

Bonhoeffer's Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation

Mary L. Vanden Berg

Introduction

In her book, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*, Ellen Charry suggests that around the beginning of the seventeenth century, the practice of theology began to be understood as the “intellectual justification of the faith apart from the practice of the Christian life.”¹ She claims that this disjunction of theology and practice is, in fact, a false dichotomy and one that is unique to the modern period.²

Prior to the seventeenth century, theology had always been what she calls a sapiential practice. “Sapience,” she writes, “is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known.”³ In other words, the task of theology was not simply to acquire knowledge for the sake of philosophical argumentation or for its own sake. Rather, a primary task of theology throughout the tradition was to “assist people to come to God.”⁴ One could also say that theology had as its task to carefully outline the central truths about God for the purpose of helping people come to know him better.

Charry goes on to examine a number of documents from the early church through the seventeenth century. In each document, she notes a dual purpose. Each document functions not only as a theological treatise intended to clarify some truth of the Christian faith, but also it has what she calls a “virtue-shaping” function.⁵

¹ Ellen T. Charry, *By The Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

Charry is not alone in noticing the formative role theology has had. In his book *The Creed*, Luke Timothy Johnson notes that the creed “is not a set of abstract convictions but a rule of faith with a clear and coherent internal logic.”⁶ In addition, he writes that it is possible “to determine from the creed which behaviors conform to this logic and which do not.”⁷ In other words, theology, even the rather undeveloped theology of the creed, is intended to be formative. For example, Johnson notes that “if people think that God created the world, their life ought to reflect that conviction by thanksgiving, reverence and sharing.”⁸ He goes on to say, “By providing an epitome of Scripture, the creed provides a bridge between the complex witnesses of Scripture and the moral lives of believers.”⁹

Ephraim Radner also notes the formative influence of early church theology. In an essay dealing with the impact of historical criticism on theology, he briefly surveys the early church and notes, “Much of the Early Church’s doctrine of salvation was distinctly oriented to the issue of moral conversion.”¹⁰ He goes on to say that the doctrine of the incarnation as addressed by such figures as Clement of Alexandria and Athanasius made clear that “the coming of the word in the flesh of Jesus took place precisely in order to transform human beings into vessels of righteousness and holiness, whose image conforms to that of God himself.”¹¹

Radner, Johnson, and Charry all give helpful information about the importance of the connection between the intellectual content of theological work and Christian practice. Unfortunately, none of them examines any theological documents of the modern era. However, the modern era is not completely devoid of theologians who have understood Christian formation as a central role of the theological task. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one such theologian.

This article will begin with a brief historical background to Bonhoeffer, including a survey of his early work, *Sanctorum Communio*, and noting that even in this early and largely philosophical work, the underlying concern for Christian formation is evident. Then his work, *Discipleship*, will be examined in detail. I will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of justification and sanctification as explained in this document takes full

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 301.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰ Ephraim Radner, *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1998), 16.

¹¹ Ibid., 16–17.

account of the two functions of Christian theology as outlined by Charry: clarifying some truth of the Christian faith and moral formation.

History, Background, and Early Work

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born, along with his twin sister, on February 6, 1906. The family had eight children and lived in Breslau, Germany. His father was a prominent psychiatrist and neurologist who was offered a chair at the University of Berlin in 1912. His upper-class upbringing was both strict and loving, with the parents sparing nothing on their children's development while not spoiling them with extravagances.¹² Dietrich's friend Eberhard Bethge writes that the children were taught to respect the feelings and needs of others. He notes, "Such consideration for others became an important element in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology."¹³

Although his immediate family was only nominally religious, by the age of fifteen Bonhoeffer had decided to become a theologian. It is likely that his older brother's death in World War I and his mother's grief over that death played some part in his decision.¹⁴ In addition, his placement in such a large family may have influenced this talented young man to find a vocation different from that of his older brothers.¹⁵

He began his theological studies at Tübingen. Bethge notes that "Bonhoeffer's initial time in Tübingen showed all the characteristics of an academic study of theology and scarcely any signs of a real commitment to the Church."¹⁶ After his first year at Tübingen, Bonhoeffer's parents arranged for him to spend a term in Rome with his brother Klaus. During their tenure in Rome, the brothers, eager for adventure, set off to North Africa for a short trip. There Bonhoeffer encountered Islam. Bethge quotes Bonhoeffer's letter to his parents from Tripoli: "In Islam everyday life and religion are not kept separate, as they are in the whole of the Church, including the Catholic Church. With us one goes to church and when one comes back an entirely different kind of life begins again."¹⁷ Further on, his letter indicates that he was not sure this sort of joining of faith and life was a good idea. Nonetheless, one can not help but wonder if a seed was planted that influenced his work in the ensuing years.

