The authority of discipleship

An approach to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount

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When we think of what defines our faith as Christians, we immediately think of those acts that constitute our being toward God in Christ. Discipleship, our fellowship with Christ, prompts us to regard the world with the loving compassion that we are taught by the Spirit and which moves us to take action against and stand witness to the many injustices suffered in this world. Jesus' call to discipleship in ministry is a call to action, a call to serve others and to enable others to see, recognise, and obey the will of God. We rarely pause to think that reflecting on the means of our response to this call is likewise an expression of faith. Critical reflection—as it is needed for preparing to read the biblical text in devotion, crafting a sermon, or producing commentary to help others in their approach to and understanding of the biblical material—is a crucial act of service and a dimension of faith.

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And yet, in writing exegesis we do more than consider where we are in relation to a biblical passage; we position ourselves as intermediaries between the text and the listeners to whom we offer the text in exposition. We will be perceived as authorities *of* the text, when in fact we need to assert our fellowship *with* the text as a critical act of obedience *to* the text. We are at once at a distance from the biblical source that we seek to elucidate as well as the embodiment of that text as we live in response to it, pronounce it in the sermon, or write of it in commentary. In our attempt to convey its meanings, our own context becomes increasingly important. To acknowledge our critical distance from the biblical text is not to deny our situation in faith; we find ourselves doubly involved with the biblical text in our role as disciples.

Commentary's secondary status

In the introduction to *The Cost of Discipleship*, an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) shows a clear awareness of this political dimension to our response in faith. Faced with a society indoctrinated to follow the example of Abraham's "blind" obedience to God exemplified in the story of the binding of Isaac (characterised by the Nazis as an act of unthinking submissiveness), Bonhoeffer uses rhetoric that is at once uncomfortably close to the Nazi propaganda he seeks to displace and at the same time directs our attention to a different understanding of the task of interpretation which cannot deny its faith perspective. He draws our attention to remaining obedient to our own call, which requires us to reflect critically on both the biblical context and our own, in order to convey the biblical text to other readers. In a provocative phrase Bonhoeffer asserts: "If we start asking questions, posing problems, and offering interpretations, we are not doing his word. . . . However vehemently we assert our faith, and our fundamental recognition of his word, Jesus still calls it 'not-doing.'. . . The word we had was not Christ's, but a word we had wrested from him and made our own by reflecting on it instead of doing it."[1]

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What then, does a faith-position look like for the issue of commentary? How are we to discuss the biblical narrative in view of our own discipleship? As text, commentary needs to establish its secondary status; it needs to follow its source text before it can claim to lead others to the word that is Christ's. The contentious issue for writing commentary—a reflective exercise, over against an immediate response to reading the scriptures within the context of our daily decision making, or as liturgical response to the sermon—is our need for understanding, which is largely informed by our historical situation. Considering both the context from which the call into discipleship arose in the biblical narrative (which marks the biblical material out as Word of God) and our own sense of calling (as it is situated in relation to an interpretation of the Bible) focuses our writing of commentary on a different purpose from that of the Gospels. Bonhoeffer differentiates the

scriptural passage and the commentary in a manner equally applicable to the difference between academic commentary and religious sermon: biblical text and sermon hold an active relationship to the presence of the Spirit, which lends authority to interpretations given expression in faith. The commentary, as analytical critical discourse, does not aim for such (direct) identification; its distance however *reflects* the moment of recognition present to faith as active reality indicated in the source text. The commentary thus offers up a new context for the biblical text, which invites the renewing presence of the Word of God; that is, it calls for renewed proclamation of the Word. To expand on this notion I offer a reading of the context in which Bonhoeffer produced his commentary-text and the relationship this contextual reading brings to the use of biblical commentary and our interpretations and expressions of faith.

A reading of Bonhoeffer's context

According to Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer, "both the theme and the underlying thesis of *The Cost of Discipleship* were already fully evolved before 1933, but it is to that year that the book owes its single-minded concentration."[2] Thus, Bethge emphasises a critical moment in history that was to be of crucial importance to political culture in the positioning of each individual as well as economical and institutional bodies. From the ensuing German church struggle borne out of Hitler's rise to power, the question of the churches' political annexation led to the formation of the Confessing Church and raised church-political questions about training, examination, and ordination of new ministers separate from the control of the National Church and the SA.[3]

Bonhoeffer, who until 1933 taught at the University of Berlin—his Christology lectures there served as basis for substantial parts of *The Cost of Discipleship*—left Germany for a pastorate in London. While he was out of the country, the 1934 synod at Barmen was part of an ecumenical attempt to maintain dialogue between Protestant confessions in a time of struggle; its declaration[4] marked the first (theological) step toward a clear dissociation from Nazi ideology and toward the foundation of the Confessing Church, in whose service Bonhoeffer was to return to

Germany in order to build a preacher's seminary at Zingst, before it resettled in Finkenwalde in 1935. While the demands of the Finkenwälder community delayed progress on *The Cost of Discipleship*, the enthusiasm of Bonhoeffer's students and the experiences he gathered during this time also shaped the book.[5] As of December 1935, the Fifth Enabling Act, dealing with the organisation of the churches, outlawed the Confessing Church,[6] with the eventual result that the Gestapo closed the seminary in 1937.

