

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

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TO BE a Christian is to be a follower, a disciple of Christ. At first sight, this is a statement too obvious to be worth the utterance, let alone elaboration. Yet, in our modern world, it is commonplace to find the terms Christian and Christianity so loosely used that they scarcely bear any reference to the following of Christ. In the jargon of the news-media, they indicate nothing more than a vague benevolence towards one's fellow-men, hardly more than a this-wordly enlightened self-interest, with some sort of fuzzy optimism regarding the hereafter. In spite of all that we hear of prisoners of conscience behind the iron-curtain, of violence and hatred in Latin America, of constant violation of human rights and sub-human existence in the middle and far east, most regular or occasional churchgoers in the western world, who would describe themselves, if pressed, as Christians, would be uncomfortable if they were reminded that to be a follower of Christ means a commitment to him in bringing good news to the poor and freeing the oppressed.

No matter what the controversy surrounding his *Christ sein*, Hans Küng has opportunely stressed the need to revive an active understanding of discipleship, if one is to accept 'The Christian Challenge'. He has also done a useful service in showing what a tenuous use of language is involved in the notion of 'anonymous Christianity', divorced from any explicit reference to Jesus Christ. It is a relevant question to ask what is happening to the Church in the first world, as it contemplates the Church of the religious prisoner or that of the materially exploited. Must it grow more materialistic, and continue at the same time to wilt under a welter of guilt that it is neither poor nor oppressed? 'Community-building', desire for greater participation by the laity in ministry, the pressure to reform outdated Church structures: all these in the end run into one cul-de-sac after another, as the melancholy side of the history of the Church

demonstrates too clearly, unless and until Christians individually, and with a developed sense of corporate initiative and responsibility, are prepared to bear the heavy cost of discipleship.

Our focus then will be upon the view of discipleship given to the Christian in the primary source of Revelation, the New Testament. We must, however, recognize from the outset that one's personal understanding of what it means to be a disciple is shaped by a variety of factors not directly drawn from the inspired word. The traditions of the Church, the example and value-systems one has received, and the personal synthesis each one makes between religious tradition and the stimuli of everyday life: all these contribute to the meaning of one's discipleship. In this sense, each person has his or her own individual way of following Christ. Yet, as a common denominator underlying this diversity of forms, there stands the inspired message of the scriptures, the record of the faith of the first disciples, and a permanent challenge to re-examine and renew our own commitment.

It would also be a distortion to give the impression that the New Testament provides a univocal, clear and simple picture of discipleship. Indeed, its portrayal contains a variety of emphases, some more interior and devotional, others more structural and disciplinary. Thus the johannine image of the disciple as a branch joined to the living vine¹ is surely more 'interior' than that conveyed by the Pastoral Epistles, whose appeal is for docility towards the official leaders of the Church, and the christian ideal is to 'live a sober, godly and decent life in this world, awaiting our blessed hope'.² Likewise, one will readily admit a difference between SS Paul and James regarding the central element of discipleship. One could follow the method now customary in New Testament theology, and examine in turn what is said about discipleship in the Synoptic Gospels, the Acts, Paul and johannine literature. Such a detailed method, however, demands more space than is available here. What we propose instead is to concentrate upon two major aspects which recur at many levels of the inspired text, namely 'Call' and 'Response', the warp and the woof of discipleship. A Christian is one who is called by God into a saving relationship with Christ, and who makes a personal response to this call. Hence we set out to illustrate first the reality and quality of this call; and then the variety of genuine responses to it, within the ambience of the New Testament.

¹ Cf Jn 15, 5.

² Tit 2, 12.

The call to discipleship

In our age of free, personal commitment, at least in the West, it is all too easy to neglect the fundamental conviction of the early disciples that they were invited or called into the christian community. This is well illustrated by the lyric from *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, which conveys the notion of individuals planning their promotion within the circle of disciples:

Always hoped he'd make me an apostle.
Knew that I could make it if I tried.
Then when we retire, we can write the gospels,
So they'll all think about us when we've died.

Whereas this stanza may reflect the normal way in which people set out to plan their future, it very much underplays the 'divine initiative' which is central to discipleship both in the Gospels and the Epistles.

Admittedly, the word disciple literally means one who trusts in the guidance of another, quite regardless of any special invitation or vocation. It could, therefore, be used of teacher-pupil relationships, where the main initiative rests with the pupil or follower. One might in this sense set off on the quest of wisdom, and travel to India or Japan, there to attach oneself to a well-known buddhist zen master. Or, more prosaically, one could register at a university, there to become a disciple of the current professors in the particular faculty of one's choice. In either case, the relationship of student to master has been initiated by the student. But in christian discipleship according to the New Testament, the initiative comes from God above: from the Father, who elects a people predestined for grace and eternal life; from the Son, who gathers them into living union with himself; and from the Spirit, who arouses in man's heart the desire and the capacity for this profound life-experience. Thus, without contradicting our psychological awareness of having freely chosen to become and to remain disciples, God's word points to a deeper and more mysterious level of cause: divine election. This notion finds clearest expression with the Evangelist John and the Apostle Paul.

