

## CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

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### *Introduction*

The bad news first! Although this year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the iron curtain and Europe and the majority of the countries on the Eurasia region have never seen such a long period of economic and political stability as right now, there is a general perception of uncertainty or even crisis. This uncertainty meets us on all levels of life.

Politically the old categories of left and right, labour or socialist and conservative do not seem to work anymore. The established political parties are losing ground and in some cases have shrunk to insignificance in the political scene. At the same time we observe the rise of nationalism and even fascism. Of course, it was never fully gone – but it was not discussed or even propagated openly, especially after the horrors of the Nazi regime and the holocaust in the middle of the twentieth century. A growing number of populists and demagogues with seemingly “easy” solutions and some extreme parties gain influence in parliaments. As a result we experience ever increasing divisions in our societies and a rising distrust in the present political systems. In Europe we are faced with an uncertain future of the European Union, which has both political and economic consequences. Globalisation and digitalisation are changing the way we have worked and lived dramatically. The rich seem to get richer and the poor poorer, globally and nationally. The gap is widening. Connected to the political and economic uncertainty comes the big question of the future of our planet. We know that we cannot continue to live the way we have been living without detrimental consequences for our climate and the ecological system we live in. In the midst of all of that uncertainty we are faced with changes in the area of moral values and ethical standards. Our cultural and religious traditions are being challenged on all kinds of levels: questions in different areas of human sexuality, a new rise of racism, increase of fundamentalism in different religions and ideologies, new levels of cruelty and inhuman behaviour of abuse and misuse of the unempowered and minorities, and a growing isolation of people and the decrease of traditional social connections especially among the elderly population group. At the same time we also realise that the way Western people have lived is not the only possible way to be nor is it the only one that looks as if it might lead to a fulfilled and meaningful life. We are torn between what we had and were used to on the one side and what might develop on the other. And that creates a feeling of uncertainty, powerlessness and frustration.

What our societies are facing is also present in all areas of the church. There is a rising distrust and frustration with the traditional denominations and their structures. This is not only caused by the scandals of sexual abuse of children and women, but also by how the church faces the political, economic, ecological, and ethical challenges. Divisions in all denominations can be observed – not only between “progressive” and “conservative” groups, but also by a distrust in the power systems of the church organisations. The first reflex of most of the traditional denominations seems to be on preserving what has been achieved with efforts of expansion of the given structures with the focus on one’s own organisation or denomination. However, we also realise that nothing seems to be and work the way it once did, or at least how it seemed to work. This leads to uncertainty in the denominations and local churches, which is followed by

frustration and turning away from the established Christian organisations especially by the younger generation.

This does not sound like a hopeful introduction. So, what is the “good news”? Is it all “going to get better” and “we will get through this”? – As a historical theologian I have learned that it is important to view current developments from a wider perspective and in the context of the longer history of the church. When we look at the two thousand years of church history, we become aware that the church has always faced times of crisis and uncertainty, actually from the very beginning. Those times were followed by times of peace and development which were then challenged again by times of crisis and uncertainty. When we look at how the church has reacted in these times, we realise that the church has often been at its best; however, too often it also has been at its worst! Generally speaking, it has been at its worst when the church focused primarily on itself: trying to preserve and expand what it had accomplished (especially wealth and power). Its behaviour was then not different from the behaviour of the world – and sometimes even worse. These developments can be observed in greater or smaller scales in all denominations and church organisations at all times.

On the other hand, the church has been at its best when it focused on its vocation and identity, living as God’s holy people. An important part of the truth is that when the church was at its best, it usually faced marginalisation or even persecution. The faithful believers have often been in the minority with no wealth and no power and influence, at the same time needing to be ready to pay the ultimate price of following Jesus.

The assumption of this paper is that as we face a time of uncertainty or even crisis, the church must be at its best by concentrating on its vocation and identity as God’s holy people. When we talk about God’s holy people we must talk about discipleship, the daily Christian life of the believers and the church. Discipleship and holiness are inseparable, which becomes clear in 1 Peter as well as the entire witness of Scripture. Holiness is at the heart of following Jesus.

