

## Listening to *Discipleship*'s 'B-Side'

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### I/ Introduction

*Discipleship* is a product of a time during which, as Bonhoeffer himself put it, 'for me everything now depended on a renewal of the church and of the pastoral station'.<sup>1</sup> This period is roughly coincident with that of the German Church Struggle, encompassing the years of Bonhoeffer's Berlin lectureship, his pastoral ministry in London, and his leadership of the Confessing Church seminary in Pomerania in its various guises from 1935-40. Although the origins of the book lie in Bonhoeffer's own wrestling with the Sermon on the Mount as far back as the start of the 1930s, it is rightly and most intimately associated with the 'Finkenwalde experiment' in ministry formation. For those who studied with Bonhoeffer there, *Discipleship* was the singular book of their singular teacher, distilling what they had learned from him of the 'separating truth of the word of God' and determining the shape of their theological existence thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

I suspect that for many—perhaps most—people the first encounter with Bonhoeffer and his theological work is with *Discipleship*. Mine was: the text was the capstone of an undergraduate course on 'Spiritual and Literary Classics' I once took at the University of Toronto. The effect of the opening chapters on 'costly grace', the 'call to discipleship', 'simple obedience', 'discipleship and the cross' and 'discipleship and the individual' was, I recall, electric: its spiritual and moral seriousness; the honesty and vigour of its prose; its dizzying combination of exegetical simplicity with intellectual finesse and theological learning; its indictment of a failing Christianity grown numb to the radicality of Christian faith; the sense of being exposed to something wondrous and terrifying in its prospect, namely the claim and call of the sovereign Christ of God; the dawning recognition that, though written in the third person, all this was in fact sermonically addressed to you, a matter of decision and inviting faith. I am sure that my younger self was also enamoured with the romance of a vision of radical religion in a world of banality and ecclesiastical grey, with the allure of personal authenticity, and with the excitement of joining the revolution against the same forces (now, of course, bourgeois or otherwise) that conspired to obstruct radical Christian

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<sup>1</sup> DBWE 14: 134 / DBW 14: 113.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is Albrecht Schönherr's cited in the editors' afterword, DBWE 4:297 / DBW 4: 315.

faith even at its origins: ‘reason . . . conscience, responsibility, piety, even the law and the principle of Scripture’—the list is Bonhoeffer’s own.<sup>3</sup>

We must have read and discussed the whole book in that course, for there was an exam after all. But very little beyond those few opening chapters really got much of a hearing. Taken together with the exposition of the Sermon on the Mount itself, those arresting opening sections make up *Discipleship*’s ‘A-side’, as it were. And just as with any hit record, it is understandable that the A-side of Bonhoeffer’s book is kept in heavy rotation, is played time and time again and comes for most people to stand for the whole. It is after all that good, that provocative, that important a meditation on the difficult and joyful work of Christian living.

But *Discipleship* also has a substantive ‘B-side’, and a rather neglected one at that. Designated by Bonhoeffer himself as ‘Part 2’ of the work, it amounts to roughly a third of the book as a whole. In it, a concise account of the present presence of Christ establishes the foundation on which four further substantive chapters on the theology of the church are built. It ends with a brief eschatological coda on the theme of the ‘image of God’. I want to suggest that this underappreciated ‘B-side’ merits close listening especially by those keen to learn something from Bonhoeffer ‘for the life of the church today’. Both its theme, its form and its substance commend it to our hearing.

As to its theme—In the first part of his book Bonhoeffer writes that ‘everyone enters discipleship alone, but no one remains alone in discipleship’ because ‘they find themselves again in a visible community of faith’ (99/95). The theme of Part II is precisely this community of faith, the ‘church of Jesus Christ’. Across these chapters Bonhoeffer sets out an extensive account of the congregation of disciples, a veritable doctrine of the church. To do so was of course to elaborate his theme, discipleship. But it was at the same time an intervention into the intense debates about the nature of the church that marked the German Church Struggle. This section of *Discipleship* undoubtedly represents part of Bonhoeffer’s personal contribution toward a ‘responsible interpretation’ of the Barmen Theological Declaration. Bonhoeffer took the synodal decisions of the Confessing Church at Barmen (May 29-31, 1934) and Dahlem (October 19-20, 1934) with extraordinary seriousness.<sup>4</sup> And the question of the church was the ‘specific

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4, edited by G.B. Kelly and J.D. Godsey, translated by M. Kuske and I. Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 77 (DBW 4:69). Hereafter all references to *Discipleship* are given in the body of the text in the form (XX/YY), where XX is in the DWBE and YY the corresponding page in the original German DBW.