The call according to John and Paul

John's account of the Last Supper includes these words of Christ: 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you'.³ The whole fabric

³ Jn 15, 16.

of the fourth Gospel reinforces this affirmation. Freely, the Word through whom all things were made became flesh, to bring light and life to mankind, and to gather together the children of God who were scattered abroad.⁴ He has come to enliven all who will receive him, with gifts of living water and the bread of life, so that they can be joined to him as branches to the vine.⁵ He calls, as the Good Shepherd calling his own sheep.⁶ Above all, it is through his cross that this initiative reaches out far beyond his own country and his own time, for 'When I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw all men to myself'.⁷ Later, through one of the best-loved images in the book of Revelation, Christ issues his call to the individual soul: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and eat with him'.⁸

A similar point is made by St Paul, although he uses different imagery. For him, the christian community is a people called by God, and not just a society of well-intentioned volunteers, bent on self-improvement. The rich phrase he uses to designate their status is *klētoi hagioi*, 'called to be saints': these roman Christians of mixed calibre, struggling with the perennial challenges and temptations of life in this world. More specifically they are the *klētoi Iesou Christou*, 'those called by Jesus Christ'.⁹ Paul addresses the faithful at Corinth in the same fashion.¹⁰ First and foremost, discipleship, like grace itself, is a free gift of God, 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'.¹¹ Any good that we can do as disciples of Christ is but the fruit of what we first received by the free and merciful disposition of God.

The call of the first disciples

The New Testament furnishes actual examples of vocation in colourful abundance: from the call of the galilean fishermen, Peter, Andrew and the sons of Zebedee, through those of Matthew-Levi, tax-collector, and of his colleague Zacchaeus from Jericho, of Philip and Nathaniel who were invited by Jesus to 'Come and see', to that of Saul from Tarsus, when he fell down dumbstruck and dazzled on the road to Damascus. All of these very varied vocations came directly from Jesus, who invited persons of such differing backgrounds to follow him. Then there were the later vocations to discipleship, mediated through the words of Peter, Paul and other apostles. In this

⁴ Cf Jn 1, 3; 9-18.

⁵ Cf Jn 4, 14; 6, 35.

⁶ Cf Jn 10, 3. 27.

⁷ Jn 12, 32.

⁸ Apoc 3, 20.

⁹ Rom 1, 6-7.

¹⁰ Cf 1 Cor 1, 2.

¹¹ Rom 5, 5.

way the call of Christ came to Cornelius, the Roman officer at Caesarea, the first non-Jew baptized by Peter (Acts 10), and to Timothy who received his discipleship through the good influence of his christian mother (Acts 16, 11), and to the little community founded by Paul at Thessalonica as the first christian Church in Europe. Writing to them later on, Paul gives thanks that 'when you received the word of God from us, you accepted it for what it really is, not the word of men but of God himself' (1 Thess 1, 24). Indeed, in a very significant sense, the whole New Testament is the book of the first disciples, how they received their christian calling, understood it and lived it out in practice. Three points should be made about this calling as it appears in the Gospels: it is broad, demanding and diverse.

From the very beginning of his preaching, Jesus announced as good news that the kingdom of God was near at hand.¹² This Kingdom, illustrated by many parables to mean joy, fulness of life, forgiveness of sin, the nearness and intimacy of God, is thrown wide open to the ordinary people, the galilean crowds who listened with amazement to his teaching. They were astonished, says Matthew, 'for he taught them as one who had authority and not as their scribes'.¹³ He affirmed the ways of God with the assurance of personal experience, needing neither elaborate jargon nor obscure, élitist language in order to speak of what most deeply concerns man: that is, authentic living and personal salvation.

He said things like: 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy burdened'; 'allow little children to come to me and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God'. 'Those that are well have no need of the physician, but those that are sick'. 'The Son of Man is come to seek and save what was lost'.¹⁴ No wonder he came to be known as friend of sinners and of social outcasts.¹⁵ The warmth and the breadth of his welcome to people to share in the kingdom of God comes to fullest expression in the parable of the great banquet,¹⁶ where there is so much room that the Host sends out servants into the highways and byways to compel more guests to attend. Indeed, there are many mansions in the Father's house.¹⁷ At the same time, Jesus lays down some very clear conditions for entry into that house; and the guests at the banquet must wear the necessary wedding-garment.¹⁸

¹² Cf Mk 1, 15.

