

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Disciple



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Introduction:

This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the person who wrote the book on discipleship. Literally.

Christian Education leaders and teachers may choose to celebrate the life of this hero of the faith throughout the church school year and/or as a way of kicking off another year of discipleship. It may be helpful to have this re-introduction to Bonhoeffer's life and some of his key ideas.

A Review of Bonhoeffer's Life & Key Ideas:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor in 1937, a time when Adolph Hitler was taking his nation down a terrible path. What was even worse is that many Christians and church leaders in Germany were supporting the Nazi's agenda. Bonhoeffer knew this was wrong. And he wasn't the only one.

The Confessing Church emerged in Germany, to oppose the Nazi regime and to counteract the preaching of the German Reich Church. Bonhoeffer and others were accused of being disloyal to their government, and suffered at the hands of

the Nazis who used arrest, torture, and terror to keep German citizens under control. Like countless others who resisted the Nazis, Bonhoeffer was arrested and placed in a concentration camp. On April 9, 1945, even as the Allied forces were winning victory over Hitler's armies, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged in the Nazi concentration camp at Flossenburg, Germany.

Published in 1937, Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship* (reprinted more recently under the title *Discipleship*) grew out of his seminars, sermons, and study groups he was a part of as the world around him got crazier and crazier.

Bonhoeffer knew that following Jesus means more than skipping along behind, watching Jesus do stuff. Following Jesus means *participating* in Jesus' life and ministry, as well as in his death and resurrection. He modeled that in the way he lived—and died. But his ideas were just as powerful as his witness:

THE GIFT IS A CALL.

As a good Lutheran, Bonhoeffer grew up hearing the famous Reformation rallying cry. *We are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ!* And he wouldn't have argued with it. But he DID have a problem with Christians who taught and/or thought that, since we don't have to do anything to be "saved," therefore we don't have to do anything at all. That, he said, is cheap grace.

"Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ" (Discipleship, Fortress Press paperback edition 2003, p. 44).

Bonhoeffer contrasts cheap grace with what he calls "costly grace," grace that is always connected to discipleship.

"It is costly because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner. Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's Son – 'you were bought with a price' – and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God" (ibid, p. 45).

The gift of salvation can never be separated from the call to follow Jesus. We don't have to do anything to be saved; that is a gift! But this gift sets us free to answer Christ's call to love God and serve our neighbor. We are called and set free to give ourselves away for the sake of others. We are called and set free to follow Christ.

JESUS IS THE REAL DEAL.

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jesus was not just an idea. Nor was he just somebody who lived a long time ago. Jesus was REAL. Jesus IS real. In fact, the only reason we can answer the call to follow is because it is JESUS who calls us.

“Because Jesus is the Christ, he has authority to call and to demand obedience to his word. Jesus calls to discipleship, not as a teacher and a role model, but as the Christ, the Son of God” (ibid, p. 57).

Bonhoeffer reminds us that answering the call to discipleship looks a lot like Peter stepping out of the boat, onto the water (Matthew 14). Jesus called him. And so he went. He *decided* to answer Jesus. But Peter couldn't have done this on his own. The only reason he could do it is because Christ gave him the gift of a call.

The word Jesus speaks isn't simply to be “believed.” It doesn't create a new “doctrine” to memorize or repeat. Jesus' word creates a whole new reality. He makes it possible for us to ACT differently, to get out of the boat, to answer his call. He made it possible for Dietrich—and makes it possible for us—to speak the truth, stand against evil, work for justice, and give everything there is to give for the sake of what is right and holy in this world. No doctrine could do that. No idea could do that. Not even the best, most compelling idea. The only thing that could make all this possible is Jesus himself.

DISCIPLESHIP IS JOY.

As Bonhoeffer was finishing up his work on the book that would be titled Discipleship, he was already in up to his eyeballs in the movement opposing Hitler. He couldn't have known exactly what his fate would be, but he was no fool. He knew the risk. And, yet, writing in the preface of his book, he said:

“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 bides us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a part full of mercy beyond measure. Discipleship is joy” (ibid, p. 40).

When we answer Christ's call to follow, Bonhoeffer reminded us, it is like finding a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price. It is worth leaving your nets behind. It is an easy burden to bear.

“[Blessed are those who follow Christ because...] their heavenly home has become so certain that they are truly free for life in this world” (ibid, pp. 55-56).

Answering the call to discipleship is not easy. It is a path paved with sacrifice and suffering. But Bonhoeffer wouldn't have had it any other way. It is the only path to freedom. It is the way to joy.