

## **Suffering Christ's Call: Discipleship and the Cross<sup>1</sup>**

In this article I explore and reflect upon some neglected themes in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of Christian discipleship. In particular, I attend to Bonhoeffer's claim that the life of the disciple always and necessarily involves suffering. In the first half of the article, I set out a number of themes in Bonhoeffer's 1937 *Discipleship*, focusing especially on his emphasis upon the priority of Christ's call over our attempts to understand and negotiate this call. In the second half of the article, I turn to the Episcopalian theologian William Stringfellow to expand upon Bonhoeffer's understanding of discipleship. I use insights from Stringfellow's memoir *A Second Birthday* to explore how pain (at least sometimes) opens us up to God's grace. Finally, I suggest that Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow together provide the basis for a rich theology of suffering, that is, for a recognition of how suffering – even while meaningless in itself – can be a place where God is present and forming us as disciples.

Throughout the Christian tradition, the language of discipleship has not been especially prominent in approaches to and understandings of the Christian life. As John Webster has written, 'The main lines of the theology of the Christian life have been structured around the Pauline and Johannine theology of union with and life in Christ, rather than the Synoptic theme of following Jesus.'<sup>2</sup> In recent decades, however, this situation has changed. There are at least four factors that have contributed to this.

First, the language of discipleship has gained prominence due to wider developments in New Testament studies and scholarship on the historical Jesus. Distinctively modern concerns with historical authenticity have led to a general prioritisation of the synoptic

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented as the Christ's College lecture at the University of Aberdeen (in September 2015) and at the conference 'Discipleship and Forgiveness' in Australia (in December 2015). I have made a number of revisions in light of helpful feedback and questions I received on both occasions.

<sup>2</sup> John Webster, 'Discipleship and Call', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 23:2 (2005): 134.

material, and of Mark's gospel in particular. Consequently, the centre of gravity in New Testament studies has shifted away from the Pauline epistles and the gospel of John. As synoptic language, the language of discipleship has benefited from this wider shift.

A second factor that has contributed to the increased popularity of discipleship is the impact of the work of Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder. If discipleship language has been marginal in the Christian tradition broadly, it has been much more central to Anabaptist traditions and communities specifically.<sup>3</sup> In his 1972 *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder insists that Jesus provides a model for radical Christian discipleship: 'His deeds show a coherent, conscious socio-political character and direction, and his words are inseparable therefrom.'<sup>4</sup> Yoder's influence over recent decades – directly and through the work of Stanley Hauerwas, Glen Stassen, James McClendon and others – has resulted in this Anabaptist vision of political discipleship being taken up radical Christian communities and movements.<sup>5</sup>

Third, I would suggest that the increased interest in discipleship is a result of a certain kind of evangelical culture, one which emphasises the conversion experience while giving little thought to the morning after. Accordingly, the language of discipleship is an attempt to address this oversight. Much of the popular contemporary literature on discipleship is about the practices and disciplines that might sustain and deepen faith post conversion. Commenting on this, Mark Mattes suggests that 'contemporary practices of discipleship aim to sustain the private "Jesus" experience.'<sup>6</sup> And if this understanding of discipleship is especially prevalent in evangelical contexts, it also appears in more mainstream

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<sup>3</sup> See Philip Ziegler, 'Discipleship', *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life*, ed. Kent Eilers & Kyle C. Strobel (London: T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.176-77.

<sup>4</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p.112.

<sup>5</sup> Ziegler writes that 'Anabaptist theologies of the Christian life have been key to bringing the discourse of discipleship into wider ecumenical theological discussion during the last century.' Ziegler, 'Discipleship', p.176.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Mattes, 'Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective', *Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (2012): 152.

Protestantism. Discipleship again becomes way of redressing a perceived overemphasis upon justification and faith at the expense of sanctification and Christian formation.

This leads to a fourth and final factor: the immensely popular book by the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Discipleship*, *Nachfolge* in German, or *The Cost of Discipleship* in its earlier English editions. Since it was first published in 1937, Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* has gone through countless reprinting in German and English. It has been widely hailed as a Christian classic, and is one of the most popular theological books of the twentieth century. Bonhoeffer's book has also been drawn upon and appealed to in almost every contemporary approach to discipleship, including those inspired by Yoder and those developed within evangelical contexts. Bonhoeffer's book is understood as providing a precedent and support for these other approaches.