Bethge's statement that discipleship "opposes mass credos and 'world movements,' because it is personal commitment,"[7] makes it hard to appreciate Haddon Willmer's warning that *The Cost of Discipleship* is not to be read "essentially as political resistance literature."[8] Bonhoeffer's book seems so naturally to fall in line with a cry against Hitler's totalitarian aspirations and the rhetoric of his propaganda machine. Rhetorically estranging to a postwar reader, the foreword's explicit mention of the renewed importance of the Bible for the church in its *struggle*[9] marks Bonhoeffer's keen awareness of his context and audience. Toward the close of the foreword, the statement *"Nachfolge ist Freude"* ("discipleship is joy")[10]—mimicking *Kraft durch Freude* ("strength through joy"), a Nazi organisation devoted to fostering the *völkisch* (national, populist)[11] spirit by offering social activities—seems to ask us to understand discipleship as a decisive counter-image to the Führer's encouragement of a culture of *Mitläufertum*[12] (groupthink).

Bonhoeffer's commentary exposes Hitler's authority as fake, and his image as political saviour is seen as a thin cover for the abuse of his status which demands not faithful obedience but a blind obedience correlative with "cheap grace."

I do not mean to reduce *The Cost of Discipleship* to resistance literature, but where Christian discipleship is understood as countercultural, the question of obedience remains a legally, ethically, and theologically contentious point for faith. The power and authority of Hitler here are exposed as fake, by their *völkische* attainability, and Hitler's image as political saviour is seen as a thin cover for the abuse and illegitimacy of his status and position which demands not faithful—in Bonhoeffer's use, "single-minded" (or meek)[13]—obedience, but a blind obedience (*Kadavergehorsam*) correlative with "cheap grace."[14]

"Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living Word of God, in fact, a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God."[15] Keeping in mind the allusions to the leader principle in the sense of obedience propagated by the Nazis, the "mass movement mentality" disallows a vision from beyond the *Volk*. Any such vision from beyond is a threat to a totalitarian social order. The costly grace of Jesus does not invite *Gleichschaltung* or a *völkische* mentality; each of Jesus' disciples has been called *personally*—out of the crowd—and their community rests on perpetual mediation by Christ—a point repeatedly foregrounded by Bonhoeffer. Cheap grace—that is, grace that has no power to transform, because it has failed to be recognised as revelation—is contrasted with the *living* Word, and with the *Menschwerdung* (incarnation: literally, "becoming human"). I prefer the German term here, for two reasons: First, it uses not the image of the flesh but of the human, emphasising a social over a material/biological aspect. Second, it parallels the active element that *living* seeks to emphasise in relation to the Word, which the becoming (*werden*) of *Menschwerdung* entails. Thus, costly grace is set apart from the conceptually stale—purely ideational—and lifeless character of cheap grace, and it calls for active engagement. Already in his opening move, Bonhoeffer has drawn on the dialectic between call and response in order to emphasise the participatory aspect, which is, however, bound to an opening move by God. Grace must be given in order to be witnessed. The sacred text remains the original which the commentary does not and cannot replace but certainly invites us to emulate. This encounter that transformed the disciples, the revelation that Jesus was the Christ, needs to be substantiated in its textual representation.

Commentary recontextualises its source text

Grace stands in direct relationship to the proclamation of the Word of God, whereas the commentary does not. By definition, the Word of God is characterized by transformative power—culminating in the incarnation of Christ—and as such issues in revelation: in the presence of Christ, as in the presence of the Holy Spirit in preaching.[16] The Word of God is not itself "just" text, or sacred text, but sacred-text-in-context (*viva vox dei)*, a testimony. The historical situation of revelation, which is tied up

with its witness, cannot be regained in commentary but only reproduced in preaching. Bonhoeffer acknowledges this dynamic, saying that "we cannot identify ourselves altogether [straightforwardly] with those whom Jesus called, for they themselves are part and parcel of the Word of God in the Scriptures, and therefore part of the message."[17] Revelation is only revelation when it is viewed in relation to those affected by it, those transformed under its work. The commentary, at one step removed from this scene, can reappropriate neither the original historical nor its kerygmatic event. "If . . . history is the nexus between the historical-theological content and the literary-historical form of the gospels, literature is the nexus between the theological-spatial message and the historical medium."[18]

Whereas in preaching there is a claim to the immediacy of the Word of God in the light of ministry, the commentary has no such claims. The commentary provides a recontextualisation of its source text. It is not just an analysis or a critical interpretation but a secondary context. It presents the textual representation of the event of revelation without also laying claim to its revelatory, transformative power. The commentary then mediates not the moment of revelation but the moment of recognition of the biblical witnesses. The realisation of their role as disciples through the calling of God's grace is the model by which the commentary is transformed by its source text to aspire to be the textual equivalent of discipleship.

