

DISCIPLESHIP AND CALLING

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I'm very grateful for the opportunity to spend this time with you reflecting on some issues about the theme of discipleship. My intention is to set our minds to work by offering a theological account of Christian discipleship, and to that end I have divided the material into two themes: 'Discipleship and Calling', and 'Discipleship and Obedience'. In arranging the topic in this way, I am reiterating what I take to be a twofold gospel principle for the theology of the Christian life, namely, that grace both precedes and commands action. In this first session, I propose to reflect on the call to discipleship, and above all on the one who constitutes that call, Jesus Christ, who is himself the grace and command of God in person. Tomorrow I propose to go on from there to consider the shape or direction of discipleship in response to the summons of Jesus. Our questions, therefore, are: who is Jesus Christ? Who are those whom he calls to follow him? And how are we to characterise the life to which he calls them? Such, I hope to suggest, are the basic elements of a theology of discipleship. Before I move into the exposition itself, however, I want to stand back and speak a little more generally about the place which the topic of discipleship has in the more general theology of the Christian life.

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

The task of a theology of the Christian life is to describe that form of human existence which is brought into being and upheld by the saving work of God. Most generally described, the concern of theology at this point is with what happens when, through the activity of the Holy Spirit, that which has been objectively accomplished in the incarnation, passion and resurrection of the Son of God is unleashed in human history, making sinful creatures into the children of God. In Protestant theology, mapping this reality is often done by offering a theology of the *ordo salutis*, the order of salvation. This term refers to an account of the history of salvation as it takes place in the Christian believer. A sequence of 'moments' is traced – including, for example, adoption, regeneration, conversion, faith, justification, sanctification, perseverance – in order to portray how through the Spirit God's grace in Christ shapes Christian existence in time. This

portrayal is commonly filled out, further, by a theology of the church as the communion of saints in which Christian existence takes place, and by an account of the stance of the Christian in the world. It is then completed by an account of the glorification of the Christian in which the life of faith is brought to eschatological perfection.

Within this scheme, the topic of discipleship has traditionally enjoyed little profile. At best, it has played an informal or illustrative role, with the main lines of the theology of the Christian life structured around the Pauline and Johannine theology of union with and life in Christ, rather than the Synoptic theme of following Jesus. There are, of course, counter-examples. Discipleship is a prominent topic in those Anabaptist ecclesiologies which have exercised such a considerable hold on contemporary Christian theology and ethics. Above all, there is a single exposition of the theme in a book of quite extraordinary spiritual and theological resonance, namely Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*¹ – perhaps the most potent piece of Christian writing to come out of the German church conflict, and certainly the most widely disseminated. It was Bonhoeffer's genius to perceive that appeal to the notion of discipleship could be immensely powerful in extracting the church from its hopelessly compromised stance; at his hands, discipleship became the clue to a radical ecclesiology and ethic marked above all by nonconformity and Christian integrity.

Bonhoeffer, of course, was not attempting a comprehensive theology of the Christian life: his book is an emergency work, directed to a church in peril. We in our turn would be unwise to over-invest in the theme of discipleship and expect that everything which needs to be said about the Christian life could be said under that head. Discipleship is only one among a range of motifs in the theology of the Christian life. But it is, I want to suggest, uniquely qualified to draw our attention to one feature of that life, namely its eschatological character, that is, the drastic separation which marks the lives of those who are called to be the followers of Christ. Discipleship means dislocation; and that dislocation is in an important sense a permanent characteristic of the Christian condition. A church which is aware that confessing Christ and following him entails a measure of isolation and loss of esteem is a church which is taking its eschatological condition seriously, and so a church about which we may entertain some hopes. Where discipleship has become a strange idiom,

¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

however, we may take that as a sign that the church may be disregarding its eschatological condition and fitting itself too snugly into the world.

But the motif of discipleship is not the only motif in the theology of the Christian life, and should not be extracted from its place in the wider scope of God's dealings with humankind as creator, reconciler and perfecter. Discipleship ought properly to be expounded with an eye to the more systematic theology of the nature and ends of human creatures in the economy of God's grace; if it is not, then the eschatological aspects of the Christian life can be isolated and inflamed in such a way that Christian existence collapses into a single moment. Nevertheless, the theme of discipleship should serve to remind us that theologies of Christian existence which eliminate the eschatological find it acutely difficult to articulate Christian *difference*. One does not need to look far to see the sad compromises into which neglect of this can betray us.

