

History of Christian Thought II
Research Project 2
Costly Grace:
A Fundamental Component of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology

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The theology and actions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer have wide ranging impact, not only because of his great mind, but also because of the many cultural and social circumstances he was responding to. The approach he embodied of responding to the realities of his time is one of the reasons his theology was so influential, and at times, a danger to his own life. According to Don Compier, “Bonhoeffer’s theology is characterized by coherence and change in response to his context... Bonhoeffer responded to new situations.”¹ In the midst of the rise of Nazism in Germany and the rapid secularization of the church, Bonhoeffer felt the need to emphasize the deep commitment Christianity represents, and the sacrifice that is necessary for discipleship.

In one of Bonhoeffer’s most influential works, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he explores his own concept of “costly grace” in contrast to what he calls “cheap grace.” This theological notion is rooted in Bonhoeffer’s experience, the world he encountered, and his own image of what Christian discipleship looks like. Just scratching the surface, we learn from Bonhoeffer that costly grace requires deep commitment, regular Christian practices, and a willingness to die of your old life to enter new life with Christ. Cheap grace, which stems from watering down the gospel, represents the mainstream interpretation of grace, often used as a scapegoat in avoidance of true, costly discipleship. Going forward we will explore Bonhoeffer’s life and experiences that led to his emphasis of costly grace and discipleship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister were born on February 6, 1906 in Breslau, Germany. His father, a prominent psychiatrist and neurologist, was offered a chair on the University of Berlin Board in 1912. Bonhoeffer was brought up in an upper-class environment that was “strict and loving, with the parents sparing nothing on their children’s development

1. Compier, Don H., Pui-lan Kwok, and Joerg Rieger, eds. *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, 394.

while not spoiling them with extravagances.”² He lived through the economic consequences of the Great Depression, but didn’t feel much of the impact due to his family’s social and economic status. Dietrich’s family did not attend church, and thus all religious education he received was at home through his parents.³ Bonhoeffer and his six siblings were taught to be compassionate regarding the needs of others, and Bonhoeffer himself developed a special sensitivity to oppressed victims of political and economic exploitation.⁴ According to Eberhard Bethge, a close friend to Dietrich, this consideration for others became an important element in the development of Bonhoeffer’s theology.⁵

Bonhoeffer decided at the age of fifteen that he wanted to be a theologian. He began his study at Tubigen, and according to Bethge, Dietrich showed all the features of a committed academic scholar, but displayed little commitment regarding his actual relationship with the Church. Bonhoeffer had an encounter in North Africa on a trip with his brothers after his first year of school. This is where he experienced Islam for the first time, and according to Bethge, Bonhoeffer said: “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.”⁶ This idea stuck with him, and played a role in shaping his own theology and interpretation of Christian discipleship. Bonhoeffer had

2. Vanderburg, Mary. “Bonhoeffer’s Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation.” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 2009, 335.

3. Van der Ziel, Aldert. “Following Jesus: The Continuing Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” *Reformed Journal*, November 1977.

4. Compier, 390.

5. Vanderburg, 335.

6. Vanderburg, 336.

what he referred to as a “conversion,” where his theological focus shifted from academics and study to a life of prayer, discernment, and Christian servitude.⁷ Many other factors throughout his lifetime, including takeaway from his time spent in America, the impact of Hitler and Nazism in Germany, and the stale, sometimes counterproductive response of the Christian church to the wave of tyranny in Germany, all led to Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of, and insistence on “costly grace.” Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the complacency of the church and the lack of commitment in the Christian faith are reflected in this response he offers to his dissertation, which was a dogmatic investigation of the sociology of the church. “My wish... is to contribute something to the understanding that our church, profoundly impoverished and helpless though it appears today, is nevertheless the *sanctorum communion*, the holy body of Christ, even Christ’s very presence in the world.”⁸ Bonhoeffer came to believe that the Church, and those who claimed to be its members, was a tangible expression, a visible sign of Christ’s influence in the world. Committed to this call and vision for the church, Bonhoeffer knew there was a lot of work that needed to be done.