¹³ Mt 7, 29.

¹⁴ Mt 12, 28; Mk 10, 14; Mt 9, 12; Lk 19, 10.

¹⁵ Cf Mt 11, 19.

¹⁶ Cf Lk 14, 16-24.

¹⁷ Cf Jn 14, 2.

¹⁸ Cf Mt 22, 11.

The demands of the call

When we consider the conditions laid down by Christ for those who followed him into the kingdom of God, we are at the point of contact between vocation and response. For the moment, we will examine some of these conditions as part of the 'calling', and then return later to consider how the early Christians actually carried them into action. First among these demands is the call to 'repent and believe';¹⁹ after that come explanations, through beatitude and parable, of what this repentance implies; then the difficult doctrine of renunciation, as the obverse side of love; and finally the invitation given to some disciples to leave all things, family, livelihood and possessions, in order to form the immediate circle of Christ's twelve apostles.

The initial demand made of all disciples was for repentance (*metanoia* — change of heart, renewal of spirit). This means a radical conversion towards God, a turning away from mere worldly independence and selfish pursuits, in order to rely on divine Providence and to seek the things of God even in this present life. That Jesus meant this conversion to affect our deepest attitudes emerges quite clearly: 'Unless ye become as little children'; 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well'. No longer were they to be anxious about their life, nor about tomorrow's troubles, nor with amassing securities and deposits in barn or bank. 'Your heavenly Father knows all that you need';²⁰ and hence you can afford to fix your attention on the deeper values in life: love, truth, honesty and justice, all of which are implied in the positive call 'to believe'.

Beatitude and parable expound more fully what discipleship requires, and therefore give specific content to that radical word *metanoia*. To follow Jesus as a disciple one must cultivate trustful dependency (poverty of spirit), meekness, a peace-making outlook, purity of mind, love for holiness, and willingness to endure hardships for righteousness' sake.²¹ We need to hear the word of God with receptive heart and let it bear fruit in us, as the seed sprouts up in fertile soil.²² Our mercy and compassion must surpass that of the unforgiving servant who oppressed his subordinate workers, and resemble that of the good Samaritan, generous to the point of extravagance.²³

¹⁹ Mk 1, 15.²⁰ Mt 18, 3; 6, 33. 32.²¹ Cf Mt 5, 3-10.²² Cf Mt 13, 8.²³ Cf Mt 24, 49; Lk 10, 35; Mt 6, 39-48.

If the requirements of christian discipleship were limited to positive ideals, they would be sublime but incomplete. Just as Churchill's words about Britain's finest hour required as background the 'blood and toil, sweat and tears' of a bitter struggle, so the fundamental virtue of love demands a corresponding renunciation from the disciple. This self-denial is inextricably interwoven with loyalty, in our still imperfect world, so pockmarked by sin and its effects. Hence the insistence of Jesus upon loving one's enemies, denying oneself, suffering persecution for righteousness' sake, taking up the cross daily in order to be a true disciple. This theme is especially remarkable in Luke's Gospel, which from another angle appears pre-eminent as the message of mercy and forgiveness. But the self-denial of a disciple has very positive significance: it is associated with the saving Passion of Christ himself, and it plays an essential part in the total growth-process towards new life with God. In John's Gospel this takes the form of a universal principle: 'Unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life'.²⁴ Reflecting deeply on this aspect of discipleship, Paul went so far as to affirm that the process of dying and rising with Christ begins with baptism and continues throughout life: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death . . . so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life'.²⁵ Ultimately, this amounts to 'filling up in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, the Church',²⁶ or to being 'crucified with Christ, so it is no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me'.²⁷ To the general faithful at Rome he writes: 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus'.²⁸

Diversity within the one call

Although much more could be said of the conditions Jesus set for all his followers, we would like to focus very briefly on another aspect of the call, namely, its diversity. While calling all his hearers to enter God's kingdom, Jesus demanded more renunciation from some than from others. The closer their association with him and the greater their involvement in the work of spreading the gospel,

²⁴ Jn 12, 24ff. ²⁵ Rom 6, 3ff. ²⁶ Col 1, 24. ²⁷ Gal 2, 20. ²⁸ Rom 6, 11.