<sup>4</sup> See the text of the Barmen Theological Declaration in *The Book of Confessions: Study Edition* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Geneva, 1999). For a recent discussion of the confession and its abiding significance, see Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now*, translated by Darrell and Judith Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). I have argued for the importance of recognizing Bonhoeffer’s implacable commitment to Barmen and its ‘Dahlemite’ implementation in ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer—Theologian of the Word of God’, in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*, edited by K. Johnson & T. Larsen (Downers Grove, IN: IVP Academic, 2013), 17-38.

point’ at which the battle for faithfulness was enjoined. The Confessing Church had acted to accept and assume the ‘responsibility and commission of being the one, true church of Jesus Christ in Germany’ he wrote, and ‘we cannot retract what happened in Barmen and Dahlem . . . not because they merely represent historical facts of our church to which we owe pious obedience but because we cannot retract the word of God.’<sup>5</sup> If, as noted at the outset, the ‘renewal of the church and the ministry’ was Bonhoeffer’s long-standing preoccupation during these years, then these final chapters of *Discipleship* represent its most direct and extended theological treatment.

As to its form—Part II of *Discipleship* is marked by a sustained dogmatic density perhaps only matched by the most developed of the draft *Ethics* MSS. The discussion of the church is structured doctrinally: Bonhoeffer develops his account of the church by moving stepwise through the *ordo salutis* from justification to glorification: the differentiated and ordered reality of salvation establishes and distributes what must be said concerning the church because the church is fundamentally the creature of God’s saving word: *creatura est verbi dei*.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, ecclesiology is materially determined by Christology where the gracious identity, saving actions and merciful ends of the Word of God itself are concretely set forth.<sup>7</sup> Notably, some of the most direct and explicit pneumatology is Bonhoeffer’s writings in found in these few pages. With its Christological concentration and pneumatological saturation, the very form of Bonhoeffer’s argument here comports with his conviction that, for the Christian disciple, overriding interest in Christ as saviour displaces any and all direct interest in oneself. By riveting attention primarily upon Christ as the Word who makes the church in the power of his Spirit, his ecclesiological discussion performs this very same gesture of faith *in thought*. The indirection thus demanded is no derogation of the church; just the opposite: for the church is the place where Christ *presents himself today*, where his word of forgiveness and claim are announced, heard, trusted and obeyed, where Christ’s own life of self-giving for the world is concretely ‘taking form’ in a new human community, the community of his own body.<sup>8</sup>

## **II / A Reading of Part II of *Discipleship*—‘The Church of Jesus Christ and Discipleship’**

### **II.1/ Preliminary Remarks**

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<sup>5</sup> DBWE 14:667-68 / DBW 14: 667-68.

<sup>6</sup> Luther: ‘*breviter tota vita et substantia ecclesiae est in verbo Dei*’ —WA 7, 721, 9-14.

<sup>7</sup>The Lutheran commitment to the intimate wedding of word and spirit is explicit and operative throughout Bonhoeffer’s discussion.

<sup>8</sup> To anticipate the *Ethics* MS, ‘Ethics as Formation’, DBWE 6: 76-102 / DBW 6: 62-90

It begins with a fresh problem, namely: the problem of the ‘disciple at second-hand’.<sup>9</sup> Everything said about discipleship to this point in the book may well be true of those original apostles who were present to Christ to hear directly, and to heed directly, his call to follow. But we are separated from Christ by the ‘ugly ditch’ of history, remote from him, listening to his call at a distance, refracted uncertainly through biblical text and time. Bonhoeffer considers the worry to be fundamentally misplaced. For Christ is no less present to us today than he was to those he first encountered during his Bethlehem to Golgotha existence. Our situation is constituted just as fully by the ‘living presence of Christ’ as was theirs. ‘The relevant difference concerns neither the reality nor the clarity of Christ’s presence; it is merely a matter of mode. They heard the rabbi in the flesh and ‘believed in Christ’ while we hear him in sermon and sacrament and ‘believe in Christ’ (202 / 216). Now as then *faith* is the medium of discipleship, for Christ’s is only ever recognised in and by his own word of grace and command. Where am I met by Jesus’ call to discipleship today? In word and sacrament where his eloquent presence is promised: *there* ‘you will hear his call’ (204 / 218).<sup>10</sup>