¹²Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter Ross, Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 6.

¹³Eberhard Bethge, *Costly Grace: An Illustrated Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Roaleen Ockenden (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 18.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 38.

In Rome, Bonhoeffer became acquainted with the Roman Catholic Church, an acquaintance that, according to Bethge, had a permanent influence on his thought.¹⁸ In addition, a letter written to his parents hints at a blossoming interest in a Christianity that was more than intellectual assent to doctrinal formulas. He writes, “Confession does not necessarily lead to scrupulous living; often, however, that may occur and always will with the most serious people.”¹⁹ Bonhoeffer seems to indicate an interest in confession, a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church, as something more than an intellectual activity. He observes a connection between confession and living a moral life.

After the term in Rome, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany and finished his theological training in Berlin at Friedrich-Wilhelm University, graduating in 1927. Bonhoeffer’s dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* or *The Communion of the Saints*, was published several years later in 1930. Although a large portion of the original preface was edited out by Bonhoeffer prior to publication, newer critical editions include Bonhoeffer’s original preface. In this preface, we get an initial glimpse at his early understanding of the task of theology.

Bonhoeffer writes that there has been a lot of talk about community and church but little theological reflection on these subjects. For that reason, he contends, theological reflection is necessary to fully grasp the seriousness of these issues. “Furthermore,” he writes, “theology is not inclined to kill something living; to the contrary, it can and should bring about the most vital changes in church life.”²⁰ In other words, part of the purpose of theological reflection as Bonhoeffer understands it, is to effect change in the life of the church. It is not merely academic exercise. In addition, a handwritten note on his dissertation reads, “My [*deleted*: most solemn] wish in presenting this study is to contribute something to the understanding that our church, profoundly impoverished and helpless though it appears today, is nevertheless the *sanctorum communio*, the holy body of Christ, even Christ’s very presence in the world [*deleted*: that in the depths of its poverty it is rich].”²¹ As with the previous statement, Bonhoeffer indicates that the work he does as a theologian is not just an imparting of the facts. It is not merely an academic exercise. Rather, his work is intended to help the church understand itself as “Christ’s very presence in the world.”

¹⁸ Bethge, *Costly Grace*, 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁰ Joachim von Soosten, ed., *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, vol 1, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, English ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Bonhoeffer's stated intention in this document is "to show that an inherently Christian social philosophy and sociology, arising essentially out of fundamental concepts of Christian theology, is most fully articulated in the concept of the church."²² In addition, he writes, "The more I have focused on this problem, the more clearly I have recognized the social intention of all the fundamental Christian concepts."²³ Thus, fundamental Christian concepts have a purpose, a social intention.

What does Bonhoeffer mean when he says that Christian concepts must have a social intention? Clifford J. Green notes that "Bonhoeffer sees all human life as essentially social, that he develops a theological phenomenology of the human person in relation to other human persons and to various types of corporate communities and institutions, and that he interprets the Christian gospel within this matrix."²⁴ In addition, according to James Woelfel, this emphasis on sociality is essentially ethical, and this ethical interpretation is "a matter of central significance in his thought as a whole."²⁵ James Burtness concurs, identifying Bonhoeffer's overall theology as an "ethical theology."²⁶ Bonhoeffer has moved, even in this early work, from understanding theology as only an academic discipline to recognizing the need to interpret and frame theology in terms of its intersection with human relationships.

This early move from an abstract understanding of theology, which was disconnected from human need in his early studies at Tübingen, to a more well-rounded theology may have been precipitated by certain forms of Lutheranism present at the time. During his time in Berlin, Bonhoeffer studied under Karl Holl, a prominent Luther interpreter and theologian. While he embraced much of what Holl taught him, he was critical of Holl's interpretation of Luther's faith as a religion of the conscience.²⁷ This sort of faith allowed one to remain "completely in himself."²⁸ As long as one remains in himself, he does not recognize his guilt. It is only through relationships that one can begin to recognize what his condition truly is.

