

Crossless Christianity

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who lived from 1906 to 1945. During his lifetime, many churches gave in to Nazism, and supported Adolph Hitler, seeing him more like a saviour than the demonic man he was. Bonhoeffer refused to support Hitler and actively opposed Nazism. He helped many Jews escape to Switzerland, and was arrested for doing so. Many of his wealthy friends tried to get Bonhoeffer to recant his strident teachings, so as to be released, but he would not. He was held at Flossenburg concentration camp. On the 9th of April 1945, just 10 days before the American troops arrived to liberate the camp, Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis by hanging.

Bonhoeffer was ambiguous on some points of doctrine, and his plots against Hitler seem to fall short of Romans 13. I am hesitant to call his understanding of the gospel orthodox. Nevertheless, his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* has been loved by many Christians since his death, especially since he was a man who was willing to pay the ultimate price. He wrote these words about cheap grace: "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Bonhoeffer was willing to sign his name under those words with his own blood. Nearly seventy years later, we live in a world saturated with cheap grace. Ours is a Christianity that wants all the privileges, and none of the responsibilities; all the advantages, and none of the sufferin; all the rewards, but none of the sacrifice. We have shaped modern Christianity after our idea of the world: the world is a big mall, with lots of things to buy and enjoy, and the customer is king. So we mould Christianity like that: We are customers, Christ is the mega-mall, faith is the credit-card, Jesus is another means to my own ends - He supplies me with Heaven when I die, joy while I'm here, and permission to do what I want in the name of grace and Christian freedom.

It is very simply crossless Christianity. It is a Christianity that might sing about the cross, wear it around their necks, but they have completely emptied this cross of its meaning: death, suffering, sacrifice. It has become a sentimental symbol of what someone else did for me, but which I fortunately do not have to be involved in myself.

This is no new idea. It is an idea that was shared by Jesus' own disciples. The Twelve were carrying

in their hearts an idea of Jesus that was partial, incomplete, and therefore, false. In this passage Jesus confronts crossless Christianity. And it comes right on the heels of a powerful confession by Peter.

It's vital that we understand the whole Gospel, not half of it. It's vital, in an era of crossless Christianity and cheap grace, that we hear the words of Jesus describing the real thing. So as we study this passage we'll see Peter's Confession – a confession that at least 1 billion people today would agree with, followed by Peter's Confusion – a confusion that is common in that same 1 billion, which led to Christ's teaching on true discipleship – conscription to a life of sacrifice. How many among those 1 billion understand the whole Gospel, I don't know, but I pray we will, as we study this.

I. The Confession of a Disciple

Mark 8:27-38 ²⁷ Now Jesus and His disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road He asked His disciples, saying to them, "Who do men say that I am?" ²⁸ So they answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ Then He strictly warned them that they should tell no one about Him.

After healing the blind man in Bethsaida, Jesus has taken His disciples about 40 kilometres north to the towns of Caesarea Philippi. This was a beautiful area, known for its waterfalls, rock pools, and lush surroundings. It is in this area that the Transfiguration is going to take place. Remember, Jesus has now finished His ministry in Galilee, and is going to spend these last six months, from October to March, preparing His disciples for His death. This passage is the first clear sign that we have passed the turning point in this Gospel.

Along the way, and probably after a time of prayer, as Luke tells us, Jesus asks His disciples who the average person thinks He is. This would be a proud question for a normal person, but in the case of the Son of God, who you think He is, is a matter of life and death.

The answers show that people have not grasped His message. Some think Elijah – because Malachi predicted Elijah's return, after having gone to heaven without dying. Some think one of the prophets that have risen again. Clearly the population has not accepted His own claims about Himself, pointing out that He is the Son of God, that He fulfils Scripture. A blindness and a hardness is already upon Israel.

But since Jesus is now in the phase of preparing the Twelve, He turns to them, and asks, who do *you* say that I am?

And Simon Peter, ever the spokesman, and the one who rushes in where others fear to tread, makes a remarkable confession: You are the Christ.

Matthew's Gospel fills that out for us – Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".. What does 'Christ' mean? Christ is not Jesus' second name. Christ is simply Greek for 'anointed one', which is the Greek word for *Messiah*. Peter is saying, you are the promised Messiah, and you are God in flesh.

Now that is a remarkable confession. Who else was seeing those twin truths: Jesus is the Messiah and Saviour, *and* He is the Eternal Son, in human form? According to the disciples, just about

nobody. So how did Peter come to see that?

Jesus went on to tell Peter how he knew that. human reasoning, human ability had not revealed this truth to Peter, but the Father in heaven. Then Jesus went on to say that the church would be built on Peter's confession of Jesus as Christ, as God, and Messiah. In fact, the origin of the fish symbol for Christians is that the Greek word for fish is *ichthys*, and the five letters of the Greek word formed an acronym 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'. This was the confession the church was built on, and Peter became the key that unlocked the church to Jews and Gentiles.

There are many, many people today, who would agree with Peter's confession in principle: Jesus is the Saviour. Jesus is the Son of God.

This is a monumental confession, but surprisingly, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. Why? The reason is that they did not fully comprehend all that this meant. And the next thing that happened proves it.