Decisive here is Bonhoeffer’s claim that what collapses the historical distance is nothing other than Christ himself present, the risen and ascended one. Yet, it is not his bare presence but only his *eloquent* presence that matters, for Christ may be widely (even ubiquitously) present today but the promise of his articulate presence *pro nobis* only attends the preached Scriptures and the dominical sacraments.<sup>11</sup> It is *here* that faith harkens to the saving voice of Christ, the ‘one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death’ (Barmen I). Both the congregation and Christian discipleship within it are *creatura verbi dei*. The possibility and reality of contemporary discipleship lies within the church of word and sacrament because the possibility and reality of the church itself lies with the fact that the Christ as the living Word, as it were, ever ‘leaps the gap’.<sup>12</sup>

## II.2 / Baptism

In baptism contemporary Christians ‘suffer Christ’s call’, are seized by him, and thereby ‘rescued from the rule of this world’ so as now to belong exclusively to him (207 / 221). In baptism the

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<sup>9</sup> This formulation is Kierkegaard’s, and the question forms the subject of one of the most interesting chapters of his *Philosophical Fragments*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 89-110.

<sup>10</sup> The marks of the church specified authoritatively in *Confessio Augustana* VII are of course echoed here.

<sup>11</sup> This follows Luther closely on the difference between presence as such and presence ‘for you’—on this see Bonhoeffer’s comments on Luther’s ubiquity in Christology lectures, DBWE 12: 320-23 / DBW 12: 302-05: ‘Christ is even in the rustling leaves, as Luther says, but his presence is not obvious; he is not there for *you*, not *pro-me*, so you cannot grope for him in the rustling leaves’ (321 / 304).

<sup>12</sup> The title of recent *Festschrift* in honour of Richard Hays: *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honour of Richard Hays*, edited by J.R. Wagner et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

absolute break Christ himself made with the ‘present evil age’ becomes an effective truth in my own life. As fully paid up members of the present age of sin, this break also of necessity comes upon us as death, the death of the ‘old self’ in the death of Christ. Baptisms are public funerals for sinful selves, public acknowledgment that they no longer have a future, having been being brought to naught on the cross. At the origin of the Christian life of discipleship there is just this separation, this breach. In baptism the breach becomes a matter of visible, public record: a step ‘out of the world’ and ‘into the church’.

The death baptism marks is a ‘gracious death’ indeed a ‘gift of grace’ for it justifies us ‘*away* from sin’ because we suffer it in communion with Christ’s own death for us (209 / 223). As Bonhoeffer puts it, Christians ‘live out of the once-for-allness of Christ’s death’ (211 / 225). In another idiom, the gift received in baptism is the gift of the Spirit, whose advent upon the heart makes the Crucified One its Lord. That this is so is an object of faith, something on which the whole of Christian life is hazarded in trusting allegiance.<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer lays particular stress on the fact that these claims are the kerygmatic promises of the gospel—i.e., announcements of the Word of God—and can only be had as such, which is to say *by faith*. They cannot be converted into ‘self-sufficient truths’ available to human experience or ‘ontological propositions’ without doing violence to their very nature (206 / 220). These gospel truths are never at our disposal, never ‘in hand’. They are not delivered over to us; we are rather delivered over to them. From its very inception in baptism, then, discipleship is a venture in which we entrust ourselves ever more fully to the promised truth of the gospel than we do to our own sense of ourselves and our world. Here begins the jarring and gracious displacement of self by Christ that is the fundamental grammar of the Christian life.

### **II.3/ The Body of Christ**

If baptism makes and marks our deliverance from the old, the body of Christ names the site of the new into which we are delivered. Discipleship is life lived ‘in the bodily presence of and in community with Jesus’. As Bonhoeffer explains in a striking passage:

For the first disciples the bodily community with Jesus did not mean anything different or anything more than what we have today. Indeed, for us this community is even more definite, more complete, and more certain than it was for them, since we live in full community with the bodily presence of the glorified Lord. . . . The body of Jesus Christ is the ground of our faith and the source of its certainty; the body of Jesus Christ is the one and perfect gift

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Consider yourselves dead to Sin’—Romans 6:11.

through which we received our salvation; the body of Jesus Christ is our new life. It is in the body of Jesus Christ that we are accepted by God from eternity.