²² von Soosten, *Sanctorum Communio*, 22.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Clifford J. Green, *The Sociality of Christ and Humanity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology, 1927–1933* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1972), 54.

²⁵ James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 61.

²⁶ James Burtness, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 25.

²⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 46.

²⁸ Edwin H. Roberson, ed. and trans., *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936 from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 62.

Recognition only comes to one through a relationship to God, specifically by God's call from outside.²⁹

In addition, after World War I and the sting of the Treaty of Versailles' assigning guilt to the nation of Germany, the church had a tendency to back off Luther's emphasis on both sin and grace and focus only on grace. K. W. Clements notes that "as the centuries [after the Reformation] rolled on, Luther's 'Christian freedom' could be interpreted as a vague sanctioning of a complacent, bourgeois existence which felt neither the weight of the law nor the liberation of grace."³⁰ There is little doubt that Bonhoeffer encountered this sort of complacent Christianity in both the academy and the social circles in which he traveled.

In particular, his experience as an assistant pastor for a German church in Barcelona gave him a firsthand glimpse of this complacency. The German church in Barcelona listed three hundred members but only about forty attended services regularly.³¹ Bethge writes that the pastor under whom Bonhoeffer served "demanded little of his parishioners ... and was disquieted by his assistant's efforts to bring about a more energetic cure of souls."³² He continues that Bonhoeffer worked hard on his sermons believing that "he had something important to say, and that his hearers should be shaken out of their complacency."³³ The pastoral aim of Bonhoeffer's theology, already present in his dissertation, moved to the foreground during his tenure in Barcelona. Once back in Germany, the deterioration of the social circumstances with the rise of the National Socialist Party moved Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the connection between theology and Christian practice to center stage.

The Cost of Discipleship

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was made chancellor of Germany. The turmoil of the following years and the open conflict of the Reich Church with the Confessing Church, to which Bonhoeffer belonged, left the question open as to how Christians were to act responsibly in the struggle created by Hitler and Nazism.³⁴ It is this deep concern for Christian

²⁹ Robertson, *No Rusty Swords*, 62..

³⁰ K. W. Clements, "Lutheran Bonhoeffer and the Guilty Nation," *Baptist Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (October 1983): 186.

³¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 75.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴ Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, *Discipleship*, vol 4, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Eng. eds., Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

practice in the midst of crisis that colors Bonhoeffer's theology throughout his work, *Discipleship*.

Discipleship was first published in 1937 under the German title *Nachfolge*, literally "following after."³⁵ Bonhoeffer opens the preface by raising questions about the state of the church in Germany. He is concerned for those who have become separated from the church and its message. He queries whether preachers have some role in this separation and get in the way of the word of Jesus by depending too much on certain formulations or "by preaching too dogmatically" and not enough "for use in life."³⁶ Thus, within the first pages of his book, his concern that theology be beneficial to the church is hinted at by his questions. In fact, in the first paragraph of this work he notes that the "sole concern" of the church should be Jesus and what he demands from us today.³⁷

At this point, it is easy to wonder whether Bonhoeffer has discarded the theological task of clarifying some truth of the Christian faith in favor of outlining his ideas about proper Christian practice. According to James Burtness, some scholars have suggested that in this work, as well as some of his other works, Bonhoeffer substituted ethics for theology.³⁸ The preface certainly leans in that direction. However, Burtness thinks it would be easier to argue that Bonhoeffer substituted theology for ethics. Nonetheless, he does not think Bonhoeffer has tilted the scale in either direction but has held theology and ethics tightly together. He writes, "Bonhoeffer cannot do theology and then ethics or vice versa, nor can he substitute one for the other. He must do them together and at the same time."³⁹

Bonhoeffer's own description of his work concurs with Burtness' opinion. In a letter to Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer wrote that the main questions he was wrestling with in *Discipleship* were "those of the exposition of the Sermon on the Mount and the Pauline doctrine of justification and sanctification."⁴⁰ Insofar as these are theological questions, not ethical questions, it is clear that Bonhoeffer considers this to be primarily a theological, not ethical, work. Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer understands that to disjoin theology from practice and focus on one aspect over the other is no theology at all.⁴¹ Theology must include both the clarification of truth

³⁵ Kuske and Tödt, *Discipleship*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸ Burtness, *Shaping the Future*, 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁰ Kuske and Tödt, *Discipleship*, 4.

