship is not *imitating* Christ, but *accompanying* Christ in faith to our death. We, therefore, turn to explore the meaning of Christ crucified for the understanding of discipleship.

The Heart of Discipleship: Accompanying Jesus to the Cross

It is commonly observed that Jesus predicts his passion three times in the Gospel of Matthew. But what is not so commonly observed is that those predictions are the entire content of his most succinct teaching on discipleship. Biblical soteriology and biblical discipleship are inseparably linked. To be a disciple of Christ is to be saved by Christ. Everything else flows from that. To understand why, I will focus on the first and most elaborate passion prediction because it is accompanied by the most thoroughgoing teaching on discipleship, Matthew 16:21-26. I quote it at length.

¹⁶ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’

The incident recorded here is a turning point in Jesus’ relationship with his disciples (cf. 16:21). Peter had just confessed Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16) and Jesus was amazed. He exclaimed that this confession was no ordinary human achievement, but the doing of his Father, the working the Father’s will amongst the disciples. In light of that Jesus now for the first time lets the

disciples in on the nuts and bolts of “the will of [his] Father” (cf. 26:42): that is, the plan of salvation that Jesus, the Son of God, has concocted with his Father God. The “must” (16:21) character of the plan is not meant to indicate a constraint on God. On the contrary, it indicates that nothing can stop the “will of the Father” from being done. And as we see in the passion story, every attempt to thwart the will of God, whether by the religious establishment or the political establishment, not only fails, but gets turned into a way of accomplishing it.

To be sure, no matter where one stands (with or against the will of his Father) this is not a pretty plan. It involves in no uncertain terms Jesus’ suffering condemnation (cf. 20:18, 26:65-66) “at hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes” (16:21) and his dying criminally at the hands of the duly constituted political authorities (20:19). But, neither is this plan a Greek tragedy. Though he will die, he will also “on the third day rise” (16:21). But that fact in no ways minimizes the depth of terror Jesus must suffer—death! Death – not reduced to a mere biological fact as human thinking is wont to do, but as the judgment of God by which the sinners are destroyed “body and soul” (10:27-28) by which they lose selfhood itself.

It is important to note the blunt -- indeed, literal -- character of Jesus’ description of what must happen. He is not speaking metaphorically, as both, Peter’s reaction and subsequent events show. All that Jesus “predicts” not only “must” but “will” happen literally! Even as Jesus in the garden later agonizes with his Father, in prayer, over the execution of the plan, whether it “must” be, the answer is clear. This plan *is* the will of the Father (26:36-46) and Jesus willingly concurs. What is not yet obvious, however, is *why* this must happen.

The answer to *why* is inseparably linked to the meaning of discipleship as accompaniment and an understanding of the human predicament that makes it necessary. We get a partial glimpse into the nature of that predicament in Peter’s initial reaction to Jesus’ blunt disclosure of the saving will of the Father as the way of cross. Although Peter in no wise realizes it, his rebuke of Jesus is nothing less than an act of pure unbelief, outright enmity and absolute rebellion against God. We know this not from Peter himself (we have no idea how Peter the man might rationalize his rebuke) but from Jesus’ counter-rebuke to Peter: “Get behind me Satan!” Shocking word perhaps, but remember, we are observing here a moment unprecedented candor. And here we have a candid statement on the human predicament. But we must be careful about interpreting this rebuke. We should use it neither to postulate a naïve doctrine of the devil nor make light of the real experience of evil as a personal other, as a unified front against God, that haunts human existence and draws it into captivity. As Werner Elert reminds us, we can no more prove the existence of a personal devil than we can a personal God.¹² With regard to both there is a veil of mystery that has not been lifted, even as there is an existential experience that cannot be avoided.

The key, in my judgment, to understanding this rebuke is the existential or personal address character of it. Just as Peter was earlier addressed by Jesus personally, and existentially, as “the rock,” as one rightly grounded in the will of the Father, so now here he is addressed by Jesus as “Satan,” as one wrongly grounded in absolute opposition to God, specifically, the will of God in Christ. If earlier Peter stood as the representative of all disciples in his confession of faith, so now here he stands as the

¹² Elert, 175.

representative of all humanity in its opposition to God. Humanity, says Jesus, is not only in the grips of evil, as a victim, it is also in league with evil and therefore, responsible for it, even though it is enslaved to it. The deep seated truth of the human predicament, as Jesus' rebuke further reveals, is that humanity's interests have become so opposed to God's interests that to set your mind on them is to oppose God and to court evil. Sin, then, is not comprehended in heinous acts of evil that outrage nearly everyone. More subtly, sin is a matter of thinking in terms of "me first" or as Augustine and later Luther put it, as a state of being turned in on self, being *for* the self and *against* God. Peter was counseling Jesus to think from a human point of view, not God's point of view (cf. 16:23), from the perspective of personal self-preservation as opposed to God's will. For this reason, the rebuke that pertains to Satan (as the source and symbol of all that opposes God) also pertains to Peter -- and to all who are in evil's grip.

