



Key words:

Discipleship: following the life, example and teaching of Jesus.

Cheap grace: grace that is offered freely, but is received without any change in the recipient, and ultimately is false as it does not save.

Costly grace: grace followed by obedience to God's command and discipleship.

Passion: Jesus' sufferings at the end of his life.

Solidarity: an altruistic commitment to stand alongside and be with those less fortunate, the oppressed, those who suffer.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

- A German Lutheran Pastor- ordained 1931.
- A key founding member of the Confessing Church.
- Christian Ethics was an ethic of responsibility for others.
- His actions against Hitler can both inspire and challenge Christians in what discipleship really entails.

Duty to God and Duty to the State & The Church and State

German Christians were divided by the rise of Hitler. In 1934 there was a split in the German Protestant church.



Christians in the Nazi controlled German Church built Nazism into their creed.

- ✓ Some leaders wore brown uniforms linking themselves to National Socialism.
- ✓ Promoted the Aryan Clause which prohibited ministers that had Jewish ancestry.
- ✓ Some campaigned for the removal of the Old Testament.
- ✓ Saw Hitler as the leader of Christianity alongside Jesus.

The Confessing Church who sought to be authentically Christian and separate from political ideology.

- ✓ Rejected anti Jewish rules.
- ✓ Rejected Nazi influence over German Churches.

Obedience, leadership and doing God's will.

For Bonhoeffer discipleship is fundamentally about something you do; which leader you obey.

"...a testimony to the absolute, direct and unaccountable authority of Jesus. There is no need for any preliminaries, and no other consequence but obedience to the call...there is no road to faith or discipleship, no other road-only obedience to the call of Jesus."

Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship



"No other significance is possible, since Jesus is the only significance. **Beside Jesus nothing has any significance. He alone matters**".

Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

Discipleship entails the exclusive obedience to the leadership of God and all other legal ties are burnt. This is controversial as it places discipleship above the law and any human leadership, above responsibilities of citizenship.

Nothing stands in the way of the call of Jesus. Doing the will of God is not always convenient.

The Cost of Following Jesus Luke 9:57-62

⁶¹ Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

⁶² Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

"It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth".

Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer stated we must have single minded obedience.



Civil Disobedience



Duty to God outweighs duty to the state. Love requires injustice to be actively challenged and resisted. He spoke out about Nazi ideas at the university he worked in (and lost his job) and at public lectures. The Gestapo banned him from public speaking.

Church as community and source of spiritual discipline.

The Church must be a visible community and be a sign for others.

Salt and Light Matthew 5:13-16

¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Bonhoeffer's role in the Confessing Church and his religious community at Finkenwalde

The Oath of the Confession Church

We publically declare before all evangelical Churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this Confession is grievously imperiled, and with the unity of the German Evangelical Church. It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling church party of the 'German Christians'...the theological basis, in which the German Evangelical is united, has been continuously and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the 'German Christians' ...In view of the errors of the 'German Christians' of the present Reich Church government which are devastating the Church and also therefore breaking up the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths..." Karl Barth and the Confessing Church.

This declaration asserts that:

- ✓ Jesus is the only way to God and rejects worldly leaders, such as Hitler.
- ✓ Only Jesus authority over the whole of a person's life.

Bonhoeffer's role in the Confessing Church and his religious community at Finkenwalde

- ✓ Bonhoeffer refused to take the civil oath to Hitler.
- ✓ In 1935 Bonhoeffer was asked to lead a secret and illegal seminary to train new pastors for the confessing church.
 - ✓ This took place in a school in Finkenwalde.
 - ✓ This teaching gave rise to his book called *The Cost of Discipleship*.
- ✓ The seminary was closed in 1937 by the Gestapo, but Bonhoeffer insisted the Church must be a source of renewal for those spiritually damaged and source of refuge for the persecuted.
- ✓ After the closure of the seminary Bonhoeffer felt the Confessing Church was not prepared to voice criticism against the treatment of Jews.

The cost of discipleship



Cheap Grace: grace that is offered freely, but is offered without any change in the recipient and ultimately is false as it does not save.

Bonhoeffer was concerned that people think that because Christ paid the price for grace, the Church can keep on giving it out for free and people will not make any changes to how they were previously acting.

Costly Grace: grace followed by obedience to God's command and discipleship.

This is Bonhoeffer's answer. Grace is something worth sacrificing everything to get. Grace is costly as it calls us to follow Jesus and that means making changes to our lives and our decisions.