⁴¹ Burtness, *Shaping the Future*, 28–29.

and the impact of that truth on the life of the believer. This becomes clear as one examines his work.

Chapter one is entitled “Costly Grace.” Bonhoeffer’s project in this chapter is to delineate what he means by this term. As the chapter opens, one immediately sees Bonhoeffer’s concern about a doctrine of grace that does not connect to life in any real way, a grace that he calls cheap. He writes, “Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God’s love as merely a Christian idea of God.”⁴² This sort of grace is an abstraction for Bonhoeffer. It is a theological construction. For the person involved, it is nothing more than intellectual assent to an idea.⁴³ It is not lived out in any real way. As a result, “grace alone does everything; everything can stay in its old ways.”⁴⁴

Bonhoeffer goes on to sarcastically suggest that because the Christian is justified by grace, she should go ahead and live like the rest of the world. After all, to try to live obediently according to the commandments of Christ would amount to “proclaiming a new servitude,” which would be the very antithesis of grace.⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer seems to be addressing the antinomian ideas of freedom in Christ that he had observed in the church of his day. This antinomian definition of grace amounted to nothing less than sinning so grace would abound. The attitude of doing as I please since I am saved by grace is “cheap grace.”⁴⁶ In contrast to cheap grace, costly grace entails a call to discipleship.

Bonhoeffer’s little phrase *call to discipleship* encompasses the concepts of both justification and sanctification. Although he holds these two doctrines tightly together, they are distinct concepts. Toward the end of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer outlines how he understands justification. He writes that “justification of sinners consists in God *alone* being righteous and sinners being totally and utterly unrighteous, rather than in granting sinners their own righteousness alongside that of God.”⁴⁷ Believers are incorporated into the body of Christ. As such, they participate in his death, which separates them from sin. “The separation from sin has been accomplished by the sinner’s death in Jesus Christ. God has a community which has been justified, and thus freed from sin.”⁴⁸

⁴² Kuske and Tödt, *Discipleship*, 43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 258–59.

This justification comes to people as a proclamation. "The proclamation of Christ's death is for us the proclamation of our justification."⁴⁹ Thus, in terms of the language Bonhoeffer uses throughout most of this book, justification is proclaimed through a call; specifically, the call to discipleship. James Woelfel writes, "The proclamation of justification is therefore the call to obedient, costly discipleship, not to the passive basking in the *doctrine* of justification, which is a cheap substitute."⁵⁰ In other words, while Bonhoeffer is careful to clarify what is meant by the theological term *justification*, he does not separate this concept from what could be referred to as Christian formation.

The focus of justification by grace, for Bonhoeffer, is not the sin but the sinner.⁵¹ Cheap grace justifies sin, allowing one to remain as he is. Costly grace justifies the sinner and compels her to change. To put it another way, cheap grace amounts to recognition of the abstract theological concept of justification. Costly grace weaves this recognition into a new way of life. In referring to Luther, Bonhoeffer writes, "His acknowledgment of grace was for him the final radical break with the sin of his life but never its justification (50)." Thus, the recognition of grace does not justify remaining in a sinful way of life. It entails moving to a whole new life. The call entails discipleship; it entails moral change.

The theme of a radical break with sin is reaffirmed in Bonhoeffer's chapter on baptism. Baptism is a sign of the radical break with sin, a sign of justification. He writes, "Baptism implies a break.... Past and present are torn asunder. The old has passed away, everything has become new (207)." This break is nothing less than a death of the old sinful self. In addition, the break with the old must become visible, with the new self becoming "externally visible through active participation in the life and worship of the church-community (210)." Justification, which baptism signifies, must be lived out.