so much the more did he require detachment from the values and the joys of this world. We are not speaking here of different degrees of holiness, but simply of diversity of vocation within discipleship. Throughout the gospels this diversity appears mainly between those few whom Jesus calls into his constant company, and who must therefore leave everything behind in order to wander around Palestine sharing his itinerant life, and the much more numerous group of disciples who accepted his message when they heard it, but whose lives were not so visibly disrupted as a result. Martha and Mary were disciples of Jesus, without leaving their home at Bethany; so indeed was Zacchaeus, the convert tax-collector from Jericho;²⁹ and many others of whom it was not required that they leave behind brothers, sisters, wives, children and lands; or fishing boats, as was the case with Peter and his friends by the galilean lake-shore. From among the larger group of his disciples, Christ chose only some for the whole-time apostolate.³⁰ It is interesting to note that some who wished to join his itinerant apostolic group were not admitted;³¹ while at least one, the rich young man, received this special vocation, but declined it and 'went away sad, because he had great possessions'.³² Once again, in the writings of Paul, we could trace the fuller development of this idea of variety within the one christian community. The Body of Christ, he says, is composed of many members, not all of whom have the same function to perform, but each is gifted with his or her special 'charisma' for the benefit of the whole community.³³

Now we go on to consider some aspects of the response to Christ made by the early disciples. In particular, we note its diversity, its common feature of continual conversion, and its interior dynamic source in the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

The response of the disciple

As we know so well from our personal experience, the call of Christ can fall upon deaf ears or a hard heart, and therefore does not of itself make the person a disciple. Discipleship consists essentially in the actual following of Christ, trusting him and answering his personal call according to one's God-given capacity. We know too that this following must be more than a fleeting emotional acceptance of Christ as Saviour, more than external conformity or

²⁹ Cf Jn 11; Lk 19.

³⁰ Cf Lk 6, 13 and parallels.

³¹ Cf Mt 8, 19; Mk 5, 18.

³² Mt 19, 22.

³³ Cf 1 Cor 12, 4ff.

superficial membership of his Church. Rather, it is a deeply loyal adherence to the Lord, one that is able to survive inner perplexities and doubts as well as exterior setbacks in health, relationships or career. In this sense, discipleship may be called a truly 'costly grace', to use the well-known phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, because it is at once a priceless gift given by God, and at the same time it imposes heavy demands on those who accept it:

Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. It comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it calls a man to follow and costs him his life; and it is grace because it gives man the only true life.³⁴ Jesus himself declares that it is not enough to make a verbal act of faith in him, however sincere, or to call out to him 'Lord, Lord!' in an ecstasy of religious fervour. Rather, the true disciple is the one who hears the word of God and does it; such a one is as close to Christ as brother, sister or mother.³⁵

Through the pages of the New Testament — the Acts and Epistles no less than the Gospels — we encounter many inspiring examples of what is involved in the response of christian discipleship. We are familiar by means of sermons, reading and our own reflection with the dominant traits of such prominent disciples as Peter, Paul, John, Mary Magdalen and the greater Mary, mother of Jesus: the marvellous blend of faith and action, prayerful meditation and charitable deeds. In each and all of these major characters we find the qualities of trust, of personal attachment to Christ and of persevering obedience to his word, of witnessing to his spirit and ultimately of conformity to his image.

There is one vital aspect of the christian response which we would like to illustrate with particular reference to Peter: it is the need for *continual conversion*. For each of us, as for Peter, the call of Christ is not an event which occurs once for all, but a repeated challenge to which we must repeatedly respond. When Peter first appears on the gospel scene, by the lake-shore in Galilee, he hears Christ's invitation 'Follow me', and in response leaves all things in order to follow the carpenter from Nazareth. Again, in the final scene of the Gospel, John's Resurrection narrative, Peter hears the same call, which now has deeper resonance since it follows upon a sad story of weakness and betrayal.³⁶ Bonhoeffer perceptively

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The cost of discipleship* (London, 1959), p 37.

³⁵ Cf Mt 7, 1-27; 12, 50.

³⁶ Cf Jn 21, 22.

remarks that in the years between Peter's first and last calling there came a whole lifetime of discipleship punctuated by acts of faith and by failure to measure up to his call.³⁷ It is clear that as Peter advanced in self-awareness and in his awareness of the person of Christ, the quality of his response also developed; so that the man who said 'Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you', was more mature in his discipleship than when he boasted, 'Even though all others fall away, I will not'.³⁸ The impetuous Paul also learned the need for humble perseverance in the christian response to Christ. Life taught him that God's grace is poured into weak earthen vessels and that power is made perfect in infirmity.³⁹ Therefore, even the apostle must discipline himself, and keep his body under subjection.⁴⁰ In the same vein, he urges us not to grow weary in well-doing, nor to fall asleep or walk again in darkness;⁴¹ for he was well aware of the 'slump factor' which draws people away from their original ideals to follow the comfortable path of mediocrity.