In this lecture, my interest is in Bonhoeffer's account of discipleship. However, I am particularly interested in some aspects of his approach that typically receive less attention, and some ways in which Bonhoeffer's account may, in fact, differ from these other approaches just mentioned. I shall proceed as follows. In the first section, I shall make some brief remarks about the context of Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*. In the second section, I shall examine Bonhoeffer's account of Christ's call to the disciples. What can we say about this one who calls? What is entailed in this call? In the third section, I shall turn to the other side of discipleship: the ones who are called. Who are the ones who follow the call of Christ? What language might best describe the nature or form of this following? In the fourth section, I shall suggest that this following has the form of suffering: 'A disciple is a disciple only in suffering and being rejected', as Bonhoeffer writes.<sup>7</sup> In this section I'll also draw on the work of the Episcopalian theologian William Stringfellow to expand on Bonhoeffer's insights into

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<sup>7</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.85.

suffering. In the fifth section, I shall then relate these insights from Stringfellow to Bonhoeffer's account of discipleship more directly. I'll conclude by summarising and drawing out what is at stake with all of this.

### **1. Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* in Context**

Let me begin with a few brief comments on Bonhoeffer's 1937 *Discipleship*. At the centre of this text is a long meditation on the Sermon on the Mount, which Bonhoeffer had already begun reflecting upon much earlier in the 1930s. Most of *Discipleship*, however, was written as lectures while he was teaching at the Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwalde.

Bonhoeffer was teaching this material to seminarians who were part of the Confessing Church struggle. *Discipleship* was published as a book just two months after the Finkenwalde seminary had been closed down by the Gestapo.<sup>8</sup>

This means that Bonhoeffer was developing the theology and concerns of *Discipleship* in the context of the early years of National Socialism; he was developing this theology—at least in part—as a response to the kinds of challenges that the Nazis and their supporters represented. In particular, he was responding to the attempt by Christian supporters of the Nazis, the *Deutsche Christen*, to combine Christianity with Nazi ideology—i.e., to turn evangelical freedom into a new law, specifically through introducing racial laws or obligations. As Bonhoeffer writes in his preface, 'there are so many dissonant sounds, so many human, harsh laws, and so many false hope which obscure the pure word of Jesus...'<sup>9</sup> Against this, he continues, 'we desire to speak of the call to follow Jesus.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 1906-1945* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp.202-209.

<sup>9</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.21.

<sup>10</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.38

Bonhoeffer's basic concern in *Discipleship*, therefore, is with how we are to follow Christ alone, or remain faithful to Christ's call even and especially during unstable and difficult times. His strategy in *Discipleship* is that we go back to basics: to Luther and Paul, to the gospels, to faith and evangelical freedom. He writes in the preface: 'What did Jesus want to say to us?' What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today?'<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship was prompted by the particular challenges of his own context, but his questions and proposals have continuing relevance today.

## 1. The Call

For Bonhoeffer, Christian discipleship begins and ends with the call of the living Christ. To be a disciple is to follow Christ's call. Bonhoeffer develops this claim through an exposition of Jesus' calling of Levi at the beginning of Mark: 'As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him. "Follow me." And he got up and followed him (Mark 2:14).' For our interests, there are four core points that emerge from Bonhoeffer's exposition.

First, Bonhoeffer draws attention to the immediacy of the relationship between the call and the response: 'The call goes out' he writes, 'and without any further ado the obedient deed of the one called follows.'<sup>12</sup> Jesus appears and calls his disciples. They get up and immediately follow him. Bonhoeffer elaborates on the significance of this: 'How is this direct relationship between call and obedience possible? It is quite offensive to natural reason. Reason is impelled to reject the abruptness of the response. It seeks something to mediate it;

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<sup>11</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.37.

<sup>12</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.57.

it seeks mediation.<sup>13</sup> In other words, we continually try and downplay or temper this immediacy. Against this, Bonhoeffer insists that Jesus' call is such that the disciples immediately follow, doing so without fully understanding what they are being called to.

For Bonhoeffer, this immediacy discloses the authority of Christ's call: 'Jesus calls to discipleship... as the Christ, the Son of God,' as he puts it.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Christ's call has supreme authority over those who are called. In an essay on discipleship, John Webster puts it thus: 'His claim has supreme authority and is supremely justified because it is *his*, the claim of the one who alone is in himself all authority and righteousness, and so who alone has the prerogative to make an absolute summons.'<sup>15</sup> This is why Christ's call exceeds and overwhelms our best attempts to understand and mediate it.<sup>16</sup> It is Christ who calls, and in light of this any human response and understanding is strictly secondary to and derivative of Christ' call.