Let me move into the substance of my exposition with a few verses from the opening chapter of the Gospel of Mark:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'... Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.' And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him (Mark 1:9-11, 14-20).

We can try to explicate this event of the summons of the Lord and the obedient response of his hearers by asking three questions: (1) who is this one who calls to discipleship? (2) what is the substance of his call? (3) who are those who are called by him?

WHO CALLS TO DISCIPLESHIP?

Who is this one who passes along by the Sea of Galilee and calls Simon, Andrew, James and John, and in calling them also now calls us? By what authority and with what legitimacy does he issue this summons to them, and so also to us? The one who calls is Jesus, the Father's beloved Son;

his call is supremely authoritative and lawful because it is the call of the one who is in person the saving rule of God and who brings help and blessing to sinners.

Mark's account of the call of the first four disciples is preceded by his presentation of Jesus' baptism, which leads – after the brief interval of the temptation in the wilderness – to the announcement of the opening of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. The baptism is especially important because of its character as manifestation: there Jesus is disclosed as the one who in a wholly unique way bears to us the presence and action of God himself. When Jesus calls his hearers to follow him, therefore, he calls in the power of what has been declared of him at his baptism. What is the content of this declaration?

First, Jesus is the definitively new and unsurpassable revelation of God. At his baptism the heavens are 'torn apart' in a literally apocalyptic moment: God Almighty cleaves the world apart, comes down (cf. Isa. 64:1), and speaks to reveal the identity of Jesus. The sheer *intrusive* character of the event is striking. Jesus has not reached this point as the result of long ascetical training or study of the Torah: his status is simply declared in a single cataclysmic moment. In a real sense, Jesus does not *belong* here with 'all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem' (Mark 1:5); his baptism by John is not as it were his natural setting, reaffirming his kinship with others, but the occasion for an eschatological declaration of his difference. He is, as John confesses, 'mightier than I' (Mark 1:8). The coming of Jesus is thus not simply one more episode in the religious history of humankind. It shatters that history; as he appears, the old passes away and the new comes.

Second, what is declared of Jesus is that he is God's only Son, the unique object of the Father's good pleasure. 'Thou art my beloved Son', the divine voice announces, 'with thee I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11). Among the Old Testament material echoing in this statement is, of course, Psalm 2. That psalm speaks of the supreme lordship of the son who is appointed to rule, by virtue of which he is undefeated by 'the kings of the earth' (Ps. 2:2). 'The rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed' (Ps. 2:2); but their conspiracy is a derisory affair because of the divine decree: 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you' (Ps. 2:7). In the person of the Son, the eternal will of God to rule and bless all things will be brought to effect. It is this triumph of God's purpose in the Son which is announced at Jesus' baptism. *He* is God's Son; he is the beloved, loved of the Father in a singular way, delighted in by the one from whom he comes. He is all this antecedently, by nature and not by adoption. And

he is known to be such not by speculation or imaginative projection, but by the revelation of God.

At his baptism, therefore, Jesus is declared to be the definitive revelation of God, the only Son in and as whom God rules. This one, Mark tells us, *comes*: comes from Nazareth to the Jordan, comes from the wilderness into Galilee, and finally comes to the lakeshore and the first disciples. In the one who bears this divine status, there takes place a divine *movement*. At his coming, God himself comes; his nearness is the nearness of God. Later in the Christian theological tradition, this will be expressed by talking of the coming of Jesus as the divine mission, the Father's sending of the Son in which the divine procession is reiterated and externalized. For the moment, we simply note that for Mark he, the mightier one, the beloved, is the presence of God, God's being in movement towards his own.