(213 / 227)

Three observations might be ventured here. First, Bonhoeffer reiterates that we are in no way ‘followers at second hand’, suggesting in fact that those who know Christ ascended know him better and more clearly as he is. Second, the ‘body of Christ’ first and fundamentally refers to the incarnation and *not* to the church—it is the physical body of Jesus, the human form and flesh of the Nazarene, which is primarily in view. Third, that very body is ‘our new life’: the body of Christ is the Christological reality in terms of which Bonhoeffer treats the soteriological reality of our ‘regeneration’, the gift of the ‘new humanity’.

Christ assumed and bore the ‘new humanity in his body’ and so, Bonhoeffer contends, we are delivered into this new humanity precisely by being delivered into community with him. Pauline talk of a new life ‘with Christ’ and ‘in Christ’ concisely signals this. Realisation of this community rests entirely with Christ: it is only because and as Christ is ‘for us’ that we find a place ‘with’ and ‘in Christ’. As he explains, ‘The body of Jesus Christ is “for us” in the strictest sense of the word—on the cross, in the word, in baptism, and in the Lord’s Supper’ (217 / 231). As this remarks suggests, Bonhoeffer lays particular stress on the necessary service of the sacraments in all this, for they ‘begin and end’ in Christ’s body in a special way (216 / 230).

Only now does Bonhoeffer introduce the idea of the church itself as the body of Christ. Reiterating a theme developed first in *Sanctorum Communio*, he says that the Church ‘*is* the present Christ himself’, the form of his body in the time after the ascension. Distinctive to *Discipleship*, however, is the emphasis on the regenerate humanity of Christ in this regard. The church, he explains, is ‘this new human being’ that Christ himself is by virtue of the Spirit, such that to ‘become a new human being means to come into the church’ (219); individuals ‘put on Christ’ by entering the church. The site and nature of our regeneration is indelibly social—*ecclesial*—in this specific way. And the force and meaning of such regeneration is the same for individual and church: ‘In Christ we no longer live our own lives, but Christ lives his life in us. The life of believers in the church-community is truly *the life of Jesus Christ in them*’ (221 / 235). This is what makes intelligible the idea that discipleship ever takes shape as lives marked by ‘vicarious representative action’—i.e., by suffering others and suffering for others: for in such lives ‘the very life of Christ’ itself ‘seeks to take shape in his members’ (222 / 236). ‘Being for others’—the gracious contradiction of our sinful incurvature—is the form of Christ’s new humanity; so it is also the form of the new regenerate *ecclesial* humanity in which Christ bodies himself forth today.

#### **I.4/ The Visible Church-Community**

The gospel of the incarnation is, for Bonhoeffer ‘no bloodless myth’ and Christ calls disciples to follow him *bodily* in a visible community that occupies space in the world.<sup>14</sup> The ‘churched’ bodies of disciples are bodies that act, work and suffer in community with Jesus and in service to him (226 / 242). Interestingly, the prime mode of the church’s visibility is its proclamation of the Word, that word of divine acceptance and transformation in which ‘Christ is present in the Spirit’ (228 / 244). The sacraments are certainly visible embodiments of Jesus Christ, yet Bonhoeffer sees them directed to the church community itself, rather than outward toward the world as such. This makes clear that by the term ‘visible’ Bonhoeffer chiefly means ‘*public*’. Also ‘public’ in this sense is the church’s ordered and ‘official’ life. For the Christian community testifies before the world, as was confessed at Barmen, ‘with its faith as with its obedience, with its message *as with its order*, that it is solely [Christ’s] property’.<sup>15</sup>

But the centre of gravity in this chapter finally lies, I think, in Bonhoeffer’s insistence that publicity of the church community must press for ‘*living space*’ *in the world*: because the claim of Christ’s community with his disciples is total, it seeks and wins bodily witness in all aspects of everyday life. In pursuing this line, Bonhoeffer looks to recover the radicality of ‘Luther’s path out of the monastery back into the world’ which, as he put it earlier, ‘meant the sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity’ since obedience to Christ was now ubiquitously demanded in all spheres of worldly life (48 / 34-5). The church now ‘invades the world’ with its obedience and its freedom; everything disciples do in the world falls within the scope of the church, the whole body being wherever one its members is. In short, ‘life as a whole is taken up ‘in Christ’ (233-34 / 249-50) and so is no longer left under the dominion of sin, but is beset by the freedom of Christians who live for others with compassion and for justice’s sake in all aspects of existence (237/ 253).