This leads to a third point: the content or substance of the call. What is it, specifically, that Christ is calling Levi and the other disciples to? In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer insists that Christian discipleship has no identifiable material or social content: 'What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all ... It is truly not a program for one's life.'<sup>17</sup> So what is the content of Christ's call? Christ alone. This means that what discipleship entails can never be fixed or stabilised in advance. What is involved in discipleship proceeds from and is continually dependent upon Christ directly. When Levi and

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<sup>13</sup> DBWE 4, p.57.

<sup>14</sup> DBWE 4, p.57.

<sup>15</sup> Webster, 'Discipleship and Calling', p.139.

<sup>16</sup> Bernd Wannewetsch writes: 'Christ's calling is authoritative in that it *generates* the need, wish, and will to follow the command – while at times explicitly rejecting the human need, wish, and will to follow him as insufficient.' Wannewetsch, 'Christians and Pagans: Towards a Trans-Religious Second Naïveté or How to Be a Christological Creature', in *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through His Poetry*, ed. Bernd Wannewetsch (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p.184.

<sup>17</sup> DBWE 4, p.58

the other disciples ‘got up and followed him’, they did not know where this path would end.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, this indicates the ineradicable distance between the one who calls and those called. Christ stands apart from the disciples or goes ahead of the disciples. Put differently, Christ’s call is precisely a call *to follow*. This means that there is never a direct affinity or equality between Christ and the disciples. Again, Webster is helpful on this point: ‘In the movement required of the disciples, there can be no question of their being companions on Jesus’s way in the sense of fellow travellers of equal ability or dignity. Between the one who is followed and the one who follows there is always an unbridgeable distance.’<sup>19</sup> To reiterate: The authority of Christ’s call establishes and maintains a distance and a difference.<sup>20</sup>

To summarize this section: Bonhoeffer emphasizes the immediacy of the relationship between call and response, the authority of Christ’s call, that Christ himself is the content of this call, and that there is a permanent distance or difference between the one who calls and the ones called.

### **3. Following**

If Christ calls his disciples in this way, what does this indicate about those who are called?

What does it mean to follow the call of this Christ? What language best describes the form of this following? In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer presents the disciples as the ones who follow. He describes the nature of this following in turn as ‘simple obedience’. ‘In simple obedience’, he writes, ‘the disciples do the will of the Lord who bids them do something extraordinary, and

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<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer writes: ‘The disciple is thrown out of the relative security of life into complete insecurity (which in turn is absolute security and protection in community with Jesus); out of the foreseeable, calculable realm (which in truth is unreliable) into the completely unforeseeable, coincidental realm (which in truth is the only necessary and reliable one); out of limited possibilities (which in truth is that of unlimited possibilities) into the realm of unlimited possibilities (which in truth is the only liberating reality).’ *DBWE* 4, p.58.

<sup>19</sup> Webster, ‘Discipleship and Calling’, p.141.

<sup>20</sup> Even when the disciples share in Christ’s suffering, as I discuss below, this distance is maintained. In the essay ‘After ten years’, Bonhoeffer writes: ‘Certainly, we are not Christ, nor are we called on to redeem the world through our own deed and our own suffering....’ *DBWE* 8, p.49.

they know in everything only that they can do nothing else, that they are, therefore, doing what is simply a matter of course.’<sup>21</sup> There are two core points here that need drawing out.

First, the disciples are the ones who ‘*do the will of the lord.*’ This means, Bonhoeffer clarifies, that the ‘disciples look only to their Lord and follow him.’<sup>22</sup> The disciples are the one’s who put aside their own wills to look to Christ.<sup>23</sup> This means that see only Christ, and do not see any goodness or holiness they might themselves possess. In a recent article, Brian Brock explores this aspect of discipleship: ‘The point is simple’, Brock writes, ‘if we are followers of Christ, the moment we look away from him and toward ourselves, we, like Peter, begin to sink into the oblivion of our own self-absorption.’<sup>24</sup> As Bonhoeffer himself writes, ‘the only required reflection for disciples is to be completely oblivious, completely unreflective in obedience, in discipleship....’<sup>25</sup> Again: The disciples do the will of the Lord, which means they look to the Lord and not to themselves.