This movement in which God comes brings about an entire reorganization of human life and history. The condensed statement which Mark sets at the opening of Jesus' public ministry sums this up: 'Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"' (Mark 1:14f.). Most basically, what Jesus proclaims is 'the gospel of God', that is, the good news whose content is nothing other than God himself. All that follows in Mark's story is 'gospel' because its subject and agent is the Lord God himself, the only hope of creatures. In the ministry and preaching of Jesus, therefore, we are faced not simply with a creaturely judgment, blessing and summons, but with God himself extending himself towards us. The good news of God is from God, about God, enacted and made known by God.

Because Jesus is in this way God's own action and self-communication, human life is qualified in a quite new way, for by the coming of Jesus, everything is redefined: 'The time is fulfilled.' With the coming of the Son of God, a definitively new stage in God's history with his creatures has opened up. Human history has been gathered together and taken to the climactic moment in which God's purpose from all eternity, secretly at work in the past, is now dramatically visible in the mission of the Son. The time of preparation and expectation is past; the eschaton, the new and final age, has broken in: 'The kingdom of God is near.' That is, in Christ God is present to rule. The creaturely realm is no longer ours to possess, defend or extend at will, no longer our territory, because one fact alone now determines that realm: God's kingdom is drawing near, and his nearness means that our pretence to be masters of our own terrain is overthrown. What Mark is reaching towards is, I think, a confession that with the

coming of God in Jesus, the great pretence is over, namely the pretence that human life is isolated from God, that we can go about our affairs as if we did not do so in his presence. The coming of Jesus puts an end to the destructive myth that God keeps his distance; in him, God loves us, drawing near and rescuing us from ruin.

The coming of God and his kingdom in Jesus is thus both a negation and an affirmation. The negation is this: in Jesus Christ, the world's pretended autonomy is finally and unconditionally cast down. But the affirmation is no less important: the coming of God in Christ is supremely *helpful*. God's rule does not obliterate human life, but restores it. It brings order, shape, coherence, direction; it makes possible the renewal of authentic creaturely form. It does so, of course, only by launching an onslaught on the disorderly, shapeless, incoherent and directionless reality with which we have surrounded ourselves and which we have, indeed, become. But the rule of God invades and assumes the reins precisely in order to bless human life, to come to our aid and re-establish us in our creatureliness and direct us to our perfection. It is in this sense that we may say that God's gracious eschatological rule perfects nature. Jesus' summons is a summons to life.

The time has come; God is near to demonstrate his saving, restorative rule. This divine movement is grace; but it is also command. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God meets us both as blessing and as obligation. In the same way that in the Old Testament revelation of God's purpose, election is always election to a way of life, so here: the announcement of the gospel brings with it the command of law, precisely because the gospel concerns God's *rule* in human life. Here the command is summed up with extreme compression: 'Repent and believe the gospel' (Mark 1:15). Repentance is not mere remorse, though it may include such; primarily it is conversion, that is, the redirection and renewal of human life following from the fact that God has already come among us and is already at work, making all things new. To repent is to confess this divine intervention; it is to acknowledge the fact that, though we have conspired to clear the world of the purpose and claim of God, God has not left us to rot but has come to us and reclaimed us with sovereign mercy as his own. Repentance therefore also includes a turn to the one who comes, in order to give ourselves to the new vocation which God has for his creatures. This is why repentance is inseparable from believing in the gospel. Conversion or repentance only makes sense on the basis of trust in the gospel, that is, on the basis of God's declaration of his saving presence. Repentance and faith together constitute the shape of human life which has been overtaken by the promise and call of God's kingdom in the person of the beloved Son.

Let us draw the threads together. Who is the one who calls us to discipleship? He is God's only Son. Manifest at his baptism as one who shares in the eternal being of the Father and who is accompanied by God the Holy Spirit, he is God's word and rule in person. In him our time and space are torn apart and remade into time and space for the presence of God. In and as this one, Jesus, God is with us. This is the one who calls. And this is why his call and claim are authoritative and legitimate. Why can he summon so unconditionally? Why is it that his call is not simply one more voice crying out to be heard, but a call which sets before us the one claim which transcends all others? How is it that he sets his claim before us not as an object for our inspection and consideration but as a claim to which we are already inescapably subject? The answer can only be this: the unconditional authority of his call and the legitimacy of its claim, are rooted in the fact that Jesus is who he is, the bearer and presence of God to us. His authority and legitimacy do not rest on the fact that we find him morally or religiously persuasive: in this matter, our judgement is not competent. He claims us as Lord because he is Lord; his claim has supreme authority and is supremely justified because it is *his*, the claim of the one who alone is in himself all authority and righteousness, and so who alone has the prerogative to make an absolute summons. Our next question is: what is the substance of his call? To what does he summon those whom he meets?