But the rebuke of Jesus to Peter and Satan is not the first time such rebukes have been issued against those who oppose God. On the contrary, that rebuke has existed as long as human rebellion against God has existed, such that it is sown into the fabric of this world (cf. 5:18). Therefore, Jesus is simply reiterating in this rebuke the ancient law of God that has existed in various historical expressions from Adam through Moses to the present (cf. 4: 15-16). Moreover, we should not be surprised to hear Jesus himself make use of and thus confirm the truth of this cosmic rebuke. In the opening lines of his so-called Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announced to everyone that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (5:17). Indeed, he was so good at teaching what the law and the prophets said -- interpreting them in such a way that it encompasses the whole of our being, including our mind's thought (cf. 5:22), our mouth's words (5:22), our fist's reaction (5:38-39), and our heart's desire (cf. 5:27-30) -- that some thought teaching the law was his central mission. This is revealed in the survey of answers that people gave to the question Jesus asked at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do people say that I am?" (16:13).

What still needs to be clarified is what Jesus means when he says that he has come to "fulfill the law." Truth be told, God being God, the law of God is always fulfilled as a matter of course. That is insured by the retributive character of the law as illustrated, for example, by Jesus when he asserts "hell" (meaning death as punishment) as the consequence of sin (5: 22, 29, 30, etc.) or by Paul when he says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Law breakers never thwart the law when they break it, even though they may think they do when they seem to evade its consequences for a time. First of all, they become guilty by it regardless of appearance. But also, the law is also always fulfilled, one way or another, in the outward consequences it declares. In theory, this can happen one of two ways: by law doers, when they satisfy what God requires and receive life as a consequence, and by law breaker, when they fail to satisfy God's requirements and receive punishment, ultimately, death, as a consequence. In actual fact, only the second option truly exists in the world because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, the existential fact of death has deep theological consequences with regard to the status of people before God. Although there may be a large historical gap between the birth and the death of a sinner, that gap in no way nullifies the fact that the law is always fulfilled.

Therefore, when Jesus says that he has come to "fulfill the law" of God he does not mean primarily that he fulfills it in the first sense, as one who has not sinned, even though that is true. This is

the way the imitation of Christ model of discipleship has taken it because it fits well with their portrait of Christ as a model of the godly life that the disciple is to emulate. Rather, when Christ fulfills the law, he fulfills it in the second sense, as one who dies as a sinner, not because he personally committed sin (he alone as the Son of God was perfectly obedient to God in all things) but because he personally chose to become the friend of sinners. This choice, this embrace of what Jesus calls the “will of the Father” to reconcile sinners back to God, implicates Christ in a theological contradiction. Matthew’s gospel abounds in examples of Jesus fraternizing with sinners and the corresponding attack he receives from the guardians of the law. But no incident more clearly shows the contradiction it creates than the story of the calling of Matthew, the Gospel’s namesake.

The details of the story are well known (9:9-13). Jesus calls Matthew to “follow [him]” and then accompanies him to his home for table fellowship. Soon the table is full of Matthew’s friends. The Pharisees see this and inquire, innocently enough, about Jesus’ choice of company: “Why does [he] eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Obviously, the Pharisees see this as a stark disregard for the law of God, which commands the righteous to separate from the unrighteous. In a calm, deliberate, manner, Jesus answers their query. I quote: “Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

With these words, Jesus recognizes the apparent contradiction that exists in the will of God. Indeed, there seems to be two competing wills or desires of God: sacrifice and mercy, judgment and promise, law and gospel. These two wills of the one God logically conflict, at least when one thinks from a human point of view. Yet, quoting Hosea (6:6), Jesus asserts that God’s logic has a preference for mercy over sacrifice, and that that preference is evidenced by the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ saving mission to reconcile sinners to God, therefore, *does over ruler* the law of God, but not in the sense that the law is simply abolished, but in the sense that it is fulfilled in the death of Christ and rendered obsolete in the resurrection of Messiah Jesus, the Son of God. Why? Because the law pertains to the old creation, “the earth” (5:18), as Matthew here calls it, understood as that which is engulfed in human sin, God’s law and under the sentence of death. The resurrection entails a new creation, Matthew calls it the Kingdom of Heaven, comprised of Christ’s higher righteousness, the Spirit’s guidance, and the promise of life everlasting. The law whose function is to condemn sin, has no relevance, no use, in the Kingdom of heaven. Fulfillment, thus, also means retirement, no longer necessary, when it comes to the death and resurrection of Christ and the consummation of the Kingdom of heaven.