Second, by looking only to the Christ and doing only his will, the disciples ‘know they can do nothing else’ and that they are ‘doing simply what is a matter of course.’ The point here is that discipleship is not about actively choosing or enacting a certain pattern or way of life. Discipleship is not a possibility that we as human beings have at our disposal. Bonhoeffer insists that ‘none can want that by their own choice. None can call themselves.’<sup>26</sup> It is Christ alone who calls and brings about discipleship.

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<sup>21</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.150.

<sup>22</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.150.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Ulrich writes: ‘To follow Jesus means to live with the petition [*Bitte*] and expectation that God’s will be done.’ *Wie Geschöpfe Leben: Konturen evangelischer Ethik* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2007), p.152.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Brock, ‘Discipleship: Forming or Forgetting the Self’, forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 4, pp.150-151. Bonhoeffer continues: ‘The goodness of Christ, the goodness of discipleship, takes place without awareness.’ Also see Bonhoeffer’s discussion of faith as *actus directus* in his earlier *Act and Being*. *DBWE* 2, p.100f.

<sup>26</sup> *DBWE* 4, p. 60. Bonhoeffer elsewhere writes, ‘Being saved by discipleship is not a real possibility, but for God all things are possible.’ *DBWE* 4, p.83



What is at stake with the claim that discipleship is not a human option or possibility?

In an earlier essay, Bonhoeffer makes a broader point that ‘the concept of possibility has no place in theology and no place in theological anthropology’.<sup>27</sup> He elaborates in some detail on why this is the case:

The concept of possibility rationalizes reality. It determines every reality according to the manner of a logically existing thing. That is, it fixes it, makes it universally accessible.... For theological anthropology, this means that the human being is conceived with certain possibilities in relation to God, to which he can withdraw at any time.<sup>28</sup>

The problem with possibility language is that it suggests a kind of human being who exists prior to and apart from its standing before God. It suggests a human being is able to understand and negotiate reality apart from God. With respect to discipleship, it implies a human being who has her own resources for negotiating or following Christ’s call and claim.

To summarize: by insisting that following Christ’s call has the form of simple obedience, Bonhoeffer affirms and deepens the insight that Christ calls with authority and the disciples simply obey and immediately follow. Discipleship is not something that we ourselves make happen; it is not a possibility that is available to us apart from continually looking to Christ.

All of this distinguishes Bonhoeffer’s approach to discipleship from some of the other approaches that I mentioned at the outset. At this point, before proceeding to the next section, it may be helpful to draw some direct comparisons. First, Bonhoeffer’s approach does not easily fit with the models of discipleship that have emerged from a biblical studies framework. To take one example, in his short book *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on*

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<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer, ‘Inaugural Lecture’, *DBWE* 10, p.403.

<sup>28</sup> *DBWE* 10, p.403.

*Discipleship*, N.T. Wright sets forth ‘the biblical model of discipleship’ and hopes that his book will ‘jolt you into seeing things in new ways.’ Bonhoeffer’s worry would be that this again makes discipleship into a possibility. For Bonhoeffer, the goal is not to interpret the texts and derive a model of discipleship for the present. Rather, the living Christ calls us and encounter us through the Scriptures, including the witness of the biblical disciples.<sup>29</sup> In another essay from this period, he writes that ‘the movement is not from the word of Scripture to the present but rather from the present to the word of Scripture, where it then abides!’<sup>30</sup>

Second, there are some marked differences between Bonhoeffer’s approach to discipleship and an Anabaptist as one popularized by John Howard Yoder. For Yoder, Jesus’ teaching and actions again provide a model of Christian discipleship, one which we are to take up or enact. In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder’s describes Jesus as the bearer of a ‘*new possibility*’ of human, social, and political relationships.<sup>31</sup> He elsewhere suggest that Jesus presents a ‘political option’ of non-violence, which stands distinct from other first-century political options (i.e. the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, etc.). Yoder’s language of possibility and option makes human agency and activity integral to discipleship in ways that Bonhoeffer’s language of simple obedience resists. Furthermore, Yoder is willing to give discipleship identifiable social and political content. For Yoder, discipleship involves adopting or taking up a visible social or political program. For Bonhoeffer, by contrast, it involves being freed from all such worldly programs for Christ.