### *The Theological Framework*

As we reflect historically and theologically on God’s holy people and discipleship, I want to begin with a brief description of a theological framework from a Wesleyan-Holiness viewpoint. The framework begins with God and his nature of love as shown in his self-revelation especially in the person of Jesus Christ. Love is at the centre of God’s being and expressed in his creative acts, which culminated in humanity being created in the image of God. Because of the centrality of love, the image of God must be understood primarily in terms of love relationships towards God, other human beings and the rest of creation. These relationships are marked by full and transparent trust (faith). Humanity trusted as responsible creatures in God as creator and sustainer of all life. God entrusted his creation to the care of humanity (human stewardship and responsibility). All of creation depended on these trust relationships between God and humanity. Another consequence of God’s nature of love is that all of life is dynamic and must be viewed in terms of transformation. This created order was distorted by the fall of humanity (sin) and its consequences. However, even after sin entering creation with its devastating results, God in his love desired to transform his creation with the goal of restoring all of creation. God’s work has been transformational from the beginning (*creatio ex nihilo*), and it remains that in God’s dealing

with sin and its effects. The love of God is at the heart of the mission of God of restoring his creation.

As creation is encompassing all aspects of life, the transformational process must be viewed holistically. From the human perspective (being created in the image of God) that process is a personal one, both for the individual (body, soul, and spirit) as well as for the human community (in relation to God, to other human beings) and in relation to the rest of creation. Scripture uses various analogies for this transformational aspect of God's mission, the most common are the "body of Christ" (especially used by Paul) and the "people of God" (used throughout the Old and New Testament and in our case also in the first letter of Peter). These analogies highlight the indivisibility and interdependence of the individual and the community in the transformational process of creation being restored.

As the nature of God (love) has been fully revealed in and through Jesus Christ, any doctrine of salvation (restoration of creation through transformation) must build upon and centre in the person of Jesus Christ. Who he is and what he has done (Christology) must guide our understanding of the transformational process of restoration (justification and sanctification). That is the reason why we can also speak of Christlikeness when we describe the nature of the Christian life. Jesus has come to accomplish the mission of God and to proclaim the good news and invite all of humanity to be transformed into the image of God (making Christlike disciples in the nations) and to provide for the transformation for all of creation (eschatological dimension of salvation). The divine work of restoration is the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the individual, the community and the entire world. This process is relational in nature, therefore all relationships are sustained by trust and faith.

Through the calling of men and women by Jesus Christ to a life of discipleship, the church has been created by God to participate in his mission of being transformed in proclaiming in word and deed the good news of God's grace and favour to restore his creation.

### *Important Aspects for the Church to be the Holy People of God*

The theological framework must guide the church as it fulfils its calling to be the holy people of God in a life of Christlike discipleship. In this paper I want to highlight three important aspects in this endeavour.

#### *1. Discipleship Begins with the Call of Jesus to Follow Him*

Discipleship is primarily not a programme organised by the church. Nor is it a method to help the church making its members "fit for service". Discipleship is grounded in the call of Jesus to follow him. With this call Jesus invited people to be restored in their relationships and to participate in his mission. He entrusted his mission to the church to be carried out by his disciples after his death, resurrection and ascension.

This call of Jesus has to be understood as a radical call. One of the best descriptions of the radicalness of discipleship has been given by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *The Cost of Discipleship*. Commenting on Mark 2:14 he wrote:

“And what does the text inform us about the content of discipleship? Follow me, run along behind me! That is all. To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. ... The disciple simply burns his boats and goes ahead. He is called out, and has to forsake his old life in order that he may ‘exist’ in the strictest sense of the word. The old life is left behind, and completely surrendered. The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity (that is in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus), from a life which is observable and calculable (it is, in fact quite incalculable) into a life where everything is unobservable and fortuitous (that is, into one which is necessary and calculable), out of the realm of finite (which is in truth the infinite) into the realm of infinite possibilities (which is the one liberating reality). ... It is nothing else than the bondage to Jesus Christ alone, completely breaking through every programme, every ideal, every set of laws. No other significance is possible, since Jesus is the only significance. Beside Jesus nothing has any significance. He alone matters.”<sup>1</sup>