It is important to note that Bonhoeffer's concern is not just with individuals but also with the church as a whole. A proper understanding of justification, for Bonhoeffer, recognizes its formative role for the community of believers. The misunderstanding of cheap grace, that is, grace that justifies sin but not the sinner, grace that entails no change in the person, is a misunderstanding that threatens the very life of the church. The call to discipleship takes place within the community of believers. The misunderstanding of grace and discipleship is both the church's predicament and "a question of how we are to live as Christians today (55)."

⁴⁹ Kuske and Tödt, *Discipleship*, 258.

⁵⁰ Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology*, 79.

⁵¹ Kuske and Tödt, *Discipleship*, 49. (From here on page numbers in parenthesis.)

If justification of the sinner is the costly grace that comes to us as the call to discipleship, the discipleship to which we are called is sanctification. Like justification, sanctification is also a gift of God, but unlike justification, sanctification is an ongoing process assisted by God's grace, not a one-time event. Bonhoeffer notes that the gifts of justification and sanctification "belong inseparably together (259)." Nevertheless, they are not one and the same thing. He writes, "While the primary issue in justification is our relationship to the law, the decisive factor in sanctification is our separation from the world in expectation of Christ's coming again (259)." By separation from the world Bonhoeffer is referring to a separation from the old way of the sinful world and entrance into a new life of holiness, that is, the radical break with sin. He writes, "The sanctification of the church-community consists in its being separated by God from that which is unholy, from sin (261)."

The doctrines of justification and sanctification, although not precisely defined until late in the book, are fleshed out throughout the book in Bonhoeffer's vivid descriptions of the call to discipleship. Bonhoeffer uses Jesus' call to Levi in Mark 2:14 as a flesh-and-blood example of the call to discipleship. He notes that when Jesus calls Levi, Levi does not answer with a confession of faith but with obedience (57). According to Bonhoeffer, disciples are "called away and are supposed to step out of their previous existence (58)." The point here for Bonhoeffer is that the call to discipleship, which he associates with justification, entails action. The disciple is not to simply say, "Yes, I will be your disciple" to Jesus; she is expected to *do* something. She is expected to follow. For Bonhoeffer, this doing involves a radical step into a whole new life. "Former things are left behind; they are completely given up (58)." Grace, costly grace, is primary in both the call and the commandment (59).

Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer does not want his understanding of justification and sanctification as the call to discipleship to be confused with meritorious works. He wants to make clear that he is not going back to a Roman Catholic understanding of the role of works in justification. Interestingly however, despite distancing himself from Roman Catholicism, he thinks that the Roman Church preserved an awareness of costly grace through the monastic orders (46). Those who entered the monastery responded to the call to discipleship by leaving everything behind for the sake of Christ and living lives of strict obedience. Their discipleship was marked by a radical break and was costly.

Unfortunately, monastic life eventually became corrupted. "The humble work of discipleship had become in monasticism the meritorious work of the holy ones," writes Bonhoeffer (47). He acknowledges the danger of a new servitude that his critics have warned about. In the monastery, what began as costly discipleship eventually morphed into a sort of pride. The monks, as far as Bonhoeffer was concerned, became like the hypocrites

Jesus spoke about in Matthew 6. They were doing their acts of righteousness in order to be honored by men.

In that corrupted context, Luther was the example of costly grace. While living in the monastery, Luther was seized by grace and moved to follow God. The key word here is *follow*. Breaking a monastic vow was not something to be taken lightly, but having heard God's call, Luther could not just stay where he was and rest in God's grace toward him. According to Bonhoeffer, a radical break with his old life was necessary. "Luther had to leave the monastery and reenter the world (48)." Once again, he emphasizes that justification by grace implies action.

Bonhoeffer asserts that "an idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship (59)." This sort of unengaged knowledge is antithetical to real Christianity. It is, for Bonhoeffer, a myth (59). True Christianity is active as demonstrated through the lives of Levi and Luther. Ellen Charry writes that one step in the renewal of theology "would require theologians to reconnect truth and goodness."⁵² This connection is exactly what Bonhoeffer is working at. Knowledge about grace and forgiveness must be connected with the practice of the Christian life of discipleship.