It is from this soteriological point of view that Jesus’ teaching on discipleship springs. And remembering that we are at a moment of stark candor, we see also that Jesus’ words about discipleship are as blunt as his words about his passion. “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and following me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

Notice, there is no hint here of what is popularly described today as “getting your best life yet” or of fulfilling God’s “purpose” for your life. There is no mention here of either moral improvement or a left or right-leaning social agenda as the great cause of Jesus. There is no advice given here on how to “master the world” or “achieve self-fulfillment.” Why? Because these ideas all miss the soteriological point. They have misread both the problem of the human condition as one of sin, judgment and death, and the reason for which Christ came to bear the cross. They have done exactly what Jesus says the Pharisees did in the “Woe” passages of Chapter 23: They have limited their focus on what people can do, like “tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, judgment (κρίσις), and mercy and faith” (23:23). They have set people’s minds on human things (the things that are in their capacity) and away from divine things (the things that God alone can do for them). Preachers who set people’s minds on such things are doing exactly what Jesus criticizes the Pharisees who “sit on Moses’ seat” for doing. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to remove them” (23:4). In the mean time, such preachers produce, at best, “anxious Christian,” to use Philip Cary’s term, the worriers of Matthew 6:25-34), and, at worst, presumptuous ones, like the Pietists Jesus describes in Matthew 6:1-5, who erroneously think that the praise they receive from the public is reflective of a praise they must be getting from God. In the mean time, these preachers and their followers are deluding themselves. It remains to be seen in the end time how they will fair. The indication from Jesus is that it is not good. Since these preachers and their followers seem never to have really known Jesus as he wanted to be known, it follows (cf. 7:22-23, 25: 31-46) also that Jesus has never really known them as they presumed he should have: that is, as righteous. “For I tell you,” says Jesus, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (5:20).

The blunt language Jesus uses to describe discipleship is the very opposite of “laying burdens on others.” It has nothing to do with human works and effort, and certainly nothing to do with “imitating Jesus.” Rather, discipleship has everything to do with Soteriology, with the will of Jesus and the Father to save sinners through the way of the cross. Discipleship is about entrusting our very being to Christ. To trust Christ for this is to truly know him for who he wants to be known as the crucified messiah. Therefore, when we hear Jesus say “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me,” he is not commanding disciples to do something for him or to imitate him. It is not a call to a life of asceticism or to this or that social agenda or to a set of moral principles or biblically defined lifestyle. With regard to these things, disciples are free. Rather, discipleship means letting Jesus handle everything concerning our ultimate future with God, especially, as that future is complicated by sin and law’s sentence of death. Discipleship is about letting Jesus manage our death, a death that we have coming because of our sin and the law that condemns it, a death that can be surpassed only by the work of Jesus who in dying confronted death head on and in rising conquered death once and for all. Discipleship is about including humanity in on his victory over sin, judgment and death.

It is now possible to interpret Jesus’ candid teaching on discipleship when he says “deny yourself, taking up your cross, and following him” (16:24). The key phrase in Jesus’ teaching on discipleship is the one he has been using from the beginning of his ministry: “follow me.” By this he does not mean “imitate me” or put into practice a set a skills or moral principles that I will teach you. Rather, he means,