The radicalness of the call cannot be underestimated in light of the mission of God to restore his creation as revealed in Jesus Christ. In the call to follow him, we are called to Christlike discipleship (being the people of God). It is such a radical call that Jesus actually invites us to die – to die to ourselves as we are being given life through Jesus Christ. Paul in his writings makes it especially clear that “dying to ourselves” is the result of the encounter with Christ.<sup>2</sup> From death to life is at the very centre of the transformational process of restoration into the image of God. As such the transformed life can only be understood as the gracious work of God by the Holy Spirit.

We must ask if, in our understandable concern to attract as many people as possible to our churches, we have not really preached the radicalness of discipleship. For too many it seems that being a Christian is something that can be done in a few hours a week on Sundays. That might work for quick results – but it is certainly not the biblical understanding of a transformational life. John Drane rightly argues that we must not wonder that for many young people who are looking for a holistic spirituality that they do not take church seriously at all, “for how can anything of value make such insignificant demands?”<sup>3</sup> This leads us to a second aspect to be considered.

## 2. *Discipleship as Personal and Communal*

As has been argued in the theological framework above, we must highlight the indivisibility and interdependence of the individual and the community in Christian discipleship. It has been demonstrated by historical theologians that in the context of evangelicalism the emphasis on individualism has often taken extreme positions of a personal relationship to God without any

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Revised edition. New York: Macmillan, 1966, 62-63

<sup>2</sup> One important example would be Romans 6:1-11

<sup>3</sup> John Drane, *After McDonaldization: Mission, Ministry, and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, 116.

regard to the community of faith.<sup>4</sup> As Michael Cartwright put it, “On the one hand, the response of discipleship is to be informed by the Holy Spirit; on the other hand, the locus of decision making is the individual disciple him- or herself.”<sup>5</sup> There seems to be no recognition of “the potential role of the congregation – the gathered believing community – for processing this concern.”<sup>6</sup> We are aware that there have been strong influences of this thinking in the holiness movement. However, it is also important to note that from a Wesleyan position such an understanding is actually an impossibility when we talk about discipleship. Referring to the above theological framework, discipleship as a transformational process into the image of God has to be defined in relationships. That is intrinsic in John Wesley’s definition of the image of God as natural image, political image and moral image.<sup>7</sup> Theodore Runyon has rightly pointed out from the standpoint of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition “holiness has been defined too narrowly if we have left out of the configuration the natural and the political image. If we include them we include holiness not only of mind but of political and social responsibility and stewardship as well. In this way holiness takes on ... social and cosmic dimensions ...”<sup>8</sup>

It was exactly because of the close relationship of the individual and the community in discipleship that John Wesley developed his understanding of the means of grace.<sup>9</sup> Especially in his teaching on the prudential means of grace, Wesley would connect these to works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety included individual practices (such as reading, meditating and studying Scripture, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others) and community practices (regularly share in the Lord’s Supper, Christian conferencing – accountability to one another, and Bible study). Likewise works of mercy were defined in terms of individual practices (doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others) and community practices (seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination, and addressing the needs of the

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<sup>4</sup> I am especially referring to the essays of Stanley Hauerwas, Rodney Clapp, Theodore Runyan, Michael Cartwright, Michael Lodahl and Samuel Powell in Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (editors), *Embodied Holiness*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Cartwright, “The Once & Future Church Revisited”, in Powell and Lodahl, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Here I want to refer to the short and precise essay by Theodore Runyan, “Holiness as the Renewal of the Image of God in the Individual & Society” in Powell and Lodahl, 79-88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Two good examples on the discussion on the means of grace in John Wesley see Dean Blevins, “Means of Grace: Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32:1 (1997), 69-83; and Carl Andrew Thompson, *John Wesley and the Means of Grace: Historical and Theological Context*. Dissertation, Duke University, 2012. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10161/9462>.