II. The Confusion of a Disciple

³¹ And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke this word openly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. ³³ But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Since they properly understand His identity, Jesus now, for the first time, begins to explain to them what is going to happen. He will go to Jerusalem, suffer greatly, be rejected by all the leaders of Israel, and its spiritual representatives, and be murdered, and after three days, rise again. The word *must* is used here, translating a Greek word that means necessary, obligation. Jesus was teaching them this had to happen, there was no other way. He did not hide this message from them, He spoke it plainly and openly.

Now you'd think that the continual rejection by the Pharisees; the indifference by the people might have hinted to the disciples that Jesus was not heading for glory in Jerusalem. But they had not put it together. They were shocked.

Once again, Peter, the spokesman, the representative, does the bold thing, and it couldn't be bolder. He takes Jesus aside. He's going to privately set Jesus straight. The word for *rebuke* means to warn, to censure, even to threaten. Jesus has obviously got it wrong, missed the plan. Perhaps He's just discouraged, and is speaking in a gloomy way, so Peter rebukes Him. Matthew tells us what he said: "God forbid! This shall never happen to you!" You are destined to rule, not be murdered. You have the power to destroy Your opponents. This is ridiculous! Stop talking like that. Messiah comes to a throne, to a glorious kingdom, not to suffering and death.

I imagine the eleven, and the other people who are part of the group, quietly watching Peter remonstrating with Jesus, seeing the hand gestures, hearing a few words floating over the wind. They know what Peter is saying to Jesus. Perhaps they are also a bit bewildered. I think one in particular is upset - Judas. This is not what he signed up for. He wants to be on the winning side. He wants the convenience and comfort that comes with being one of Messiah's generals and captains. This talk of suffering and death sounds all wrong.

Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him privately, but now Jesus turns around to look at His disciples

and He rebukes Peter publicly. He is doing so to rebuke everyone who agrees with Peter's sentiment. And He says, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

What a stinging rebuke. And this comes right after Peter has been called the rock, and the one blessed by the Father. From that height of confessing the truth about Christ, he is now called Satan! Why?

It is not because Satan is speaking through Peter. It is because Peter is taking up a satanic position. He is agreeing with Satan's plan for the Messiah. Do you remember when Satan tempted Jesus? He called on Jesus to throw Himself down from the Temple, and be instantly acclaimed as Messiah. He tempted Him to take all the kingdoms of the world by simply worshipping at Satan's feet. Satan called on Jesus to seize power apart from the path His father had set out. He called on Him to go after the crown without the cross; to be the King without being the Lamb; to be the Sovereign without first being the Servant. This is Satan's mindset, Satan's attitude. Satan does not set his mind, or attitude to favour God's ways or will, but his own. Satan sets himself in opposition to God's plan. Peter, by rebuking Jesus, by calling on Him to be a crossless Messiah, is doing exactly the same thing - he is thinking selfishly. He is trying to get God to fit around his own agenda, and a crucified Messiah does not fit into Peter's plan for his life.

Jesus will have none of it. It is not enough to confess Jesus is Messiah and Son of God. You need to know what it is to embrace Messiah. So Jesus is going to explain. He is going to explain what it means to sign up with Jesus, to be conscripted into Messiah's army.

III. The Conscription of a Disciple

³⁴ When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ³⁷ "Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels [and will then recompense every man according to his deeds]."

Jesus makes it clear what it means to believe He is Messiah. Remember *Christ* is the Greek for Messiah. What does that make a Christian? A Messiah-one. Each of us who claims Jesus as our Messiah must understand what it means to embrace Him.

Here it is: To follow Jesus is to follow Him where He goes. He is going to suffer and die and rise, and His followers don't get another path and another way. Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."

That doesn't mean that we all die the death Jesus died. That can't happen. Christ died once for sin, and it is finished. We don't die on His cross, or re-crucify Him. But what Jesus says here is that every true disciple of His takes up his cross. In fact, according to the account in Luke, he takes it up daily.

'Self-denial; taking up a cross; losing your life for Christ', are all ways of saying the same thing. A Christian gives up the right to his own life. As Jesus gave up His own life to save others, so the disciple of Christ no longer clings on to his own life. As Christ did not seek His own will, His own glory, His own agenda, so the follower of Christ does the same thing. As Christ poured out His life

for the glory of the Father, so we do that. As Christ embraced shame to complete His mission, so we embrace shame for Christ unashamedly.

Look at these descriptions: *Let him deny himself*. He denies himself rights over his own goals and ambitions and plans. His life is no longer his own. The selfish life, the life lived for one's own glory, the life that the world wants you to live, is refused, it is counted dead.

William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*, summarises the opposite of self-denial. Self affirmation, self-worship, defiant self-rule.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

He takes up his cross and follows. In Christ's day, if you saw someone carrying a cross, he was usually carrying the main crossbar, and he was not alone. He was accompanied by Roman soldiers. Where was he going? To his own death. As Tozer said, there was one thing you knew about a man carrying a cross, and that was that he wasn't coming back again.