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<sup>29</sup> Brock summarizes this difference: ‘The result is a picture of discipleship as the task of following a living Christ that is to be distinguished from discipleship as following a Christ who lived. The latter has a strong tendency to drift toward the language of “imitation” rather than the appropriately distinguishing language of “following”.’ Brock, ‘Discipleship: Forming or Forgetting the Self’, forthcoming. See also Ziegler, ‘Discipleship’, pp.179-80.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, ‘Contemporizing New Testament Texts.’ *DBWE* 14, p.418-19

<sup>31</sup> Emphasis added. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, p.82.

Third, the broadly evangelical and Protestant appeals to discipleship as Christian formation are again distinct from Bonhoeffer's claim that the disciples are only to look to Christ and not to themselves.<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer goes to some lengths to avoid the language of self-formation that is central in such appeals. Rather, as we have seen, he keeps the emphasis firmly upon Christ's call and what Christ himself is doing. He is reluctant to talk about human activity, self-formation or self-reflection apart from this. Against popular contemporary approaches, then, discipleship for Bonhoeffer is not primarily about practices or disciplines for Christian formation (i.e. to sustain a private Jesus experience). Rather, it is about receiving Christ or being formed by Christ.<sup>33</sup> He makes this point in a later manuscript from his *Ethics*: 'Formation occurs by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ ... This does not happen as we strive to become like Jesus ... but as the form of Jesus Christ himself so works on us that it molds us, conforming our form to Christ's own.'<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Suffering

If discipleship is following Christ's call – receiving and being formed by Christ through simple obedience – Bonhoeffer further insists that this following is marked by suffering.<sup>35</sup>

'Discipleship is *passio passiva* [passive suffering], having to suffer', he writes. To be a

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<sup>32</sup> John Webster, 'Discipleship and Obedience', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 2:1 (2006): 12. Webster continues: 'This is why investment in the language of practice, habit and virtue in the theology of the Christian life - such language enjoys renewed prestige in contemporary theology - is in important respects unwise.'

<sup>33</sup> As Mark Mattes aptly makes this point, 'discipleship is more properly viewed as something God does to believers, rather than something that believers do for God or for the world.' Mattes, 'Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective', p.142.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, 'Ethics as Formation', *DBWE* 6, p.93. In *Discipleship*, he writes: 'To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ is not an ideal of realizing some kind of similarity with Christ which we are asked to attain. It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us.' *DBWE* 4, p.285.

<sup>35</sup> Eberhard Bethge describes Chapter 4 of *Discipleship*, 'Discipleship and the Cross', as a 'cornerstone of the work from the beginning.' Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p.450.

disciple is to suffer Christ's call.<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer is therefore adamant that there is no Christian discipleship without suffering. 'Just as Christ is only Christ as one who suffers and is rejected, so a disciple is a disciple only in suffering.' Accordingly, all Christian discipleship is by definition a discipleship of the cross.

What is at stake with this claim? To draw this out, it will be useful to reflect upon suffering or pain as such. In his theological memoir, *A Second Birthday: A Personal Confrontation with Illness, Pain and Death*, the Episcopalian activist and lay theologian William Stringfellow provides a rich account of his experiences when suffering from a pancreatic disease in the late 1960s. Stringfellow's memoir is therefore useful for deepening Bonhoeffer's account of discipleship.

In his memoir, Stringfellow gives particular attention to the elemental nature of suffering and pain. When we experience pain, it is elemental or basic to us in ways that confound our attempts to understand and describe it. Stringfellow writes: 'There is an ambiguity in pain which is truly exquisite. It is no wonder that medical science is so ignorant about what pain is, beyond knowing what any victim of pain realizes without asking a doctor.'<sup>37</sup> There is something about pain and suffering that exceeds our best attempts at reduction and explanation. It cannot be reduced to its medical causes or the physical and psychic conditions that give rise to it. Or at least medical attempts to explain pain in these ways do not get the heart of the matter.

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<sup>36</sup> It is at this point that Webster expresses concerns with Bonhoeffer's theology: 'We may perhaps register a worry about Bonhoeffer's handling of the notion of the *costliness* of obedience to the summons to discipleship. Of course, as we shall see, obedient discipleship entails cross-bearing, the loss of self. But cost is not all: to lose one's life is indeed to save it; mortification is the obverse of vivification; obediently to follow Jesus is to come alive. There is, in other words – perhaps because of the pressure of circumstance – a certain loss of teleology, a foreshortening of the movement of discipleship, to be connected, maybe, by a richer theology of resurrection.' Webster, 'Discipleship and Obedience', p.8.

