

Dietrich Bonhoeffer — The Christocentric Life

1.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born in Breslau, Germany on February 4th, 1906, worked with the "Confessional Church" during much of WWII. The Confessional Church was made up of those Christians who would not bow to the god of fascism and the Nazi state religion. Because of his stand, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo on April 5th, 1943, and died a martyr's death in Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9th, 1945, only weeks before Germany surrendered.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), Bonhoeffer laid out, in the context of a modern world gone mad, principles which go back to St. John's gospel. Not only is Christ the center of human existence, the center of history, and the center between God and nature, but, if we are to be like Christ, he must be at the center of our cognitive and perceptual experience (cf. Bonhoeffer's *Christ the Center*).

Bonhoeffer discusses the Christocentric life in the larger context of his distinction between *cheap grace* and *costly grace*. Briefly, his notion of cheap grace is the idea of "religion" or religious practice without God, without Christ, lifeless, and filled with egocentric striving. Thus, cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. [*Discipleship*, 44-5]

Costly grace on the other hand is what Bonhoeffer calls "religionless Christianity." Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it one will gladly go and sell all that they have. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all their goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a person will pluck out the eye which causes them to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves their nets and follows Christ. Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which one must *knock*.

Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs one their life, and it is grace because it gives one the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: "You were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God. [*Discipleship*, 45]

Keep in mind that we have here a fine-line distinction. It is often easy to muddle the notions of grace and the costly life of "the disciple working out their salvation" (similarly with faith and works; cf. James 1:19-27 and 2:26). Rather than mutually exclusive—that difficult tension between works and grace—they stand in a tightly woven chronological relationship. That is, because of God's grace in the sacrificial work of Christ...costly discipleship inexorably follows. Looking back to Luther, Bonhoeffer explains,

Luther had taught that humankind cannot stand before God, however religious their works and ways may be, because at bottom they are always seeking their own interests. In the depth of his misery, Luther had grasped by faith the free and unconditional forgiveness of all his sins. That experience taught him that this grace had cost him his very life, and must continue to cost him the same price day by day. So far from dispensing him from discipleship, this grace only made him a more earnest disciple. When he spoke of grace, Luther always implied as a corollary that it cost him his own life, the life which was now for

the first time subjected to the absolute obedience of Christ. Only so could he speak of grace. Luther had said that grace alone can save; his followers took up his doctrine and repeated it word for word. But they left out its invariable corollary, the obligation of discipleship. [*Discipleship*, 49-50]

With this distinction in mind, then, Bonhoeffer moves into what I call a *Christocentric epistemology*, the principle of perceiving all things through Christ's eyes, with the mind of Christ. The call of Christ (as for Levi) must be followed by the response of obedience, obedience unto worship, obedience unto death! Mark writes, "And he [Jesus] went out again by the seashore; and all the multitude were coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the *son* of Alpheus sitting in the tax office, and he said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he [Alpheus] rose and followed him" (Mark 2:13-14, NASB).

To be more than mere human striving, obedience and discipleship of necessity requires "putting on the mind of Christ." And for the believer, this requirement can only be accomplishment by Christ himself, through the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than through any effort on the part of the individual Christian (see John 14-17). Bonhoeffer puts it this way.

By virtue of [Christ's] incarnation he has come between a person and their natural life. There can be no turning back, for Christ bars the way. By calling us he has cut us off from all immediacy with the things of this world. He wants to be the center, through him alone all things shall come to pass. He stands between us and God, and for that very reason he stands between us and all other persons and things. *He is the Mediator*, not only between God and humankind, but between one person and another, between a person and reality. Since the whole world was created through him and unto him (*John* 1:3; *1 Corinthians* 8:6; *Heb.* 1:2), he is the sole Mediator in the world....

The call of Jesus teaches us that our relation to the world has been built on an illusion. All the time we thought we had enjoyed a direct relation with others and things. This is what had hindered us from faith and obedience. Now we learn that in the most intimate relationships of life, in our kinship with father and mother, brothers and sisters, in married love, and in our duty to the community, direct relationships are impossible. Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships nor in the ties with their nation nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through Jesus, through his word, and through our following him. To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves....