More than anywhere else, Bonhoeffer illustrates exactly what he means by discipleship, or sanctification, in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. He notes that in the Sermon on the Mount it is Jesus' disciples, that is, the Twelve, who are being addressed. The disciples are "blessed" because they are living in renunciation of their former life by answering his call.⁵³

The Beatitudes essentially demonstrate the gap between those called to be disciples and the rest of the people. Bonhoeffer writes, "Every additional Beatitude deepens the breach between the disciples and the people. The disciples' call becomes more and more visible (103)." The disciples are rejected for not embracing the world. They are "strangers in the world, bothersome guests, disturbers of the peace (104)." They suffer because they are rejected, and they bear that suffering "by the power of him who supports them (104)." Their comfort is in Christ.

Throughout this section on the Beatitudes, Bonhoeffer goes out of his way not to spiritualize Jesus' words. These commands must be understood as literal commands for discipleship in the world. The corollaries to the commands are the blessings Jesus pronounces. These are not the result of obedience to some spiritualized notion of his commands. Jesus' blessings are the result of radical discipleship.

⁵² Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 238.

⁵³ Kuske and Tödt, *Discipleship*, 102. (From here on page numbers in parenthesis.)

The poor are the disciples who live in “renunciation and want (103).” Those who mourn are the disciples who bear suffering for not embracing the success of the world (104). The meek are those who claim no earthly rights and leave justice to God (105). Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who long for the restoration of the world (106). The merciful are those who seek out those in misery and “give their own honor to those who have fallen into shame and take that shame unto themselves (107).” The pure in heart are those who “have completely given their hearts to Jesus, so that he alone rules in them (107).” The peacemakers are those who “renounce self-assertion and are silent in the face of hatred and injustice (108).” The persecuted are those who suffer for the sake of a righteous cause (109). Throughout, Bonhoeffer seems to take the hardest reading possible.

It is rare to find a commentary on this text that takes such a hard, literal interpretation. Indeed, it seems that some commentators go out of their way to minimize what the text actually says. Why then does Bonhoeffer insist on such a difficult interpretation? I think his biblical interpretation is related to his overarching concern for the costliness of discipleship. Just as justification watered down to a judicial concept unconnected to human reality cheapens the grace involved in the call, so sanctification, if only addressed as a concept of following but unconnected to concrete actions will cheapen the grace given in following. In other words, discipleship, like the call, is costly.

Bonhoeffer goes on to explain that Christ’s disciples are the salt of the earth. “The earth is preserved by salt (111).” Furthermore, he explains, “The call of Jesus Christ means being salt of the earth or being destroyed (112).” Bonhoeffer makes the point with both the salt and light metaphors that Christ’s disciples *are* salt and light. It is not that they *should be* salt and light. They are, and if they do not do what salt and light are supposed to do they are thrown out (112). Once again, the emphasis is on action. The disciples are not faced with a decision about whether or not to be salt and light. “The only decision possible for them has already been made,” Bonhoeffer writes. “Now they have to be what they are, or they are not following Jesus (113).” Once again, we see that Bonhoeffer is concerned with the character-forming nature of the doctrine of sanctification.

Justification and sanctification also inform how one thinks about the connection between faith and obedience. Faith and obedience, like their correlates justification and sanctification, are inextricably linked. Bonhoeffer writes, “Only the believer obeys and only the obedient believe (63).” As earlier noted, Bonhoeffer is not suggesting that good works or obedience justify. He writes, “First there is faith, then obedience. If this meant only that faith alone justifies us and not deeds of obedience, then it is a firm and necessary precondition for everything else (63).” Once again, he is cautious lest his statements be misconstrued as some form of

the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification that has humans cooperating with God's justifying grace in some way—doctrine that he rejects. He solves this problem by pointing to the necessity of Christ's call. "Christ has to have called; the step [of obedience] can only be taken at his word (66)."

Therefore, he is not in any way refuting the traditional Protestant notion of justification by faith. The believer is justified by faith in the person who is calling him, that is, Christ. In addition, the call of Christ is an act of grace. The gracious nature of Christ's call is clarified in Bonhoeffer's discussion of baptism. He writes that baptism "is something *Jesus Christ offers to us*. It is grounded solely in the will of Jesus Christ, as expressed in his gracious call" [emphasis his] (207). Furthermore, he asserts that the call to discipleship of the Synoptic Gospels is identical to Paul's concept of baptism (207).