<sup>37</sup> William Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday: A Personal Confrontation with Illness, Pain and Death* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), p.45.

This is because pain or suffering is more than something that happens to us, or something that comes to us from without. When we are in pain or suffering, we lose the ability to draw a clear line between ourselves and our pain. Pain is at once constitutive and disruptive at the deepest level of our being. On this basis Stringfellow suggests that pain by its nature confronts and challenges our self-understanding. It challenges and unravels who and what we think we are. In particular, it places in question the claims we make about ourselves; it unravels our core narratives. Stringfellow writes: ‘In pain, as much or more than physical health, sanity is always an issue.’<sup>38</sup> When we are in pain we lost our grasp on what we once held to be real. Suffering or pain brings everything we think we know into question.

Stringfellow suggests that in precisely this way suffering throws us back on ourselves. Pain and suffering has an isolating effect. As the Psalmist cries out, ‘You have taken from me my closest friends, and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.’<sup>39</sup> At the same time, pain or suffering itself narrows our horizons. Stringfellow describes this, non-pejoratively, as ‘the vanity which pain instils in its victims.’<sup>40</sup> When we are in pain we become reduced to the negotiation of this pain. Everything recedes into the background and suffering becomes our world.<sup>41</sup>

This means that when faced with pain or suffering we do everything within our power to escape it and to elude its grasp. The first strategy that we typically employ is that of diversion. Reflecting on the human propensity to diversion, Blaise Pascal writes: ‘Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men [*sic*] have decided, in order to be

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<sup>38</sup> Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, p.46.

<sup>39</sup> Psalm 88.

<sup>40</sup> Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, p.51.

<sup>41</sup> Elaine Scarry writes: ‘Pain either expands to fill the whole of our universe or contracts our universe and confines it within the boundaries of our immediate experience. The inexpressibility of pain, comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed . . . whatever pain achieves it achieves in part through unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language.’ Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.4.

happy, not to think about such things.’<sup>42</sup> We pursue diversion and distraction at the best of times. And when we are suffering we turn this pursuit into art form. When in pain, as Stringfellow writes, ‘the aim... is to find a distraction sufficient to, temporarily, displace the pain as a fascination.’<sup>43</sup> For Stringfellow, this largely involved perusing through Sears department store catalogues. (He explains in his memoir that he has such a short attention span that this is all he can cope with. For most of us today, I suspect when we get sick or are in pain today we tend to binge watch Netflix). Yet even our best attempts at diversion can only succeed up to a point. Stringfellow recounts the progressive failure of his own attempts: ‘One after another, such comforts or distractions as I knew them were neutralised by pain.’<sup>44</sup>

Once such attempts at diversion begin to fail, we turn to a new strategy. Rather than attempting to flee, we now attempt to assert our dominion over our suffering, that is, by claiming it as work. We attempt to work through the pain or make the pain itself into a project. Again Stringfellow: ‘The resemblance of pain to work, in my circumstances, was startling: pain commandeered, engaged and exhausted all my faculties, energies and talents; pain tested all my weaknesses and shortcomings; pain filled most of my time and dictated the use of all of my time.’<sup>45</sup> By making pain work, striving to bear the pain and find meaning through this bearing, we are again attempting to maintain a level of control. By actively embracing or bearing it, we strive to invest it with meaning and forestall its unravelling forces. We attempt to give meaning to ourselves as the ones who bear or pass through this pain.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, (Penquin, 1995), p.133.

<sup>43</sup> Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, p.47.

<sup>44</sup> Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, p.51.

<sup>45</sup> Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, p.55.

<sup>46</sup> This strategy of making pain into work, rendering it productive, is a broadly Hegelian strategy. It is an attempt to play the long game. While we may indeed be suffering and in pain in the here and now, this negativity is

However, even this second strategy is ultimately limited. This is because work as such cannot give us the kind of meaning we require. Work of any kind is unable to save us. This is because, as Stringfellow writes, ‘work is a reality of fallen existence, that is, of the present era in which... all relationships are sundered, all persons and principalities exist in profound disorientation with respect to themselves, their identities and functions, and to one another, and all things are subject to death and all experiences is premonitive of death.’<sup>47</sup> Work, including the work of bearing pain, remains part of a fallen and futile order, and as such cannot provide a means of escape.