THE SUBSTANCE OF JESUS' CALL

The substance of Jesus' call is: Follow me. To orient our reflections on this simple and direct command, two preliminary characteristics need to be noted. First, as we have already remarked, it is a call of self-establishing, because divine, authority. The economy of Mark's presentation of the call narrative here (and also in the call of Levi in Mark 2) is remarkable: Jesus appears, issues his call, and those called follow immediately; the entire episode is over in a matter of moments. What we have here is not simply an instance of Mark's characteristic terseness; nor do we have a blueprint of the psychological processes of conversion. It is not a point about the disciples but about Jesus: an indication of the categorical authority of his call to follow. His is a call which demonstrates its authority in the act of being uttered. The summons comes without supporting evidence: no miracle, no discourse from Jesus to explicate his person. Rather, the call presents itself with all the self-evidence of the divine Word. It does not assert itself as if it expected to have to face the reality of opposition, resistance or counter-claim, but is a word of command which is calm, effortless and therefore properly and finally authoritative. It has *absolute*

force; it is beyond comparison; it occurs with true, legitimate, divine authority. In no way is it insecure, needing to press itself upon the attention of its hearers, for it simply makes itself known in a wholly immediate, unexplained way, presenting itself not for our judgement but for obedience. Why? Because here we have God speaking in person.

Second: this self-establishing divine call is the imperative force of God's grace. 'Grace' is the coming of Jesus. It is shorthand for the fact that in Jesus we have the enactment and therefore the manifestation of God's saving rule. In him we have God's servant and chosen one, the one on whom the Spirit rests and who will bring justice to the nations; in him we have one in whom God's righteousness will triumph by the making righteous of many (Isa. 42:1; 53:11). Grace is the coming of this one, his saving and restoring presence through which creaturely existence is reconstituted. But this presence is not only indicative but also imperative; it is grace as command and obligation, grace which not only justifies but also sanctifies, grace which elects but elects for active holiness. How else, indeed, would grace really be grace? If it did not present itself with this imperative import, if it did not also have as its end rekindling of obedience and renewal of life on the part of those whom it addresses, then it would not be the restoration of the covenant, but simply a unilateral declaration: 'You are my Son.' But that declaration concerning the Son is a declaration that the Son *rules* and therefore *calls*. His lordship is metaphysical; but because it is metaphysical it is also moral, a summons to life and direction. The deity of Christ *claims* us for itself.

What may we now go on to say about the substance of the claim as it announces itself here in the call: 'Follow me'? Jesus issues a call to *follow*. His summons, that is, is to life in a particular direction, characterised by a particular movement (in Mark's Gospel, of course, the motif of discipleship as following Jesus on a journey is especially prominent). Jesus' intervention in the lives of those to whom he comes is not only to be conceived as an ascription of status. Discipleship does indeed involve a change of status on the part of the one called; it is not simply a task but a task which rests upon a divine decision and determination. But here the point is that this divine determination is no mere happy possession of blessedness, on the basis of which the one called can enjoy some kind of achieved repose. It is appointment to movement, movement in relation to a greater divine movement which is already underway in Jesus himself, the movement of the coming of God. This movement on our part is what is indicated in the command to follow.

The following commanded by Jesus is a responsive movement on the part of the one called. The substance of Jesus' call is not that his hearers

should initiate or set a direction for themselves, but rather that they should move in a direction which has already been marked out in advance. What does the follower of Jesus do? *Follow*. Indeed, the call to follow Jesus involves renouncing self-direction, that is, abandoning an existing path and striking out along a new path which can only be entered upon as autonomy is broken. 'Following', as we shall see, is inseparable from 'cross-bearing'; the followers of Jesus are called to go in a direction they do not wish to go.

