

# bonhoeffer cost of discipleship

**bonhoeffer cost of discipleship** is a profound theological concept explored in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seminal work, "The Cost of Discipleship." This concept delves into the demands and sacrifices involved in truly following Jesus Christ, contrasting cheap grace with costly grace. Bonhoeffer challenges Christians to consider the radical commitment required, emphasizing obedience, suffering, and self-denial as integral to authentic discipleship. The idea has influenced Christian thought, ethics, and praxis, particularly in contexts of persecution and moral courage. This article will examine the core themes of Bonhoeffer's cost of discipleship, its historical background, theological implications, and its relevance in contemporary Christian life. Additionally, practical applications and critiques of Bonhoeffer's teachings will be discussed to provide a comprehensive understanding of this enduring theological topic.

- Understanding Bonhoeffer's Concept of Discipleship
- The Historical Context of Bonhoeffer's Writings
- Key Themes in The Cost of Discipleship
- Theological Implications of Bonhoeffer's Teachings
- Contemporary Relevance of Bonhoeffer's Cost of Discipleship
- Practical Applications of Bonhoeffer's Doctrine
- Critiques and Challenges to Bonhoeffer's Perspective

## Understanding Bonhoeffer's Concept of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer's cost of discipleship is fundamentally about the radical nature of following Christ. He distinguishes between "cheap grace," which is grace without the cross, and "costly grace," which calls for repentance and obedience. Discipleship, in Bonhoeffer's view, demands a complete surrender to Christ, involving personal sacrifice and a willingness to suffer for one's faith. This concept challenges superficial Christianity and calls believers to authentic commitment that transforms their lives and actions.

## Cheap Grace versus Costly Grace

Bonhoeffer defines cheap grace as grace offered without requiring repentance, without the need for discipleship or the cross. It is grace received as a matter of course, leading to complacency. In contrast, costly grace is the gospel that calls a believer to follow Jesus

wholeheartedly, embracing the demands and potential suffering that come with true discipleship.

## **The Call to Obedience**

Central to the cost of discipleship is the call to obedience. For Bonhoeffer, it is not enough to acknowledge Jesus as Savior; one must obey His teachings and example. Discipleship involves active participation in the life of Christ, which includes humility, service, and often, sacrifice.

## **The Historical Context of Bonhoeffer's Writings**

Bonhoeffer wrote "The Cost of Discipleship" during a turbulent period in German history marked by the rise of Nazism and World War II. His theological insights were deeply influenced by the political realities of his time, including the persecution of the church and the moral challenges posed by the Nazi regime. This context shaped his emphasis on costly grace and the necessity of standing firm in faith, even at great personal risk.

## **The Rise of Nazism and the Church**

During the 1930s, the German church faced intense pressure to conform to Nazi ideology. Bonhoeffer was a vocal critic of the regime, advocating for Christian resistance and ethical accountability. His writings reflect the urgency of living out discipleship in a hostile environment.

## **Bonhoeffer's Role in the Confessing Church**

Bonhoeffer was a leading figure in the Confessing Church, which opposed the Nazi-influenced German Christian movement. His commitment to discipleship included active resistance, which ultimately led to his imprisonment and execution. His personal sacrifice embodies the cost of discipleship he articulated.

## **Key Themes in The Cost of Discipleship**

The Cost of Discipleship is rich with themes that address the nature and demands of following Christ. These themes are critical to understanding Bonhoeffer's message and its application for believers.

## **Discipleship as Following Christ**

Discipleship means literally following Christ's path, imitating His life and teachings. It involves a daily decision to live in accordance with the gospel, prioritizing Christ above all else.

## **Suffering and Sacrifice**

Bonhoeffer highlights that true discipleship often entails suffering. Following Christ may lead to persecution, social rejection, or even death. This suffering is not purposeless but participates in the suffering of Christ Himself.

## **Community and Church**

Discipleship is not an isolated endeavor but takes place within the context of the Christian community. Bonhoeffer stresses the importance of the church as a community of disciples who support and hold each other accountable.

## **Faith and Works**

Bonhoeffer emphasizes the inseparability of faith and obedience. Genuine faith naturally produces works that reflect Christ's teachings, rejecting any notion of salvation by faith alone without transformation.