quite literally, “accompany me.” The words “follow me” need to be understood as an invitation into an enduring relationship with the crucified and risen Christ that is based on *faith alone*. Indeed, the “cost of discipleship” is that it entails placing our faith in Jesus alone as the proverbial basket that holds all our eggs. Two things are distinctive about Jesus’ teaching on discipleship. First, *he is unflinchingly honest about the necessity of our death in light of the reality of our sin and God’s law*. There is no escape from death. We can either die alone, in which case death is ultimate, or we can die with Christ, in faith, in which case death is penultimate, the prelude to resurrection. Indeed, repentance is the main category for describing the disciple’s acceptance of that fact concerning death. The call to “follow me,” then, is no different from the call “to repent, for the kingdom of heaven [God’s victory over sin, judgment and death] has come near” (4:7). Second, *Jesus is unequivocal in his claim that he alone can lead the disciple through death to new life*. Indeed, that claim is essentially the reason he gives for “following him.” Therefore, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is emphatic, as are the divinely sent messengers at the tomb side, that his disciples go to Galilee to “see him” (28:10), the crucified one, raised. The resurrection of Jesus is not a psychic phenomenon or a mythical construct designed to underscore certain elements of Jesus’ teaching. On the contrary, it is a historical fact: meaning, a one time, unrepeatable event that has been witnessed by others. What is essential here is the reason for Jesus’ appearance to his first disciples. It was so they could bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus as confirmation of all that he had claimed. God the Father has placed his power and reputation on Messiah Jesus, the Son of God. The resurrection appearances of Jesus are, therefore, his way of discipling his disciples in faith. Even though the disciples are not yet raised, but still on their way to death, they can be certain that what God done for Jesus will also be done for those who trust their death to Christ Jesus.

The words “deny yourself,” as we said earlier, is not a euphemism for asceticism and it certainly is not a call to self-deprecation. Rather, “to deny yourself” means to give up on any illusion that you can save yourself (16:25). As such it is a call away from the illusion of self reliance and toward faith in Christ. What distinguishes it from the words, “follow me” is that it identifies the “false god” to which sinful humanity desperately clings: namely, the self. Sinful humanity sets up the self as a “god,” not because we necessarily believe we are all powerful (that myth may persist for a while, but it is pretty well punctured by the time we reach middle age) but because our natural, sinful inclination is to believe we are the only one whom we can truly trust to look out for our own good. A “god,” as Luther notes, is that to which we look for our good.¹³ I say *false* god, because, ultimately, the self cannot deliver up that for which its hopes above all else: namely, life as an escape from death. Moreover, we dare not overlook just how repulsive these two little words can be either. The call to “deny yourself” flies in the face of modernity’s most universally accepted axiom: “Look out for our own self-interest because nobody else will.” We dare not be naïve. This axiom is true. In this sinful world, where everyone is looking out for their own self-interest, reason dictates to every “self” to do the same. But this is not a truth that sets us free. On the contrary, it is a truth that enslaves us to our self and insures our death. Only as these words,

¹³I am following Martin Luther’s line of argumentation from his explanation of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism*. In his own kind of existential way, Luther sets forth a definition of “god” that is utterly factual and applicable to all. “A ‘god’,” he says, is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need.” Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

“deny yourself” are accompanied by the words of Jesus, “follow me” is that axiom replaced by another: “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (16:25).

The words, “take up your cross,” are the most metaphorical of the three phrases, but not as is often thought. The words are not a call to service per se, but rather a call to repentance, understood as an acknowledgment of sin and the acceptance of the consequences. While it is true that the gospel does free the disciple *from* self-absorption and *for* other-concern, that is not what the words “take up your cross” mean here. The cross, in Jesus’ day, was literally the instrument upon which enemies of the state were executed, not a vehicle by which others are served. It was punishment for opposition to and rebellion against the duly constituted authorities. Of course, the natural tendency is to avoid the cross at all cost, not “to take it up.” Therefore, these words are even more shocking than the words “deny yourself.” Jesus’ metaphorical reference to the cross is nothing other than a reference to the law of God, as interpreted by Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, as that which makes us ultimately “liable to hell of fire” (5:22; cf. 5:25, 29, 30, etc.). The “cross” that Jesus is talking about here is the one that the law of God lays up those who oppose God in the course of everyday life. Wherever we experience God’s accusing word, *there* the cross is being assigned to us. And it is everywhere, as the Sermon on the Mount attests. It is embedded in the very fabric this old creation; it is inescapable and it is deserved. The temptation, of course, is try to avoid it, but all such attempts are illusory. Therefore, with all candor, Jesus says, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” This is not a call for us to give up on hope or to give in to despair, but to give over to Christ. Jesus is not here commanding his disciples to do something. Rather, he asking them to trust him to take over their very cross-ridden selves and turn it into new life.

This, then, is what discipleship is essentially all about. It is not about “imitating Christ” but “accompanying Christ” in faith through death to new life. To be sure, though the promised new life is still just that -- a promise yet to be fulfilled -- the very anticipation of it by the disciple does have great *consequences* for the disciple’s involvement in both, the ministry of the Church and the wellbeing of the world. Concerning that, all I can say is, stay tuned.

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