Further, the command is to follow at a distance. 'Follow after me', Jesus commands Simon and Andrew (Mark 1:17). In the movement required of the disciples, there can be no question of their being companions on Jesus' way in the sense of fellow-travellers of equal ability or dignity. Between the one who is followed and the one who follows there is always an unbridgeable distance – like the cloud and the pillar of fire in the wilderness, Jesus goes ahead of his followers. He is present with them; but he is present always as the transcendent Lord. Nor can there be any hope for the eventual closing of the gap between Jesus and those who follow. The distance between him and them is not such that we may expect that it will gradually narrow and finally close entirely, as the disciples grow in knowledge or skill or virtue. They are permanently, by nature and not merely temporarily, those who come after him. The summons to follow does not look ahead to growing proximity, but to a condition in which the disciples walk in the wake of Jesus, pulled along by his movement, set in motion by him but always *unlike* him and so *behind* him. In this connection, much can be made of the distinctiveness of following Jesus over against the relations between rabbi and pupil or between moral model and the one who imitates such an example. The pupil becomes a rabbi; the imitator grows like the model; but the disciple never moves beyond the condition of following. There is no assimilation to be awaited: even at the end of the disciples' journey with Jesus in Mark, after the resurrection, Jesus continues to 'go before' his disciples (Mark 16:7), anticipating them as they hasten in his direction.

The call, then, is to *follow*; and the following is always marked by the chasm between, on the one side, the electing God and, on the other, the elect. The substance of Jesus' call is, further, 'Follow *me*'. It is irreducibly personal, a call to enter into a movement which is a relation to Jesus himself. Everything hangs on this. Jesus speaks in his own name, with his own authority. He does not refer the one called to some other, not even to God himself. Discipleship is a matter of following Jesus as personal absolute, the absolute in person. It is not a command to take upon oneself a commitment to some cause, principle or truth beyond or behind Jesus, as

if Jesus were the symbol or highest instance of something other than himself. The name of Jesus cannot be eliminated without losing everything; as Bonhoeffer put it, in the matter of discipleship 'Jesus is the only content.'²

This point is particularly important to register because there exists a permanent temptation, theological and practical, to substitute something else for the offensively particular name of Jesus, to search for something more generic, something which does not bring with it the affront of Jesus' implausible and singular direction: 'Follow *me*'. It is a temptation to which the church has often succumbed and continues to do so: contemporary substitutes for the name of Jesus include: justice; spirituality; inclusiveness; orthodoxy; moral truth. However valuable some of these generic realities may appear to be, however much gospel resonance they may bring with them, they run the risk of abstracting from the pure singularity of Jesus and his command. His name – his non-transferrable identity as *this* one – is the one reality in which salvation is to be found. And his name is to be filled out, not by reference to some principle which he illustrates or which may even be drawn from him. He is the divine self-declaration in person; he is who he is.

Once again we sum up so far. Jesus the beloved Son goes his way. He enters into and moves through human history, cleaving open our time and space, reclaiming them as the domain of his lordship. His presence is what makes here and now into what they are: places and occasions in which we are encountered and blessed by him. In that encounter we are blessed, because we are ineluctably faced with the command of God: self-established, lawful, omnipotent, beyond any rivalry. We are set in motion as he strides ahead of us and call us to come after him. With this, we move to our third question: who are those who are called by him? What is to be said of those summoned by his command?

WHO DOES JESUS CALL?

Once again, the leanness of Mark's narrative helps set our thinking in the right direction. The sheer brevity of his presentation of those who are called is startling: we have their names, the activities they were about, their employment, but nothing more. Andrew, Simon, James, John, Levi, fishermen and a tax-collector. Beyond this, Mark has no interest; they have no significant features beyond this bare recital, which serves only to identify them. Unlike, for example, figures in the Lucan infancy narratives such as Zechariah and Elizabeth, those who receive the call of Jesus in

² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 59.

Mark have no history of expectation or preparation anterior to the coming of the Messiah. His arrival breaks in on them like an accident, cutting clean across the grain of their lives. There is no neat match between their past and their present; for Mark, the call to follow Jesus excludes any straightforward sense that the new life can be built on the foundations of the old. Jesus simply comes, apparently ignoring their existing world and announcing that from now on they are to follow him. What are we to make of this feature of the narrative? The point can be put negatively and positively.