The politics of this are at once radical and conservative. On the one hand the extension of life ‘in Christ’ into the world unhinges all existing relations, changing everything (235 / 251): called out of the world in the midst of the world for the sake of the word, Christian disciples are visibly anarchic vis-à-vis the world (236 / 252).<sup>16</sup> Yet Bonhoeffer affirms that Christians are called to honour worldly authorities and to accept their stations in life not in spite of this but *because of it*. In the language of the Reformers we might say that because Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, his lordship does not compete with worldly claims to authority in a zero sum

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase is from Geoffrey Hill’s poem ‘Genesis’: ‘By blood we live, the hot, the cold / To ravage and redeem the world: / There is no bloodless myth will hold’, in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Article III of the Barmen Theological Declaration, see note 4 above.

<sup>16</sup> ‘All the laws of this world have lost their binding force. . . the sphere in which brothers and sisters are loved with Christian love is subject to Christ: it is no longer subject to the world’ (236 / 252).

game, but rather transcends them. Obedience to Christ is angular to worldly obedience because different in kind, but it is not its simple opponent. Bonhoeffer suggests that the mere overturning of worldly structures and forms of life is, as it were, not enough to express the genuine depth of God's saving revolution, 'God's new ordering of all things through Jesus Christ' (238/ 254-55). Rather 'the world rules; [but] Christians serve' and this 'unworldly' service publically attests a freedom from secular constraint more radical and thoroughgoing than any other, manifesting also the hope that Christ's triumph over the powers will be manifest soon (239-40; 244). In this they live as members of the body of Christ, exercising their new humanity in order publically to contradict and call time on the world from within the world. Like the One they follow who was not 'of this world', Christians live into the world 'as if not', they live '*meontologically*' (as it were) as patient participants in Christ own revolutionising of *all things*.<sup>17</sup> This politics suffers the world with an uncanny freedom that continually attests that 'the present form of this world is passing away' (1 Corinthians 7:31).

## **II.5/ The Saints**

What we've been describing might well be considered the politics of sanctification, as Bonhoeffer sees it, a politics in which everyday existence is 'made strange' in witness to the Christian 'separation from the world in expectation of Christ's coming again' (259 / 275). The separation of the church from the world is the work of divine rectification (justification '*away* from sin' into God's righteousness) and sanctification (its preservation in that righteousness). As Bonhoeffer explains, both aspects belong together as 'both gifts have the same content, namely, community with Christ' (259 / 275). It is a point of particular emphasis that sanctification is the work of the Spirit to hold, 'lock' and 'secure disciples 'in Christ' unto the end: Bonhoeffer largely eschews the language of growth or progress in holiness in favour of the language of preservation and perdurance in community with Christ, who simply is our righteousness. Separated out by the salutary call to discipleship, Christians now struggle to prevent the church community from lapsing back into the world, to own and not betray the gift of community with Christ's body (262 / 278). If it means anything in this context, growth in maturity means acknowledging that one's disposition to sin is ever more fully being overcome by the Spirit who effectively presses Christ's saving promise upon us.

Bonhoeffer suggests that ecclesial *discipline* has its place just here, commending the practices of self-scrutiny and personal confession of sin, community admonition, even temporary

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<sup>17</sup> For elaboration of this idea of life in the world 'as if not' as a fundamental determination of Christian faith, see Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), especially chapter 1, 'Living "As if Not": Messianic Becoming or the Practice of Nihilism', 17-37.

‘pedagogical’ exclusion from the congregation for the sake of repentance. But the predominant theme here is the essential place of ‘good works’ as the aim and ‘goal’ of Christian existence for which community with Christ has prepared us (277-80 / 293-96). Faith, as Luther said, ‘is a busy, active, mighty thing’.<sup>18</sup> We might say that Bonhoeffer understands that sanctification is always sanctification *unto service*—disciples are gathered, upheld and sent by the Word that is Jesus Christ ‘for good works’, i.e., for the sake of those things which God will accomplish through them. Whether and how what we do amounts to such good service is, Bonhoeffer suggests, hidden from us. Rather, the situation is ever this:

God alone knows our good works, while we know only God’s good work and listen to God’s command. We journey under God’s grace, we walk in God’s commandments, and we sin. . . but we have faith and trust that “the one who began the *good work* in us will bring to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6). (279 / 296)

It is in the church that disciples learn of God’s good work on their behalf, it is in the church that disciples are addressed by God’s command and receive direction, and it is in the church that disciples are renewed in their hope that their service may not be unprofitable in virtue of their community with Christ.