According to Bethge, Bonhoeffer had already discerned the main thesis of *The Cost of Discipleship* before 1933, but this was the year when things fell into place naturally as a rebellion against Hitler’s dictatorial aspirations and rampant propaganda.⁹ In the first chapter of *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer sets up his idea of “costly grace” by describing what he considers to be “cheap grace.” “Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks’

7. Van der Ziel, 23.

8. Bonhoeffer in Vanderburg, 336.

9. Neumann, Katja. “The Authority of Discipleship: An Approach to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.” *Vision (Winnipeg, Man.)*, 2012, 80-81.

wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices... Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, a principle, a system... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹⁰ In these snippets of Bonhoeffer’s words we catch a glimpse of his critique of the mainstream interpretations of grace in his context. This grace is cheap in the sense that it is freely given without condition; the church sells it like a common good in the marketplace and proposes it as a systemic ingredient of “salvation,” rather than as a quintessential and costly component of discipleship. This grace is simply an idea, and requires no action.¹¹

One of the clearest evidences of this “cheap grace” was the larger Christian response to Nazism in Germany. In the 1930s what became known as the German Christian movement emerged. This movement was essentially a theological version of Nazi ideology. Church leaders supported the vision of the Nazi party to “rebuild” and “protect” Germany from its enemies. Nazi flags were raised in churches. Much of this support was initially rooted in patriotism, but over time shifted to fear and a desire for self-preservation.¹² Bonhoeffer, committed to nonviolence through his interpretation of the *Sermon on the Mount*, found Nazism to be heretical and contrary to the gospel. These events were components of what led to the emergence of the Confessing

10. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. 1st Touchstone ed. New York: Touchstone, 1995, 43-45.

11. Vanderburg, 340.

12. Schneider, Laurel. “The Call Was Not Meant for You Alone: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Discerning the Call.” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 94 (2007), 19.

Church in 1934.¹³ In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer sarcastically notes that because Christians are justified by grace there is no need to take radical action in the name of Jesus. He says then to “let the Christians live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world’s standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin... Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations of his grace!”¹⁴ These words pierce into the heart of the larger Christian response to Nazism in Germany. The majority allowed injustice and social oppression to happen, following the status quo, and ignoring the radically different vision Jesus was casting for Christianity in their context. Bonhoeffer, who was frustrated with cheap grace and casual discipleship, had different ideas for what grace should look like in the life of a Christian.

After describing the attributes of cheap grace, Bonhoeffer explores what he describes as costly grace. He compares it to the call of Jesus Christ, where the disciples put down their nets and followed him. “Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”¹⁵ This grace, that costs a person their life as they enter new life in Christ, is what Bonhoeffer believes Christians are called to. Bonhoeffer identifies issues that led to cheap grace becoming the norm in society rather than costly grace. The spread and growth of Christianity, according to Bonhoeffer, is in large part what led to the cheapening of grace. As the church grew it became secularized, and the costliness of grace faded away. “The world was Christianized, and grace

13. Compier, 391-392.

14. Bonhoeffer, 44.

15. Bonhoeffer, 45.

became its common property.”¹⁶ To acquire such rapid growth grace became a common product of Christianity, and it had to be advertised at low cost.

Bonhoeffer gives credit to the Catholic Church for keeping a live a small piece of the earlier vision of grace. Monasticism, a sacrifice that required leaving your life behind to engage in new Christ-centered life, was a living protest against secular Christianity and cheap grace. The primary issue however was that Monasticism was recognized as an individual achievement rather than as a true representation of the Christian calling. “By thus limiting the application of the commandments of Jesus to a restricted group of specialists, the church evolved the fatal conception of the double standard—a maximum and minimum standard of Christian obedience.”¹⁷ Monasticism became something the church could point to when it was accused of becoming too secular. The irony is that monasticism, whose original mission was to preserve the primitive Christian idea of the costliness of grace, acted as justification for the Church’s secularization.¹⁸ Those on the outside saw monasticism as a higher standard for Christian life with a different set of expectations, while those on the inside began to morph costly grace into a sort of pride.¹⁹

After revealing his perspective on monasticism in the Catholic Church, Bonhoeffer lifts up the life of Martin Luther. During the reformation, Martin Luther left everything to follow Christ on the path of obedience as a monk. Luther’s discipline was part of his understanding that obedience and belief were intertwined. According to Bonhoeffer, God shattered all of Luther’s