Sacrifice, suffering and the cross.

Suffering and sacrifice are inherent to discipleship for anyone who follows Jesus because they must pick up his cross and follow the path of suffering that Jesus walks.

The Way of the Cross Mark 8:34-35

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

- The life of a Christian is a life of suffering for Christ. It is suffering and rejection. Costly grace entails self-denial and endurance of the cross.

The burdens of Christian life involve:

- Avoiding/overcoming temptation.
- Forgiveness
- Bearing the sins of others.



The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world.

Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Solidarity

An altruistic commitment to stand alongside and be with those less fortunate, the oppressed, those who suffer.

- Parable of the Sheep and The Goats

Bonhoeffer saw Christ as a man for others and we are able to encounter God when we are there for our neighbour.

Being there for others is what makes a Christian. The purpose of a Christian life is not be "religious", but to be in a relationship with God through living existence with others. Being there with others is an experience of transcendence.

"...but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others', through participation in the being of Jesus."

Bonhoeffer could have lived in security in the USA, but 3 weeks after arriving he returned to Berlin. He was determined to share in the time of suffering with humanity. This sharing of suffering included his decision to get involved in the Resistance.

David H Jensen: argues that for Bonhoeffer solidarity was a subversive act. It was against the State and for the sake of human relationships with each other (something the Nazi state were damaging). It fits with the idea that Christians were called to live responsibly in the world and the Church should be interpreted into a language that was meaningful for the people.

Does Bonhoeffer put too much emphasis on suffering?

Yes	No
It might not be possible to live according to Bonhoeffer's ideas in times of peace and justice.	The time in which he lived could have influenced his writing to overemphasise suffering as a concept of discipleship.
Could be seen to downplay the joy and hope of the message of resurrection.	We all experience some form of suffering eg. Injustice, illness, bereavement.
Bonhoeffer stuck too close to the cross and forgot the empty tomb. He forgot the defeat of sin and death.	To avoid sacrifice and suffering would mean to fail to follow the call of Jesus.

Should Christians practice civil disobedience?

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

Romans 13: 1-2

A plain reading of this suggests Christians should not challenge authority.

Critique: Does St Paul's message have universal significance or was it just intended for early Christianity?

Jesus encourage people to live by the law of the land- e.g. paying taxes.

"Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Mark 12:17

But he did also challenge the status quo- eg. He healed on the Sabbath.

"He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored."

Mark 3:1-6

Is civil disobedience always needed?

Bonhoeffer's disobedience was in the context of a totalitarian state in which democracy had ended. Laws were also becoming more oppressive.

Perhaps the necessity and justification of civil disobedience is dependent on the nature of the civic authorities involved.

Is it possible to know God's will?

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer gives many interpretations of Bible passages, however, these may not be the only reasonable interpretations so how can we act confidently in the way Bonhoeffer thought disciples should?

Bonhoeffer could be seen as dangerously encouraging individuals with distorted views of God's will. For example some believe he was involved in an assassination attempt of Hitler could this promote violence?

However, a key element of Bonhoeffer's approach to his faith was that the community should come together to study and reflect on scripture and to not just cherry pick extracts you want to read. This, therefore, would hopefully avoid peculiar or distorted interpretations.



Many Christians today would sympathise with Bonhoeffer's interpretation of God's will, in comparison to that of the German Christians.

Is Bonhoeffer's theology relevant for today?



In Western societies there is an obsession with material benefit and self-interest, which held alongside a deep sense of unhappiness. Bonhoeffer's powerful challenge to abandon such a life might lead people to a more meaningful life.

Many people are suffering in the world, so Bonhoeffer's message of solidarity seems relevant.

Bonhoeffer's obedience challenges the pressure to follow trends and modernise the church.



Modernising the church may lead to a more tolerant and accepting faith.

Bonhoeffer's words on setting aside the local law for being obedient to God's law could cause difficulties.



Questions to consider:

- "Using the will of God as a guide for moral behavior is impractical, as in most circumstances it is impossible to know what God wants us to do".
- To what extent was Dietrich Bonhoeffer justified in his teaching on civil disobedience?
- Bonhoeffer's theology is still relevant today.' Discuss
- Assess the view that Bonhoeffer's theology puts too much emphasis on suffering.
- Assess the view that Bonhoeffer's community at Finkenwalde is a useful example for Christian communities.