Negatively, nothing can be said about the competence, suitability or readiness of those who are called. It is not that Mark lays especial emphasis at this point in his presentation of the disciples upon their incompetence, unsuitability or lack of readiness, though that will follow. At this early stage, it is simply that such matters are ignored, as having no bearing. One way of articulating this would be to say that the divine summons which sounds out in the command of Jesus is sheerly *creative*. It *makes* disciples, and makes them out of nothing. Jesus' call is not such that it reorganises or refocuses energies and abilities which pre-exist; it does not harness some antecedent capacity on the part of Simon, Andrew and the rest, recruiting them for the project of the coming kingdom. The disciples move, not from anticipation or eligibility, but from nothingness. Followers is what they are *not*; they are made such by the command. All that needs to be said about those called is to be found in the call and the one who calls.

Disciples, therefore are brought into being by Jesus' call; their following is an eschatological event, part of the new creation in which God in Christ makes all things new. Accordingly, to put the point positively, discipleship is a matter of election. Those who are encountered by Jesus and his call to follow him are faced by an unconditional determination and appointment. 'Follow me' is not an invitation but a command. In this call, there does not take place a meeting between equal partners: on the one side, Jesus and his call, and on the other those who attend to him and make of him what they will. The call of Jesus does not look to a future decision on the part of the disciple, by virtue of which it might become effective. Rather, the call sets before its hearer a decision which has *already* been made. It places the one called under a conclusion. Here in Jesus' call we do not have the first stages of the gathering of a voluntary assembly of those who choose discipleship; we have the outworking of the eternal divine purpose: he destined us in love.

Jesus' call is thus the revelation of God's determining will. As with the election of Israel, so here: the imperative 'You shall be my people' is an

imperative which brings a divine indicative to bear upon the life of those to whom it is uttered. To respond to this summons, to drop everything and follow the movement required by the Lord of the covenant, is simply to go the way which has been determined. It is to acknowledge the conclusion which has already been reached, to enact the vocation which has already been foreordained. The almost nonchalant way in which Jesus calls – *of course* following is the only way forward, the only possibility! – underlines the immutability of the divine decree which is here set in motion: what kind of impediment can there be?

Yet it would be incomplete to end the description of the disciple there. The conclusion under which those called by Jesus are placed is not a blank fate; it is appointment to a task, to life in a particular direction and movement. Those foreordained by God are appointed to a particular end, and to a history which moves towards that end. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of predestination to think of it as entailing immobility, passivity; creatures are foreordained by God to live and move and have their being. And so the revelation of God's conclusion in the call of Jesus is the revelation of the living and moving in which the disciples will have their being. God's call does not merely fix them, but ordains them to be and act. To follow the call of Jesus, to stand beneath this conclusion, is to be quickened.

This quickening is a matter for exploration in tomorrow's lecture. For the present, what is important to secure is that the call to discipleship is not Jesus as it were engaging in a kind of coaxing, influencing or demanding. It is Jesus setting in motion the eternal will of the Father. That will is absolute and antecedent, not contingent on the cooperation of creatures. But God's will is not blank necessity. God's will is the way which he has for us. His will is his law; and his law is not simply statute but the path of life. To exist under the conclusion of God's will is not to sit still but to walk. And it is to that walking that disciples are summoned by the one whose call undoes, remakes and blesses. His call is the way in which our appointment to life in the society of God reveals itself and makes itself effective; and therefore it is at its heart the summons of divine love.

CONCLUSION

By way of brief conclusion, let me offer two suggestions about how these reflections on the theology of discipleship may help us as we try to discern the church's task.