## **Theological Implications of Bonhoeffer's Teachings**

Bonhoeffer's cost of discipleship carries significant theological weight, challenging prevailing notions of grace, salvation, and Christian ethics.

## **Redefining Grace**

Bonhoeffer's distinction between cheap and costly grace redefines grace as not merely God's unmerited favor but as a call to radical obedience. This redefinition affects how Christians understand salvation and sanctification.

## **Christology and Discipleship**

The cost of discipleship is deeply Christological. It centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ, who calls believers to participation in His suffering and obedience. This shapes Christian identity and mission.

## **Ethics and Moral Responsibility**

Bonhoeffer's theology insists that discipleship entails ethical responsibility. Christians are called to act justly, resist evil, and bear witness through their lives, reflecting the character of Christ.

# **Contemporary Relevance of Bonhoeffer's Cost of Discipleship**

The cost of discipleship remains highly relevant for modern Christians facing various cultural and moral challenges. Bonhoeffer's call to costly grace challenges believers to reconsider the depth of their commitment.

## **Discipleship in a Secular Society**

In increasingly secular contexts, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on costly discipleship challenges Christians to resist cultural conformity and live countercultural lives grounded in faith and obedience.

## **Persecution and Faithfulness**

For Christians in regions experiencing persecution, Bonhoeffer's teachings offer encouragement and a theological framework for understanding suffering as part of faithful discipleship.

## **Social Justice and Christian Witness**

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on ethical responsibility inspires contemporary movements that link faith with social justice, advocating for the oppressed and marginalized as part of Christian discipleship.

## **Practical Applications of Bonhoeffer's Doctrine**

Bonhoeffer's cost of discipleship offers practical guidance for living out faith in everyday life, emphasizing intentional choices and community engagement.

## **Commitment to Obedience**

Believers are called to examine their lives for areas where obedience to Christ is lacking, prioritizing spiritual disciplines and moral integrity.

## **Engagement with the Church Community**

Active participation in the church is essential for mutual support in the journey of costly discipleship, fostering accountability and encouragement.

# **Living Out Sacrifice and Service**

Discipleship involves acts of service, generosity, and sometimes personal sacrifice, reflecting Christ's love and humility.

## **List of Practical Steps for Costly Discipleship**

- Regular self-examination and repentance
- Commitment to daily prayer and Scripture reading
- Active participation in church and fellowship
- Willingness to face social or personal challenges for faith
- Engagement in acts of justice and mercy

## **Critiques and Challenges to Bonhoeffer's Perspective**

While widely influential, Bonhoeffer's cost of discipleship has faced critiques and raised questions within theological circles.

### **Perceived Rigidity**

Some critics argue that Bonhoeffer's emphasis on costly grace can appear overly demanding and legalistic, potentially discouraging believers struggling with imperfections.

### **Contextual Limitations**

Bonhoeffer's context of extreme political oppression shaped his theology, which may not always translate directly to more comfortable or pluralistic societies.

### **Balancing Grace and Obedience**

Debates continue about how to balance God's grace with the call to obedience without slipping into works-based righteousness, a tension present in Bonhoeffer's writings.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What is the main theme of Bonhoeffer's 'The Cost of Discipleship'?

The main theme of Bonhoeffer's 'The Cost of Discipleship' is the call to true Christian discipleship, emphasizing the necessity of costly grace and the willingness to follow Jesus Christ wholeheartedly, even to the point of suffering and sacrifice.

## What does Bonhoeffer mean by 'costly grace' in 'The Cost of Discipleship'?

In 'The Cost of Discipleship,' Bonhoeffer describes 'costly grace' as the grace that demands a response from the believer, involving repentance, obedience, and a commitment to live according to Christ's teachings, contrasting it with 'cheap grace,' which offers forgiveness without requiring change or discipleship.

## How does Bonhoeffer differentiate between 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace'?

Bonhoeffer differentiates 'cheap grace' as grace without discipleship, forgiveness without repentance, and a religion of ease, whereas 'costly grace' is the gospel that calls a person to surrender, obedience, and a life of discipleship that may include suffering and sacrifice.