## **II.6/ The Image of God**

The final short section of Part II treats of the renewal of the image of God in us as the *telos* of salvation, what is traditionally called ‘glorification’. Bonhoeffer’s distinctive themes are all on display here once again: the business of the restoration of the image of God in us is total and ‘encompasses our whole existence’; the hope of this transformation lies solely in the One who came low to save, bearing himself the image of God anew, namely Jesus Christ; we do not change ourselves into the image of God by pursuing an ideal, rather, we are changed into the image only as Christ’s own form—incarnate, crucified and rise—‘takes shape within us’; and once again our proper action amounts to simple discipleship, a following after the living Christ who goes before us in word and sacrament, forgiving and directing. Situated within the church community, the horizon of the disciples’ eschatological attention is thus filled with entirely with Christ. As Bonhoeffer concludes, “The life of Jesus Christ here on earth has not yet concluded. Christ continues to live in it the lives of his followers. To describe this reality we must not speak

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, ‘Preface’ to his commentary on Romans, in *Luther’s Works* volume 35, edited by J. Pelikan, et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 370.

about our Christian life but about the true life of Jesus Christ in us. “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20)’ (286-87 / 303).

### **III/ Concluding Remarks**

In this paper I have tried to set forth something of the importance of *Discipleship*’s often overlooked ‘B-side’ and perhaps also suggest something of its provocation. On Bonhoeffer’s account nothing would be more wrongheaded than to imagine that renewal of the churches would come from the strenuous cultivation of individual discipleship as such. There simply is no genuine discipleship outwith and without the church: the community of Christians is not ancillary or supplemental to personal discipleship in any sense; it is rather essential, indeed its very condition of possibility. Not every ecclesiology would require such a claim but a properly *evangelical* ecclesiology does so. For, as Bonhoeffer contends, discipleship is an *ecclesial* reality because the Christian congregation is the ordinary locus of the accepting and commanding address of the living Lord, its witness and instrument. This is why the struggle for discipleship in his day was inextricably bound up with the confessional and practical struggle for the true church.

This conviction is built into the very structure of Bonhoeffer’s book itself: the interrelation of its two parts signals that there can be no intentional recovery of personal discipleship (Part I) apart from equally deep investment in the understanding and renewal of the church and its ministry (Part II). It is a work of Christ’s continued self-humbling that he should tether the promise of his saving presence to the fragile preaching, sacramental practice and communal life of our congregations. But if there is no discipleship without church, all the more so is there is no church with Christ, God’s Word of saving promise and gracious command for us. For Bonhoeffer, to speak of the church is fundamentally to speak of Christ the Lord who is eloquently present *pro nobis* today in the power of the Spirit, calling, forgiving and directing disciples still, constituting them in his body. All of faith’s gravity and excitement lie finally in fidelity to the Word whose creature the church is and remains.

It was Bonhoeffer’s conviction that Christian truth is concrete in that it is at once Christ-bound and time-bound. It is the latter because it is the former. That Christian truth is time-bound is a function of our creatureliness, yes; but, for Bonhoeffer, it all the more a function of the reality of Christ’s lively, articulate, rectifying, and commanding presence in every present, the one voice to which the church can and must harken in life and in death (Barmen I). On the promise of his vital presence and address turns the hope for our churches, hope for the clarity of their witness, and hope for the integrity and vibrancy of their common discipleship. It is an

exhausting and desperate affair to wrestle with the challenges of the contemporary Christian life outwith this promise. And yet, it is all-too easy to do so by effectively placing ‘ourselves outside the living presence of Christ’ in the very way we formulate and confront the pressing questions of our era. Bonhoeffer would remind us that we must not do so in ways that ‘refuse to take seriously that Jesus Christ is not dead but alive and still speaking to us today . . . in bodily form and with his word’ in the preaching and sacraments of the church (201-2 / 215). For the sake of discipleship we must be in earnest about the church; for the sake of the church, we must be deadly and joyfully in earnest about Christ. To order our attention in this way is itself an act of discipleship, since, as Bonhoeffer contends, ‘the followers look only to the one whom they follow’ (288 / 304).