From a Christian standpoint, this means that suffering cannot be drawn into a productive dialectic. Pain as work cannot be counted on to make us stronger or wiser. Put differently, the relationship between suffering and new life is not one of progressive unfolding. On their own terms suffering and pain are just as likely to lead us to bitterness and despair. Nonetheless, from the Christian standpoint, this is also not the whole story. Death is not the last word. There is new life on the other side of death; resurrection follows the cross.

Accordingly, Stringfellow reflects on the endpoint of his own failures to elude his suffering: ‘It is... only then and there—where there is no escape or equivocation possible from the fullness of death’s vigour and brutality, when man [*sic*] is exposed in absolute vulnerability—that life can be beheld and embraced as the gift which life is.’<sup>48</sup> While suffering and death do not of necessity lead to new life, new life only becomes possible on the other side of them. There is no resurrection without the cross. As Stringfellow concludes, ‘I understood that... the pain represented a familiar crisis to be transcended by a grace also

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incorporated (*aufheben*) as part of a movement towards something higher. In other words, by working through the negativity of pain, we can become something more or other than what we were.

<sup>47</sup> Stringfellow, *Second Birthday*, p.62.

<sup>48</sup> Stringfellow, *Second Birthday*, p.67.

familiar. After that, though the pain did not relent, I was free from anxiety about my survival.<sup>49</sup>

## 5. Suffering Christ's call

How does all of this help us understand the suffering that is involved in following Christ's call? How do Stringfellow's insights relate to Bonhoeffer's claim that suffering is integral to Christian discipleship?

For Bonhoeffer, as for Stringfellow, suffering helps us to relinquish our need to be in control. As Bonhoeffer puts this in one of his prison letters: 'suffering... is a way to freedom. In suffering, liberation consists in being allowed to let the matter out of one's hands and into the hands of God.'<sup>50</sup> By breaking us down and unravelling us, suffering reveals the futility of our own efforts and activity. Suffering forces us to relinquish our own agendas and projects, making us available for Christ's call and God's own work.<sup>51</sup> In his memoir, Stringfellow recounts his own punishing schedule of work and activity prior to his illness. Through the inactivity caused by his illness he becomes attentive to God's grace in a new way.

Second, Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow insist that we know of God's presence and work in suffering – preparing us for and leading us to Christ – only through faith. We cannot know of God's presence in suffering otherwise or more directly than this. On its own terms suffering simply has an isolating and unravelling effect, as we saw with Stringfellow. It is only in faith and by looking to Christ that it becomes possible to recognise something more about suffering. Bonhoeffer quotes Luther on this point: 'When we feel pain, when we suffer, when we die, let us turn to this, firmly believing and certain that it is not we alone, but Christ

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<sup>49</sup> Stringfellow, *Second Birthday*, p.68.

<sup>50</sup> *DBWE* 8, p.492.

<sup>51</sup> In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes: 'The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world.' *DBWE* 4, 81



and the church who are in pain and are suffering and dying with us ....<sup>52</sup> In faith, we hold that we are not simply isolated and unravelled by suffering we hold that Christ and his church are present and suffering with us.

Third, it is worth restating that neither Bonhoeffer nor Stringfellow are proposing a natural theology of suffering—that is, what Gerhard Forde calls a ‘negative theology of the cross.’ None of this is a celebration or endorsement of suffering *per se*. Bonhoeffer, too, does not claim that suffering on its own terms leads to Christ. Accordingly, we cannot become better disciples simply by seeking out suffering (i.e. putting one’s hand in the blender, jumping in front of oncoming traffic, etc.). Bonhoeffer writes: ‘The old self cannot kill itself. It cannot will its own death. We die in Christ alone; we die through Christ and with Christ.’<sup>53</sup> The suffering of discipleship is not a suffering that we choose. (In Stringfellow’s language, this would again be an attempt to assert a certain level of control or dominion over suffering).<sup>54</sup> Rather, suffering is only what is received or suffered. Bonhoeffer insists that the suffering of discipleship is only that which comes from Christ and is in service to Christ’s call.

Finally, this means that neither Stringfellow nor Bonhoeffer are interested in suffering in general or in the abstract. As we saw in Stringfellow, suffering and pain are themselves ambiguous and elusive in ways that defy general description or explanation. Bonhoeffer, too, is not interested in suffering as a general phenomenon. He claims that Christ gives to each disciple his or her own suffering: ‘How should disciples know what their cross is? They will receive it when they begin to follow the suffering Lord. They will recognize their cross in

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<sup>52</sup> See *DBWE* 1, 181.