What Bonhoeffer is trying to make clear by asserting that only the believer obeys is the necessity of grace for obedience. God's gracious call initiates faith, yet faith cannot come first in a chronological sense with obedience coming later. Faith and obedience necessarily come together. The problem Bonhoeffer is worried about has to do with the moral lives of believers. If faith comes first chronologically, when does obedience start (90)? If one emphasizes a chronological relationship between faith and obedience, it would seem possible to have faith without obedience, something unthinkable for Bonhoeffer. We are justified by faith, but "faith is only faith in deeds of obedience (64)." One can hear undertones of the epistle of James here and wonders whether Bonhoeffer had James in mind.

Further on, however, Bonhoeffer writes, "A concrete commandment has to be obeyed in order to come to belief (64)." In other words, only the obedient believe. This statement sounds as if he is saying obedience must come first, but he has already denied that this is so. I think Bonhoeffer is simply emphasizing the point that belief and obedience must go together. One does not happen without the other. The two are inextricably linked. To uncouple them will lead to cheap grace. Once Christ's call has been extended, it is imperative that one obey. Bonhoeffer explains, "Do not say, I do not have the faith for that. You will not have it so long as you remain disobedient, so long as you do not take that first step (66)." The way Bonhoeffer sees it, faith is not actual faith until it is acted on, and the actions Bonhoeffer proposes are nothing short of radical as his explanation of the Sermon on the Mount makes clear.

In addition, as far as the law is concerned, Bonhoeffer asserts that Jesus' claim of not abolishing the law "puts the law of the Old Covenant into force (116)." The disciples are bound to the law of the Old Testament, according to Bonhoeffer. Nonetheless, he adds his now familiar twist: "allegiance to the law by itself is not yet discipleship; nor may allegiance to this person of Jesus Christ without the law be called discipleship (116)." In other words,

Bonhoeffer again ties together faith and works. The disciples are righteous not because of the law but because of their union with Christ who fulfilled the law. Nonetheless, they must do the will of God themselves and are enabled to do it by virtue of their union with Christ. “The righteousness of Christ should not just be taught, but *done*” [emphasis his] (120).

Analysis

Throughout this survey of *Discipleship*, we have seen Bonhoeffer tie together justification and sanctification, as well as faith and obedience, always defining the concepts in terms of their impact on human behavior. In an age where theology had become an academic discipline with little relevance to the life of the church, Bonhoeffer chose to shape his theological propositions in a way that informs Christian practice.

It is possible that a conversion experience that Bonhoeffer had may have been a factor in his interest in pursuing theology as more than just an academic subject. In a letter to a friend in which he is reflecting on his past, Bonhoeffer speaks about this experience in terms of becoming a Christian.⁵⁴ Bethge notes that Bonhoeffer’s students saw a change in him after 1931. He began attending church regularly and studied the Bible in a meditative rather than an exegetical way. Furthermore, “He no longer spoke of oral confession merely theologically, but as an act to be practiced.”⁵⁵ In addition, in the letter referenced above, Bonhoeffer says his conviction that Christians live as servants of Jesus Christ was strengthened during the “crisis of 1933.”⁵⁶

Bonhoeffer also wrote to his brother Karl-Friedrich about how this change he experienced had affected his theology. He writes of his worry that his brother will think him fanatical or crazy but that “if I become more reasonable, I would have to hang up my entire theology the next day for the sake of honesty. When I first began, I imagined it quite otherwise—perhaps a more academic matter. Now something very different has come of it.”⁵⁷ Interestingly, he attributes his change at least in part to taking seriously the Sermon on the Mount, which constitutes a large part of *Discipleship*.⁵⁸ Because *Discipleship* was written after his conversion experience, and Bonhoeffer himself attributes this experience with understanding theology as something more than academic, it seems reasonable to think that his efforts in this work to tightly link justification and

⁵⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 155.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

sanctification in order to assist moral formation are related in some way to his conversion experience.