So when Jesus says to His disciples that following Him means carrying a cross, what do you think it meant to them? It would have meant the same as if we had heard, take up your electric chair and follow me. Take up your lethal injection and follow me. Take up your gallows and follow me. Take up the instrument of your death, and come and die. A person walking to his own execution no longer has his own life to live. He is still walking and alive, but his independence is gone. My life as I would live it for my self is gone. My life is now one of obeying Christ's commands.

Galatians 2:20 ²⁰ *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*

He gives up his life to gain it.

³⁵ *"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.*

Since the disciple denies self-rule and lives as dead to his own life, he spends his life on Christ and

the Gospel.

The true disciple says, "I will spend up my whole life on God, trusting that this is the best possible use of the life that is no longer mine. I will embrace a life given over to another, trusting that that is how I will find it."

In Jesus' ministry there were several ways He said this to people. To one he said forget about your father's inheritance. To one he said, stop worrying about stability and security. To another he said, stop looking back. To another he said, give up this idol of your wealth.

Henry Martyn, a Cambridge University student, was honoured at only 20 years of age for his achievements in Mathematics. In fact, he was given the highest recognition possible in that field. And yet he felt an emptiness inside. He said that instead of finding fulfillment in his achievements, he had "only grasped a shadow."

After evaluating his life's goals, Martyn sailed to India as a missionary at the age of 24. When he arrived, he prayed, "Lord, let me burn out for you." In the next 7 years that preceded his death, he translated the New Testament into three difficult Eastern Languages.

Jesus then says – what does it profit, if on this side of the equation you get everything this world has, but on that side, you lose your soul in hell?

A young mathematician enjoyed challenging his fellow students to solving difficult maths problems. One day a classmate came to him and challenged him to solve a new problem. The young man was eager, and his friend handed him the problem on a piece of folded-up paper. He left the room and left the proud young mathematician to it.

He opened the paper and instead of finding numbers, he found words. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36, 37). He was disgusted and insulted. He tore up the paper and went back to his books.

But he could not shake off those haunting words. He could not shake off the truth that to gain the world and lose one soul was a foolish and broken equation. The man, under conviction of the Holy Spirit, soon believed in the Lord Jesus, and subsequently became a preacher. His first sermon was from the words "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels"

Then Jesus summarises it with this idea of shame. A person who is still committed to himself does not want to be associated with the suffering, humiliated Jesus. He wants glory now, prosperity now, fame now, honour now. He wants to be admired in the eyes of a generation that is twisted and evil. Jesus says such a person is not following me. Such a person has not denied himself, taken up his cross. Such a person has not given up his life for the sake of Christ and the cross.

And so such a person does not yet know Christ. He is ashamed to be identified with Jesus now when Jesus is humiliated. So there is coming a time when Jesus will be exalted and glorified, and on that day, Jesus will not want to be identified with him. This is not speaking of the person who suffers embarrassment or ridicule at the hands of your friends or family. This does not indict you

because of the fears you may have to own Christ. This indicts the person who disowns Christ, who hides Christ, who will not bring up Christ, or obey Him in business deals, in conversations, in partnerships, in relationships. This one does not want the loss that comes with Christ.

A person may have trusted in the cross, but then expect Christianity to be crossless. We say, Jesus died on the cross for me, so that I didn't have to. Yes, indeed, you and I will never have to face the poured-out anger of God on the cross. But that is not the same as saying, Christians have no cross. In fact, they have a daily cross. It is the power of the cross, and the idea of the cross that must come into everyday living.

I am dead to sin, so I will act like it. I am dead to my own life, so by faith I will act like that. I will renounce claims on my own life. I will renounce my own lordship, and live as if my life belongs entirely to another. I will give up my own name to be called by His name – Christian- Messiah-one. I will embrace the temporary shame of rejection by being unashamed of Christ, rather than being unashamed in front of people by hiding Christ.

Maybe someone says, “This is not what I signed up for when I came to Jesus.” If so, then be reassured, you probably haven't signed up at all. You probably received half a gospel – the half which Peter believed: that Jesus is there to help and glorify you, and fix your problems and take you to Heaven. Without knowing it, you embraced a gospel that does not save, because it leaves you squarely in control of your own life, pleasing self, holding onto your own life.

And if so, then you have not signed up as a conscript for Christ, and you are still free to go. Jesus left it voluntary – if any man wants to come after me. He offered the Twelve the chance: “Will you also go away?” You don't have to follow Christ. Now if you choose to hold onto your own life, Jesus has told you what will happen. If you choose to gain the whole world, but neglect your soul, you know what will happen. If you choose to live for your own reputation, then you know what will happen. But that is a choice Jesus gives you.

What you don't get to choose is what Peter thought of: a crossless Christianity. If you choose Christ, then you don't get to choose the terms. If you follow Christ, then you follow Him on His path – the path of self-denial, counting yourself dead to sin, spending your life on Him, and living for His name.

Why do we do that? Because we want life. It's said that Bonhoeffer's last words before being hanged were, “This is the end – for me, the beginning of life.” A Christian says that, each day. The end of my life, the growth of His. We have come to know grace – and it is not cheap. It's the free, but expensive grace that leads us to willingly give up our lives for Christ.