poor).<sup>10</sup> For Wesley the means of grace “were essentially human practices or activities through which the Holy Spirit worked with transforming power.”<sup>11</sup>

I am afraid that for too long the church has uncritically embraced modernity with its focus on the individual self and designed programmes to promote an individualistic understanding of the Christian life. By that the church has offered “a diet that is spiritually damaging, serving up religious junk food that leaves people bloated and self-satisfied but still under-nourished in such a way that they ... have no opportunity to grow as fully integrated persons and disciples.”<sup>12</sup> All of this underlines the need for and the call to the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition for being the people of God in a way that promotes the transformation of the personal life in the active presence of the community of faith. I believe that we have to recover the communal aspect of discipleship and live it as we participate in the mission God has called us to.

### 3. *Discipleship and the Created Order and Eschatology*

The transformational work of God not only encompasses the restoration of humanity (individually and as community) but also the transformation of all of creation, because all of creation has been affected by sin.<sup>13</sup> The human relationship to the rest of creation is part of being created in the image of God – especially in what Wesley called the political image, which includes human stewardship in God’s created order.<sup>14</sup>

This holistic or cosmic understanding of the restoration of creation highlights the eschatological dimension of the work of Christ – the dynamic tension between the already and the not-yet. This eschatological dimension is not an “add-on” (like, “at the end everything will be fine”), but it is intrinsic in being the people of God and a life of holiness. When we think about the future (personally and globally) we are reminded that God is already now at work in me, in us, in all of creation to bring about his purpose. This process is one of “groaning” and “suffering” and “dying” – but that is not the end of it. The end is God’s fully restored creation – filled by his presence and glory. In this process humanity, as created in the image of God, is to act and live a life of stewardship before God. We have a special place of responsibility in what God has entrusted to us. It is part of the mission of God in the restoration of the created order – and it is a dimension that needs to be recovered and developed as we are the people of God in our world today.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Wesley spoke about his understanding of the means of grace not only in his sermons, “The Means of Grace” and “Working Out Our Own Salvation”, but all over in his Works when he explained his understanding of the Christian life. Much of what is summarised in this section has been taken from Thompson, 123-176.

<sup>11</sup> John H. Knight III, “Consider Wesley: Wesley on the Means of Grace.” In: *Catalyst – Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives for Methodist Seminarians*. Retrieved from <https://www.catalystresources.org/consider-wesley-44/>

<sup>12</sup> Drane, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Two important biblical references are Romans 8:18-22 and Revelation 21:1-5

<sup>14</sup> The Church of the Nazarene recognises and affirms the importance of creation care in the *Manual (2017-2021)*, IV. Current Moral and Social Issues, §924.

<sup>15</sup> One very good example of how Christian discipleship is connected to the relation to the

### Conclusion

That we live in a world of uncertainty and crisis should not surprise us nor should it threaten us – because we know that we live in a fallen world. Wholeness, true security and fulfilment is only possible when God completes the restoration of the created order. That is not only something we hope for – but it is something that will happen and is happening already now. As church, as God’s holy people, we are not merely onlookers but God invites us to participate in his mission of transformation.

When the church is caught up in the uncertainty and crisis of the world then we need to be attentive for God who is always graciously reaching out to us and calling us to return to him and his ways and his purpose and his mission. As we experience God’s call and presence, we will realise that as the church participates in God’s mission of transformation – the church itself is being transformed. At least since the reformation we have learned, *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the church must always be reformed). God’s mission is one of transformation – from the very beginning. And when something is being transformed, it cannot remain the same. One last word – and this is truly “good news” – when crisis and uncertainty confront us, as followers of Jesus Christ we can be assured that it is Jesus who builds his church; and the gates of Hell will not overpower it (Matt. 16:18).

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