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Thus, methodologically, the commentary requires obedience toward its sacred counterpart without appropriating its propositions. The commentary's analytic cannot aim for the revelatory event without presupposing its meaning, and thus objectifying the event, rendering it lifeless and therefore meaningless. Exegesis in its critical analytic cannot faithfully deconstruct the kerygma without presupposing full knowledge of—or being party to—the divine agency that discloses it. Mark Alan Bowland's work offers an insightful reading of the case of divine agency at work, as an occasion where prejudices and pre-understandings have to be negated or suspended in order

to invite new meanings to the terms by which we validate our situations.[19] An agreed method—however self-reflexive of the influences and context of the investigator and the investigated—cannot claim full validity in matters of divinity, because it cannot find objective criteria by which to (exhaustively) discern the work of the divine without assuming a position of superiority in critical analysis: our acts of worship must also speak for us. Within a faith context, such as preaching, this speaking for us happens in prayer and dedication of the sermon in its appeal to the work of the Spirit. We cannot take God seriously as a possible presence if we evade God's activity by calculating God's agency prior to meeting God in worship. To Bonhoeffer, this dynamic is substantiated in the disciples' recognition of grace in Jesus' call. Discipleship as textual and interpretive method of the commentary must assume a position alongside its source text. When discipleship assumes this position, the commentary avoids rendering the Word a lifeless object, devoid of grace. It obediently submits first and foremost to the text as text.

What a look at Bonhoeffer's historical context has brought to the fore is his keen awareness of the dangers of ideologically indoctrinated readings, which makes his aversion to reflection and interpretation stand out as bewildering. Reception history strongly emphasises the ethical and theological dimensions of *The Cost of Discipleship*, which, again, is largely informed by interest in the historical milieu Bonhoeffer was facing, and his unique testament in writing. Discipleship, as contextual feature, reveals its interpretive quality to both biblical and critical context—in theological discourse and historical reality—by transferring between their concerns, thus opening the commentary text toward the grace presented in the call of Christ. Grace is the source of authority underlying all acts of faith—and also interpretation.

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As Bonhoeffer chose the commentary form, approaching the situation of faith from a nonliturgical, albeit still theologically informed position, discipleship serves as a means to contextualise the commentary's critical perspective from the perspective of faith. Thus, methodologically the commentary requires the

recognition of biblical authority in a living faith's testament to the Word of God, while its position alongside the biblical narrative opens the commentary toward the recognition of revelation as an expansion of the Bible's context which transforms the commentary into the witness of its own representative status.

Notes

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, revised and unabridged 7th edition, translated by R. H. Fuller, revised by Irmgard Booth (London: SCM Press, 1962 [1959]), 176.

[2] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, translated by Eric Mosbacher et al., edited by Edwin Robertson (London: Collins, 1970), 375.

[3] Otto Dudzus and Jürgen Henkys, eds., *Illegale Theologenausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935–1937*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 14 (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1996), 3. The SA—Sturmabteilung (Stormtroopers, also known as Brownshirts)—was the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi party.

[4] The Barmen confession is a "six-point declaration adopted by Evangelical (Protestant) Church leaders opposed to the German Reich Church at their first Synod held in Barmen, Westphalia, from 29th to 31st May 1934. Without mentioning Nazism, the Barmen Confession or Declaration categorically rejected any ideological addition to the revelation of the word of God in Jesus Christ. It did not, however, directly address the 'Jewish question'" (John W. De Gruchy, "The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," chapter 5 in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], xx–xxi). As a first reaction and programmatic coordination of a Christian position opposed to the "Brown Synod," which established the submission of the national church under Nazi governance, this event, for all its merits, did not have a great effect on the course for *Gleichschaltung* (the process by which the Nazi regime established totalitarian control over all aspects of society), as Klaus Scholder shows (Klaus Sholder, *The Year of Disillusionment: 1934 Barmen and Rome*, vol. 2 of *The Churches and the Third Reich*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1988), 124ff.); however, it marks the critical awareness of the theological implications of the political context of the churches.

[5] Editor's epilogue, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, edited by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, 3rd ed. of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 4, edited by Eberhard Bethge, Ernst Feil, et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 321.

[6] Dudzus and Henkys, *Illegale Theologenausbildung*, 5.

[7] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 373.

[8] Haddon Willmer, "Costly Discipleship," chapter 9 in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. De Gruchy, 173.

[9] Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 21; Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 29.

[10] Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 24; Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 32.

[11] I follow Scholder's explanation: The word *völkisch* "has overtones of nation and race as well as 'people,' and was a key term in the racist ideology of the Third Reich" (Klaus Sholder, *Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions 1918–1934*, vol. 1 of *The Churches and the Third Reich*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1987), viii.

[12] Describing the attitude of uncritically aligning oneself to a goal, doctrine, group, etc., with the immediate prospect of gaining an opportunity.

[13] Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 69.
[14] Ibid., 35.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Press, 1990), 1096–97.
[17] Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 73.
[18] Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 132–33.
[19] Mark Alan Bowland, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 22.

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