<sup>53</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.208.

<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer quotes Luther: ‘You must not follow the work which you choose, not the suffering which you devise, but that which comes to you against your choice, thoughts, and desires. There I call; there you must be a pupil; there it is the time; there your Master has come.’ *DBWE* 4, p.91. Bonhoeffer is quoting *Luther’s Works* 14, p.152.

communion with Christ.<sup>55</sup> Just we cannot know what it means to follow Christ apart from following, we cannot know in advance what it means to suffer as one who follows Christ.<sup>56</sup>

What is at stake with this? Among other things, the fact that we know God's presence in suffering only through faith, and that suffering is always particular and never general, means that we are never in a position to make generalisations about suffering. On the one hand, we are not in a position to glorify or endorse suffering *per se*, or suggest that it is redemptive on its own terms. The movement is one from above to below, from God into human suffering, and not the reverse. God is freely present and at work in human suffering, and this alone gives it meaning or value. On the other hand, we are not in a position to condemn any particular suffering as wholly irredeemable or tragic without remainder. There is always the hope in the miracle of resurrection or new life.

To summarize this section: suffering is integral to Christian discipleship. For Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow, suffering draws us away from our own agendas and makes us available for God. However, it is only in faith that we recognise this to be the case, that God is, in fact, present and at work in human suffering. In addition, the fact that it is only God's presence and activity that gives meaning to suffering pre-empts any general endorsement of suffering as itself redemptive. On its own terms suffering is simply meaningless or tragic. Nonetheless, in faith we hold that Christ is present and at work even here, often in ways that are not directly available to us, or that we ourselves cannot understand.

## Conclusion

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<sup>55</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.89.

<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer writes of the disciples: 'They each have their own cross ready, assigned by God and measured to fit.' *DBWE* 4, p.87.

Where have we arrived? I began this lecture by outlining a number of different accounts of discipleship, and by suggesting that Bonhoeffer's account has some distinctive theological features over against these others. As we have seen, Bonhoeffer gives sharp emphasis to the priority of Christ's call for Christian discipleship. Christ calls with authority and the disciples simply obey and immediately follow. Moreover, Christ's call determines the shape of this following. Discipleship is not primarily about human practices or disciples of self-formation and reflection. It is not about enacting a pattern or ideal way of life. Rather, for Bonhoeffer it is about looking to Christ and continually allowing ourselves to be formed by God's work in Christ.

Yet if discipleship for Bonhoeffer is governed by the call of Christ, this is more specifically the call of the crucified one. For Bonhoeffer, the Christ who calls to discipleship is the suffering and humiliated Christ. Indeed, he insists that God comes to us only in the form of the suffering servant. In his Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer writes: 'He comes among us humans not as God, but rather *incognito*, as a beggar among beggars, an outcast among outcasts.... Christ's presence as God remains concealed under the form of his suffering and humiliation.' Christ's divinity or glory remains hidden under the form of the cross. What this means, as Bonhoeffer's writes in *Discipleship*, is that 'it is the hidden Christ who calls. The call as such is ambiguous. What counts is not the call as such, but the one who calls. But Christ can only be recognized in faith.'<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, this means that the Christian life or discipleship is likewise hidden. That the disciples look only to Christ, that they do Christ's will as a matter of course, means that any goodness or holiness is similarly hidden beneath their suffering. If the disciples look away from Christ and to themselves, they see only their suffering and failure: 'Our good

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<sup>57</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.202.

work is... completely hidden from our eyes. Our sanctification remains hidden from us....'<sup>58</sup>

In this life at least, it is primarily in faith that we see God's presence and activity in the midst of our suffering and hardship.

In particular, faith allows us to recognize that God is present and at work not in spite of suffering, but precisely in and through it. Through suffering, God is continually directing us to Christ and making us available for Christ's call. In faith, we affirm that God is at work through suffering that would otherwise be meaningless. In faith, we therefore find freedom and joy in our own particular suffering, allowing ourselves to be formed by and prepared for Christ. To give Bonhoeffer the final word: 'Discipleship is being bound to the suffering Christ. That is why Christian suffering is not disconcerting. Instead, it is nothing but grace and joy.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *DBWE* 4, p.279.

<sup>59</sup> *DBWE* 4, 89.