## Why is 'The Cost of Discipleship' still relevant for modern Christians?

'The Cost of Discipleship' remains relevant because it challenges modern Christians to examine the depth of their faith and commitment, urging them to avoid complacency and to embrace a faith that involves active following of Christ, ethical living, and sometimes costly sacrifices in contemporary society.

## How did Bonhoeffer's own life reflect the principles outlined in 'The Cost of Discipleship'?

Bonhoeffer's life reflected the principles of 'The Cost of Discipleship' through his active resistance against Nazi Germany, involvement in the Confessing Church, and ultimate martyrdom, demonstrating his commitment to costly grace and authentic Christian discipleship even at great personal risk.

## Additional Resources

### 1. *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This seminal work by Bonhoeffer explores the concept of true Christian discipleship, emphasizing the need for costly grace as opposed to cheap grace. It challenges believers

to live out their faith authentically, following Jesus' teachings with commitment and sacrifice. The book remains influential in Christian ethics and theology.

## 2. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* by Eric Metaxas

Eric Metaxas provides a comprehensive biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, detailing his life, theological contributions, and resistance against Nazi Germany. The book offers insight into Bonhoeffer's courage and the profound cost of his discipleship. It combines historical narrative with theological reflection, making it accessible to a broad audience.

## 3. *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In this classic work, Bonhoeffer reflects on the nature of Christian community and fellowship. He emphasizes the importance of living in communion with others as a vital expression of discipleship. The book offers practical advice for nurturing spiritual unity and mutual support among believers.

## 4. *Ethics* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Written during a turbulent period in Bonhoeffer's life, this book presents his mature ethical thought, focusing on responsible action in the face of evil. It complements the themes in *The Cost of Discipleship* by exploring how Christian ethics must be lived out in real-world situations. The work reveals Bonhoeffer's deep engagement with questions of morality and faith.

## 5. *Bonhoeffer's Theology of Sociality: Divine and Human Agency in Community* by Mark Thiessen Nation

This scholarly work examines Bonhoeffer's understanding of community and social responsibility within Christian discipleship. It explores how Bonhoeffer integrates divine agency with human action in shaping ethical living. The book offers an in-depth theological analysis that enriches the study of Bonhoeffer's thought.

## 6. *Following Christ: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* by Bonhoeffer and Others

This collection delves into the theme of discipleship as portrayed in the Gospel of Mark, drawing heavily from Bonhoeffer's insights. It highlights the challenges and demands of following Christ in a contemporary context. The essays provide both theological depth and practical application for modern believers.

## 7. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson

This biography focuses on Bonhoeffer's role as a Christian witness during one of history's darkest periods. It explores his theological development and the personal cost of his discipleship commitment. The book offers a nuanced portrait of Bonhoeffer's life and legacy.

## 8. *Bonhoeffer's Costly Grace: A Modern Interpretation* by Clifford J. Green

Clifford J. Green offers a contemporary interpretation of Bonhoeffer's concept of costly grace, central to *The Cost of Discipleship*. The book discusses how this idea challenges modern Christian practice and belief. It serves as a bridge between Bonhoeffer's original writings and today's theological conversations.

## 9. *The Bonhoeffer Reader* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edited by Clifford J. Green

This anthology collects key writings of Bonhoeffer, including excerpts from *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and *Life Together*. It provides readers with a broad overview of his theological insights and ethical reflections. The reader is an excellent resource for those

seeking to understand Bonhoeffer's enduring impact on Christian thought.

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grace. He describes cheap grace as self-bestowed, characterized by the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, and communion without confession. According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Conversely, he defines costly grace as the gift that must be earnestly sought, symbolized by the door at which one must knock. It is costly because it demands a person's life, yet it is grace because it is given by God and provides a path to true life. The Cost of Discipleship was first published in 1936. Blue Harvest Publishing is dedicated to introducing individuals to the revelation of Jesus Christ through the publication of Christian content. This book is part of the Blue Harvest Publishing Classics series, selected for its wisdom and influence. The Cost of Discipleship is an excellent addition to any Christian library.

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