

Fănel Şuteu:¹

“Nachfolge” by Bonhoeffer: The „Imitatio Christi” of the 20th Century²

Eight decades are precisely marked since *Nachfolge*, the work of the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), has appeared in the German realm (1937). In 2009, 72 years since that date, the Cluj publisher *Peregrinul*, published this book in Romanian language. There lies a possibility of the title being translated literally but hermetically, such as: „Succession”, „Emulation”, or „Imitation”. The latter refers to a writing by a medieval monk called *Hammerkin*, *Die Nachfolge Christi* (it is about the extremely well known work by Thomas a Kempis, *Imitatio Christi*). Ligia Taloş – the translator of Bonhoeffer’s work – chose a title accessible to the common Christian reader, probably drawing inspiration from the English version *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The book signed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by the university lector Dr. Emanuel Conţac

from the Pentecostal Theological Institute, Bucharest, and recommended by the theologian Karl Barth as „easily the best that has been written on the discipleship subject” (cited on p. 30), completes the comments dedicated to the *Matthew 5–7* section, translated or written in Romanian, among John Chrysoſtom’s (*Sermon on the Mount*), Martyn Lloyd Jones’ (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*), John R.W. Stott’s (*Sermon on the Mount*) or Iosif Ţon’s (*Sermon on the Mount*).

The volume of 348 pages is split into two parts, out of which only the second has a title. The way of starting a journey by asking questions belongs to a philosopher who acquired the art of the peripatetics of the antiquity. In order to offer valid answers, one must pose problems correctly. „What can the call to discipleship mean today to the laborer, businessman, peasant or soldier” – the author asks himself. „And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? Which decisions and partings will it demand? To answer these questions we shall have to go to Him, for only He knows the answers.” (p. 35) Why? Because „discipleship means happiness” (p. 36). And still... „When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.” (p. 35)



1. Graduate of “Babeş-Bolyai” University, MFAM, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: fanel.suteu@gmail.com.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Costul uceniciei* [*The Cost of Discipleship*]. Cluj-Napoca: Logos Publishing, 2009

Part I (p. 41–200) comprises seven chapters: from the *Costly Grace* to the *Call to Discipleship*; from the *Single-Minded Obedience* to *Discipleship and the Cross*; from the *Discipleship and the Individual* to its exemplification in *Sermon on the Mount*; from the fact of being *Messenger* to *Suffering, Decision* and *Fruit*.

The *costly grace* appears as opposed to *cheap grace*, which is an enemy of the church, cheapjacks' wares, providing „the sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion at cut prices” (p. 41); the other is expensive because the account has been paid in advance and thus „everything can be had for nothing” (*v. supra*). *The Call to Discipleship* offers the „simple obedience” (p. 74) and the *single-minded obedience* is preceded – says the author – always by the call. *Discipleship and the Cross* follows with the „proclamation of the passions of Christ”. (p. 83) The phrase of Luther is conclusive here, conditioning every true disciple: „Your Lord Himself has passed through here” (p. 90). *Discipleship and the individual* examines a new problem: „bringing the disciple face to face with his own individuality.” (p. 91)

The Sermon on the Mount is then tracked over the three chapters of Matthew (5–6–7). Bonhoeffer identifies the Saviour with „the poorest, meekest, and most sorely tried of all men” (p. 107), signifying exactly the ideal human Prototype. In this context, „for the first time... the word that summarizes the whole message up to now is enunciated: love.” (p. 135). *The Messengers* are the labourers sent to the eternal *Harvest*: „Jesus is looking for help, for I cannot do the work alone.” (p. 184). The unshakable *Decision* of „abiding by the Word”, is repeatedly supported by the encouragement: „Fear not!” (p. 195) and thus shall appear the *Fruit* of a disciple's life taught by the Teacher.

Part II (p. 201–282), captioned *The Church of Jesus Christ and the Life of Discipleship*, has six chapters: from *Preliminary Questions* to *Baptism*; from *the Body of Christ* to *the Visible Community*; from *the Saints* to *the Image of Christ*.

In *Preliminary Questions*, Bonhoeffer clarifies: „Jesus Christ is not dead, but alive and speaking to us to-day through the testimony of the Scriptures.” (p. 201). *Baptism* „is the offer of Jesus Christ” (p. 206), and *The Body of Christ* is not just the real one visible in front of the disciples, but also the one „St Paul tells us that we are made members of through baptism”. (p. 213) *The Visible Community* refers to Christian gatherings: „Amid poverty and suffering, hunger and thirst, they are meek, merciful and peacemakers, persecuted and scorned by the world, although it is for their sake alone that the world is allowed to continue.” (p. 246). *The Saints* enter the *Body of Christ* through That „Man who comes to men” (p. 277), Jesus Christ did for them „redemption, deliverance and salvation”. (p. 273). *The Image of Christ* takes form in humans through the awareness of each disciple that „man has lost the essence of the resemblance to God” (p. 276) and that „the follower of Jesus is the *imitator* of God.” (p. 281).

The Afterword in the German Edition (p. 283–307) signed by Martin Kukse and Ilse Tödt (1989) provides the reader a few historical biogeographical coordinates, which accompanied the process of the book's publication.

The Cost of Discipleship – a genuine *Imitatio Christi* from the German realm of the last century – is the work, which examines elegantly and in depth the subject of discipleship proposed in the *Sermon on the Mount*. Bonhoeffer was challenged by the historic events

of his time to demonstrate how much is „the Cost of Discipleship”. Calling the Führer „Verführer” („Enticer”) two days after obtaining the position of Chancellor of Germany, and fighting for the defence of the Book and the people of the Book (the Jews), he was arrested and then executed six years after publishing *Nachfolge*; his statue remains among others in the Gallery of 20th century martyrs, Westminster Abbey (London), like a monument for a life similar to a book which conveys the *Logos*, the Word.

I encourage every passionate reader to acquire the writing of Thomas a Kempis, *Imitatio Christi* to practise and also read Bonhoeffer’s work, *Nachfolge* (alias *Imitatio Christi*), in order to understand the meaning of *Devotio Moderna*.