

Christians, Money and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's

*The Cost of Discipleship*¹

“Earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected.... Hoarding is idolatry.”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

EXCERPTS

‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer directed an illegal seminary for two and a half years until it was closed by the Gestapo. The seminary trained pastors for the “Confessing Church,” a group Bonhoeffer and others had formed as an alternative to the Nazi-influenced German Reich Church. It was at this seminary that he developed his classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*’ (CH&B #32). In it, he asserts that the church historically has been corrupted by “cheap grace,” contrasted with “costly grace,” which is costly in its faithful obedience:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. (47)

Cheap grace is addressed by recognizing that obedience and belief must go hand-in-hand: “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes” (69). This is crucial in part because anything less than single-minded obedience can undermine our faith:

At this point we may conveniently throw in a few observations of a pastoral character. In dealing with souls, it is essential for the pastor to bear in mind both sides of the proposition. When people complain, for instance, that they find it hard to believe, it is a sign of deliberate or unconscious disobedience... One can imagine him conversing thus with his pastor: ‘I have lost the faith I once had.’ ‘You must listen to the Word as it is spoken to you in the sermon.’ ‘I do; but I cannot get anything out of it, it just falls on deaf ears as far as I’m concerned.’ ‘The trouble is, you don’t really want to listen.’ ‘On the contrary, I do.’ And here they generally break off, because the pastor is at a loss what to say next. He only remembers the first half of the proposition: ‘Only those who believe obey.’ But this does not help, for faith is just what this particular man finds impossible.

The pastor feels himself confronted with the ultimate riddle of predestination. God grants faith to some and withholds it from others. So the pastor throws up the sponge and leaves the poor man to his fate. And yet this ought to be the turning-point of the interview. It is the complete turning-point. The pastor should give up arguing with him, and stop taking his difficulties seriously. That will really be in the man’s own interest, for he is only trying to hide himself behind them. It is now to take the bull by the horns, and say: ‘Only those who obey believe.’ Thus the flow of the conversation is interrupted, and the pastor can continue: ‘You are disobedient, you are trying to keep some part of your life under your own control. That is what is preventing you from listening to Christ and believing in his grace. You cannot hear Christ because you are willfully disobedient. Somewhere in your heart you are refusing to listen to his call. Your difficulty is your sins.’ (74-76)

¹ Page numbers refer to the revised paperback edition (Collier: New York), 1963.

Because of this danger to faith from cheap grace, Bonhoeffer urges radical obedience from the beginning of one's Christian life:

The actual call of Jesus and the response of single-minded obedience have an irrevocable significance... because he knows that it is only through actual obedience that a man can become liberated to believe. (91-2)

So, for instance, in our relationships with others, we are “not allowed to grow slowly, gradually, uninterrupted in progressive sanctification out of the natural order into the fellowship of Christ” (106)²; he instead calls for a “complete breach with the world”.

With this context in mind, we may read what he has to say about money:

Worldly possessions tend to turn the hearts of the disciples away from Jesus. What are we really devoted to? That is the question. Are our hearts set on earthly goods? Do we try to combine devotion to them with loyalty to Christ? Or are we devoted exclusively to him? (194)

...How can the disciple have dealings with earthly goods and yet preserve this singleness of heart? Jesus does not forbid the possession of property in itself. He was a man, he ate and drank like his disciples, and thereby sanctified the good things of life. These necessities, which are consumed in use and which meet the legitimate requirements of the body, are to be used by the disciple with thankfulness... Earthly goods are to be used, not to be collected. In the wilderness God gave Israel the manna every day, and they had no need to worry about food and drink...

But where are we to draw the line between legitimate use and unlawful accumulation? Let us reverse the word of Jesus and our question is answered: ‘Where thy heart is, there shall thy treasure be also.’ Our treasure may of course be small and inconspicuous, but its size is immaterial; it all depends on the heart, on ourselves. And if we ask how we are to know where our hearts are, the answer is just as simple—everything which hinders us from loving God above all things and acts as a barrier between ourselves and or obedience to Jesus is our treasure, and the place where our heart is. (194-195)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Bonhoeffer warns that if belief and obedience are not properly paired faith itself is at risk. Are there signs in your spouse's³ life of weakened faith due to attachment to possessions?
2. Our study of riches has arguably pointed us in the direction of greater simplicity and frugality tempered by gratitude and enjoyment of God's abundance; we increase in our detachment from the world and from our possessions as we mature in the faith.

*If we believe God ultimately wants us to be living even more frugally than we do now, how can we justify only a *gradual* movement toward obedience? Is Bonhoeffer right in requiring a clean break?*

² As he goes on to explain, this is because Jesus must mediate all interactions with others.

³ You are required to let your spouse answer this of you as well.

3. What is Bonhoeffer's test for ungodly accumulation of possessions? As you did with Wesley's criteria, try Bonhoeffer's test on health insurance; a retirement account; (private?) college for your children; ownership and care of a pet; international travel for pleasure; and Christmas presents.
4. What would Bonhoeffer say about Wesley's view of money, and vice versa? Or Sider's?



Fun facts (from *CH&B* #32):

- Though later he was an outspoken advocate of pacifism, Bonhoeffer was an enthusiastic fan of bullfighting. He developed the passion while serving as assistant pastor of a German-speaking congregation in Barcelona, Spain.
- By the end of 1930, the year before Bonhoeffer was ordained, church seminaries were complaining that over half the candidates for ordination were followers of Hitler.
- During Allied bombing raids over Berlin, Bonhoeffer's calm deeply impressed his fellow prisoners at Tegel Prison. Prisoners and even guards used all kinds of tricks to get near him and find the comfort of exchanging a few words with him.
- In 1933, when the government instigated a one-day boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, Bonhoeffer's grandmother broke through a cordon of SS officers to buy strawberries from a Jewish store.
- Bonhoeffer served as a member of the *Abwehr*, the military-intelligence organization under Hitler. (He was actually a double agent. While ostensibly working for the *Abwehr*, Bonhoeffer helped to smuggle Jews into Switzerland—and do other underground tasks.)
- Bonhoeffer learned to drive a car while in the United States—yet he failed his American driver's-license examination three times.