For the Christian the only God-given realities are those they receive from Christ. What is not given us through the incarnate Son is not given us by God. What has not been given me for Christ's sake, does not come from God. When we offer thanks for the gifts of creation we must do it through Jesus Christ, and when we pray for the preservation of this life by the grace of God, we must make our prayer for Christ's sake. Anything I cannot thank God for the sake of Christ, I may not thank God for at all; to do so would be sin. The path, too, to the "God-given reality" of my fellow-man or woman with whom I have to live leads through Christ, or it is a blind alley. We are separated from one another by an unbridgeable gulf of otherness and strangeness which resists all our attempts to overcome it by means of natural associations or emotional or spiritual union. There is no way from one person to another. However loving and sympathetic we try to be, however sound our psychology, however frank and open our behaviour, we cannot penetrate the incognito of the other person, for there are no direct relationships, not even between soul and soul. Christ stands between us, and we can only get into touch with our neighbours through Christ. That is why intercession is the most promising way to reach our

neighbours, and corporate prayer, offered in the name of Christ, the purest form of fellowship....

The same Mediator who makes us individuals is also the founder of a new fellowship. Jesus stands in the center between my neighbour and myself. He divides, but he also unites. Thus although the direct way to our neighbour is barred, we now find the new and only real way to our neighbor—the way which passes through the Mediator. [*Discipleship*, 95-100]

Because of the fall, human beings are separated from all reality outside of themselves, ultimately trapped within their own mental states, what philosopher Ralph Barton Perry aptly called the *egocentric predicament*. Through Christ, these isolating effects of the fall began to be overcome through regeneration and the renewing of our minds. Drawing his discussion of Christocentricity to a close, Bonhoeffer directs our attention to a passage from Mark.

Peter began to say to him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that they shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first, will be last; and the last, first." [*Mark* 10:28-31]

2.

Finally, we go to St. John's Gospel for an understanding of how God has already begun leading us as believers into the Christocentric life, how, as born again by God's grace, through faith, into the household of God, we have already the means of *epistemic Christocentricity*! To begin at the beginning,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [*John* 1:1-5, NIV]

Now we see who Christ is, the *Logos*, the Word incarnate, and what he has done, created all that there is. After a brief exposition of the deity of Christ, where Jesus himself openly proclaims his oneness with God the Father (10:25-39), we then go on to the center of the whole gospel as it affects the life of the believer, the mystic union we have with Christ. Says Jesus,

"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.... Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.... I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. [*John* 14:15-24 + 16:33 NIV]

And in Jesus Christ's "high-priestly prayer," he continues on the same theme.

"As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." [John 17:18-23, NIV]

The metaphysical reality for us is *oneness with Christ Jesus*, through the work and witness of the Holy Spirit, and thus—what we humans have sought after since our beginnings—oneness with the divine being, our Father God. It is our recognition of this metaphysical fact which is the basis for the epistemological fact and necessity of *our seeing and understanding the world through Christ's eyes*, as God, the creator and sustainer of the world, sees and understands and knows the world. We then walk as Christ leads us. This means depending on Jesus as the blind person depends on a seeing-eye dog. We may think our neighbor needs only sympathy when in fact they need exhortation and stern though loving counsel; Christ alone knows such a person's inner life. With our own perceptions of things, there are a million factors that we can unknowingly get wrong. With Christ as our eyes and our ears, like the radar of a ship in stormy seas, we can depend on his perfect leading, on his judgment calls.

Let Jesus Christ be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path. We don't have to figure out our neighbor, discerning whether what they tell us is as it truly is with them. Jesus Christ knows our neighbor, co-worker, father or mother, spouse; Jesus Christ knows them intimately, compassionately, and completely, their problems, their fears and hopes, their deepest thoughts. "For who has known the mind (*noûn*) of the Lord, that they should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16)! Christ within us, the hope of glory:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,	I bind unto myself the Name,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,	The strong Name of the Trinity;
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,	By invocation of the same,
Christ to comfort and restore me,	The Three in One and One in Three.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,	Of whom all nature hath creation;
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,	Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Christ in hearts of all that love me,	Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.	Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Amen.

[ST. PATRICK, 372-466AD, *EPISCOPAL HYMNAL*, 1940, 268, vv. 6+7]

Note: all quotations from *Cost Of Discipleship* are from the English translation edition, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1963, and edited by K. D. Kragen for pronounal gender accuracy, based on the seminal text *The Handbook Of Nonsexist Writing*, by Casey Miller & Kate Swift, 1980.

©2013. K. D. Kragen
kdkragen.com