The tight linkage that Bonhoeffer makes between justification and sanctification is not new historically. Berkhof writes that the Reformers “though in no way confounding justification and sanctification ... felt the necessity of preserving the closest possible connection between the former, in which the free and forgiving grace of God is strongly emphasized, and the latter, which calls for the co-operation of man.”⁵⁹

Bonhoeffer's linkage is only new in the context in which he is living; the context of Protestant liberalism which, following Troeltsch, “understood the kingdom of God strictly eschatologically.”⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer was dealing with a church that saw little need to live out their faith in the here and now. Clifford Green writes that although Bonhoeffer owed much to his colleagues, he “saw their theological renovation inhibited by a preoccupation with *epistemology* characteristic of modern European philosophy.”⁶¹ In contrast to this, Green writes that Bonhoeffer wanted “to move theology to a world of persons, communities, historical decisions and ethical relationship.”⁶² As a result, in a fashion similar to many theologians prior to the seventeenth century, Bonhoeffer's theology sought to clarify truths of the Christian faith for the purpose of the moral formation of the church.

This understanding of theology's purpose as morally formative should not be misunderstood as the oft-heard cry that theology needs to be relevant in the broadest sense of that term. Bonhoeffer thought that to make theology relevant was to submit theology to the justification of the trends of the day.⁶³ Once one does this “the message is trimmed and cropped until it fits the frame which has been decided, and the result is that the eagle (with his clipped wings) can no longer rise and fly away to his true element but can be pointed out as a special showpiece among the other household animals.”⁶⁴ The message of Christianity becomes what he calls a “tamed Christianity.”⁶⁵ It is clear from his understanding of justification and sanctification that Bonhoeffer thinks the message of Christianity is always relevant. However, people must be willing to listen to this message and not simply assent to the propositions presented; they should follow

⁵⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 530.

⁶⁰ Hans Schmidt, “The Cross of Reality?” in *World Come of Age*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 219.

⁶¹ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 60.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Robertson, *No Rusty Swords*, 308.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

where the message leads, no matter the cost. The message of Christianity, as exemplified in his explanation of justification and sanctification must, therefore, serve the purpose of forming Christian character. Bonhoeffer would likely agree with Ellen Charry's assertion that theology must be what she calls "aretegenic," or "conducive to virtue."⁶⁶ In that sense, theology is always relevant.

Conclusion

Like Bonhoeffer, we must not limit our understanding of the theological task to the casting of doctrinal statements, no matter how important that may be. Especially in the context of seminary education, theology should be done in service to the church first and foremost, not the academy. Central questions that should always be in front of us as we do our work are: What good will this do God's people, the church? How will it help them live Christian lives? Charry writes, "Genuine theological knowledge ought to transform as it informs."⁶⁷ Without the task of transformation in mind, theology becomes just another intellectual pursuit with dubious ends. With the task of transformation in mind, however, theology has the potential for helping people conform more closely to the image of Christ and follow more fully Christ's radical call to discipleship.

At Calvin Theological Seminary, this focus on formation lies at the heart of our mission. Our task, as professors, is to not simply disseminate information to our students but to help our students understand the truths of the historic Christian faith in the context of ministry. We aim to form our graduates into ministers who will then go out and form communities of disciples.

In that vein, Ellen Charry's suggestion for an aretegenic reading of theological texts can provide a helpful starting point,⁶⁸ and this examination of Bonhoeffer offers one example of an aretegenic interpretation of theological doctrines. Her purpose as she examined various documents was to show the pastoral function of doctrine, or as she puts it, "doctrine as an aid in cultivating a skilled and excellent life."⁶⁹ She encourages theologians to do more than hunt for theological facts as we read texts. Thus, the question as we read Bonhoeffer must be more than, How did Bonhoeffer define justification? The question must be: How does Bonhoeffer's shaping of the concept of justification lead people to desire to live like justified people?

⁶⁶ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 19.

⁶⁷ Ellen T. Charry, ed., *Inquiring after God: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xxiv.

⁶⁸ Charry, *By The Renewing of Your Minds*, 19.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

Charry encourages theologians to reconnect truth with Christian virtue in this way because “what science calls truth is only part of what theology calls truth.”⁷⁰ Charry wants us to remember that “theology insists that truth is salutary—that God is good for us.”⁷¹ By so doing, theologians can begin to reclaim theology as healing medicine for the soul.⁷²

⁷⁰ Charry, *By The Renewing of Your Minds*, 238.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Charry uses the very helpful and interesting analogy of medicine with theology throughout her book.