16. Bonhoeffer, 46.

17. Bonhoeffer, 47.

18. Bonhoeffer, 47.

19. Vanderburg, 342.

hopes. “He showed him through the Scriptures that the following of Christ is not the achievement or merit of a select few, but the divine command to all Christians without distinction.”²⁰ Seeking to escape the world and live a life of obedience to God, Luther then discovered that the world had made its way into the monastery, and that merit and spiritual self-assertion were at the core of what he believed to be a life of humble work and discipleship. “The attempt to flee from the world turned out to be a subtle form of love for the world.”²¹ He recognized a call to go back into the world, and according to Bonhoeffer this call was affirmed by the grace of God. It was a costly grace, “and it shattered his whole existence.”²² Bonhoeffer also asserted that many have misinterpreted Luther’s theology on faith and grace. Many believe that his understanding of the gospel of pure grace in some way conveys that Christian action is not required, as we are justified by faith alone. Bonhoeffer reminds us that it was not the justification of the sin, “but the justification of the sinner that drove Luther from the cloister back into the world.”²³ He had received costly grace that was like “water on parched ground, comfort in tribulation, freedom from the bondage of a self-chosen way, and forgiveness of all his sins. And it was costly, for, so far from dispensing him from good works, it meant that he must take the call to discipleship more seriously than ever before. It was grace because it cost so much, and it cost so much because it was grace.”²⁴ These words capture the essence of Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of grace, but also the heart of Luther’s experience. Though Luther’s words may be

20. Bonhoeffer, 47.

21. Bonhoeffer, 48.

22. Bonhoeffer, 48.

23. Bonhoeffer, 49.

24. Bonhoeffer, 49.

misconstrued, it is clear when looking at the heart of his message that he emphasizes the costliness of a life committed to Christ.

One reason that it was so easy for the Church to collapse and submit to Nazism was because Hitler often used religious rhetoric and terms to propel his agenda. The Nazi party asserted its support for “positive Christianity.” Hitler often spoke of appealing to the “Almighty” and claiming the support of “providence.”²⁵ This dynamic, among many others, made Bonhoeffer’s task of asserting costly grace and discipleship even more challenging. Regardless, Bonhoeffer continued to devote himself to the struggle for the renewal of the church, rooted in his belief that the church is called to be the presence of Christ in the world. Beyond the chapter on costly grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer argues three points as to why ideology that contradicts God’s reconciling purposes must be rejected. First, the church is to follow only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and no other can claim authority in the church. Second, the church must visibly embody being a community of humanity and God, even in the face of persecution. And third, in being a visible representation of God’s reconciling and redeeming purposes, the church is called to stand in strong contrast to society.²⁶ In these points it is evident that the leader he is contrasting is Hitler, the church he is calling to visibly embody God’s community is his own, and the broader Christian church, and the society the church is called to be contrary to is that of Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer advocates for the cause of costly discipleship by contrasting realities in his own context that perpetuate injustice and inequality.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943. Bonhoeffer had been part of the German counter-espionage group led by Admiral Canaris and Colonel Oyster. In July of 1944 there was

25. Compier, 390.

26. Compier, 396.

an attempt on Hitler's life. After documents were found that proved Bonhoeffer's involvement he was sentenced to death. On April 9, 1945 Bonhoeffer, along with Canaris, Oster, and others was executed on direct orders from Hitler. The camp doctor where Bonhoeffer was executed wrote about his encounter with Bonhoeffer. "Through the half-opened door of a room in the barracks I saw Bonhoeffer kneel, before taking off his clothes, in heartfelt prayer to God.... In my fifty-year experience as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die in such complete surrender to God."²⁷ The testament of this doctor demonstrates the level of commitment Bonhoeffer had to the Christian cause, and the hope he saw for the world through Jesus Christ.

During a time when theology had become an academic discipline, Bonhoeffer shaped his own theology in a way that informed Christian practice.²⁸ At a time when the norm was to secularize Christianity, Bonhoeffer stood for a discipleship that demanded sacrifice. In a setting where the powers at be demanded obedience to the state, Bonhoeffer demanded obedience to Christ. When the norm was to exclude Jews and following a model of inequality, Bonhoeffer stood for Christian community with God that included all of humanity. Karl Barth spoke of Bonhoeffer as one "whose wide and deep view raises the deepest respect, not only when one looks back at the situation during that time, but that also today can be read as more instructive, more exciting, more illuminating and more edifying than much more famous works that have since been written..."²⁹ Bonhoeffer offered a call to Christianity that is still relevant today. While many Christians still fall into a place of complacency, Bonhoeffer reminds us of God's costly grace, and the call to deeper life that is inherent with it.

27. Van der Ziel, 25.

28. Vanderberg, 346.

29. Barth in Van der Ziel, 22.

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