From this point of view, it would be rewarding to search through the Acts and the Epistles for hints and evidences that the human tendency towards lower ideals existed not only on the individual level but also in local communities. Perhaps Luke paints too rosy a picture of the early Church at Jerusalem where 'the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own'.⁴² Yet, without in any way doubting his conviction that the community was guided by the pentecostal Spirit of Christ, we note that he is candid enough to tell us later on of the dissension between the two major groups concerning the distribution of poor relief, or of the other more important quarrel about circumcision and the law of Moses, which was settled by the Apostolic Council at Jerusalem.⁴³ All this indicates that those twin forces, discernment and conversion, were no less needful in the earliest days of the Church than in our own day.

A Spirit-guided response

It would be unpardonable nowadays to speak of the disciple's response to Christ without referring to the influence of the Holy Spirit in this process. That influence, already foreshadowed in the

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Mk 14, 29.

³⁹ Cf 2 Cor 12, 9.

⁴⁰ Cf 1 Cor 9, 27.

⁴¹ Cf Gal 6, 9; 1 Thess 5, 44ff.

⁴² Cf Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32.

⁴³ Cf Acts 6, 1; 15, 1-29.

Gospels, becomes quite prominent in the Acts of the Apostles, and constitutes a major principle in St Paul's vision of christian life, whether on the individual level or on that of community action. The relevant texts have been so emphasized through the vigour of the charismatic renewal movement that it will be enough just to mention them here.

Jesus himself was led by the Spirit from the beginning of his saving ministry. He taught his disciples that the Spirit would be given to them as a gift if they prayed for it, and promised that the Holy Spirit would perform the role of Comforter and Counsellor to bring to their minds all he had taught them.⁴⁴ Then Acts takes up the story of the early Church, underlining the influence of the Pentecostal Spirit upon individuals such as Peter, and upon the whole company of believers united in harmony and joy.⁴⁵ It is in the letters of St Paul, however, that this conviction regarding guidance by the Holy Spirit is most fully expressed. Although Paul himself never quite sets out his doctrine in systematic form, we can validly distinguish two important aspects in his thought regarding the Holy Spirit's influence: the basic fruits of christian character common to all disciples, and the special charisms variously distributed.

Common characteristics

Every disciple, according to Paul, is a living temple of the Holy Spirit,⁴⁶ whose active indwelling promotes certain shared qualities, such as purity, love and a deeply-rooted trust in God. The celebrated fruits of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, self-control — provide a summary of the christian moral response.⁴⁷ Similarly, Paul writes of the filial confidence and the power of prayer which the Spirit awakens within us. 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying Abba, Father! So you are no longer a slave but a son'; 'likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'.⁴⁸ It is this indwelling Spirit who causes disciples to hold firmly to Christ without fear of ever losing hold. 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation'.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Cf Mk 1, 13; Lk 11, 13; Jn 14, 16, 26; 15, 26.

⁴⁵ Cf Acts 2, 4ff; 2, 42ff; 4, 31, etc.

⁴⁶ Cf 1 Cor 16, 19.

⁴⁷ Cf Gal 5, 22.

⁴⁸ Gal 4, 6; Rom 8, 26.

⁴⁹ Rom 8, 35-39.

Special charisms

Over and above the spiritual gifts shared by all disciples, some individuals receive from the Spirit of God an activation that equips them to perform specific works of christian service: preaching, teaching, administration, hospitality, aid to the poor, and the like.⁵⁰ 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills'. It is, therefore, a vital part of the christian response to co-operate with the genuine impulses of the Spirit, so that one's charisms or talents are exercised for the benefit of others and especially for the local community of the faithful.

Conclusion

To sum up, we have considered discipleship as the following of a call which comes from God through Christ. It is a call which involves both gratuitous promise and serious demand, and may be termed a 'costly grace'. The forms of discipleship are varied, as are the degrees of renunciation it requires. In all cases it entails conversion to Christ, which is not just a once-for-all choice, but a continual, oft-renewed process. The response of the disciple may indeed be partial and imperfect like that of Peter; and as in the first generation, so in ours: there must be growth through experience and repentance. Yet always, as the well-spring both of response and of development, there is the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus said, 'He will lead you into all truth'. The true disciple is one who, in the manifold circumstances of his personal life, hears and follows this call. Strive as we may for basic human rights within the institutional Church, produce what plans which seem good for the reorganization and updating of our lives in christian community, the lead will certainly come from the Spirit, as long as we 'pay our dues' of discipleship well in advance.

⁵⁰ Cf Rom 12, 6-8; 1 Cor 12, 4-11.