First, it is very important for us to grasp that the Gospel stories about Jesus and his disciples are stories which address us in a direct and

immediate way. They are not only records of what took place there and then; they are also the voice of the risen Christ to the company of his saints. Here Jesus lifts up his voice and instructs his church through the testimony of his apostles. In reading Mark, therefore, we are not simply immersing ourselves in an historical record from which we may perhaps be able to draw edifying pastoral implications. We are being addressed by the risen one about the situation of the people of God now. This is what is meant by speaking of Holy Scripture as the Word of God; we mean, not only that God has spoken but that God speaks. The event of Jesus' summons looks ahead to a history which continues to take place in the world. For the one who was appointed by the Father and empowered by the Spirit to command the world to follow him, not only was, but is; not only spoke but speaks; not only called but calls. The one whom Mark presents is the living one, the one who died and is alive for evermore. Accordingly, the event of his call to discipleship is not finished business. It extends with inexhaustible power into the present; it reiterates itself as Jesus Christ speaks and summons now. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ is among us exercising his prophetic office, manifesting himself to us, revealing to us both who we are and what his will is for us. If that is the case – if Jesus Christ truly is present and self-communicative, if there really is one among us from whose mouth there issues the sharp two-edged sword of the Word of God – then the situation which is described in Mark's presentation of the calling of the disciples is in some measure our situation. This is who we are. We also are encountered by this one, the beloved Son of God, the proclaimer of presence of God's kingdom. We also are addressed by his call; we also are appointed to heed him and move after him.

Jesus Christ is not absent and he is not silent; he is present and eloquent. It is out of this fact that we may begin to address some of the anxiety and distress which afflicts much of church life in the present. The church of Jesus Christ is the creature of the Word, and in the power of the Spirit it lives from the Word. That is, it comes into being and is sustained through the word of the gospel spoken by the living Christ. At times, however, the church is persuaded that Jesus Christ no longer speaks, or at least does so with a voice so faint as to be scarcely audible. The church falls into that persuasion for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes it's because very clever people tell the church that what God says is a great deal more complicated, or difficult of access than the church once thought, and that the church requires their professional services to help them pick out the important bits from the rubble. Sometimes it's because hard-pressed and earnest officers of the church lose their grip on the gospel. Most often it's

because all of us in some way stop listening to the divine Word: we know that it is the only word which can absolve us and bless us with life, but we find its judgement and exposure hard to take, and so we become selectively deaf. What hope is there for us? If in this situation the church is to be renewed in its discipleship and hear the summons of Christ, it can only be by making its own the confession and prayer of the psalm: 'My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me according to thy word!' (Ps. 119:25). That prayer is the clue to the church's renewal, because it is the clue to the church's being; that is, we can pray that prayer and expect an answer, because there really is a Word of God, borne to us by the Spirit from the living Christ through Holy Scripture. He speaks, and listening to his voice, the dead receive new life.

Second: a church which lives from the Word of the living Christ will be able to adopt a rather free and sometimes unimpressed attitude to the other voices which clamour for its attention as it tries to live the life of discipleship and extend Jesus' call to others. The church learns what it is and how it is to act by sitting in the school of the gospel, there to learn of the ways of God with and for his saints. Because of what the church is taught there – because it sees itself and its surrounding context, its friends and its self-styled enemies, in the gospel's light – it will not be too affected by all the other things that it is told. Above all, the church will not let itself be trapped into reinventing itself endlessly for the sake of keeping up with the rhythm of the world. An excitable and unstable church cannot properly minister the gospel, and stability comes from constant, patient attention to Christ and his Word, and the avoidance of overstimulation. Of course, the church will be alert to and interested in what the world says; it will listen courteously and genuinely, hoping to catch an echo of the Holy Spirit's voice. But it will not be mesmerised or overawed by what is said. This does not mean that the church is to be some sort of catatonic institution, self-absorbed and unresponsive. It is simply to say that the gospel outbids the world every time. Jesus himself speaks more authoritatively, legitimately, winningly and interestingly than the world. If the church really loves the world, then the church will give its mind to listen to Jesus' prophetic presentation of himself; it will attend to the gospel, not as something it already knows but as something it must always learn. Hearing the gospel will help the church to help the world. It will enable the church to see the world without the masks which the world puts on to hide from the things which it fears or hates or longs for but dare not face. Maybe the world is late modern, postmodern, late capitalist, globalized, and so on. But to the church it has been given to confess where we really are. We are at the place where the living Jesus accosts us, and all

around us, with his infinite mercy and love; where he presents us with the great divine *fait accompli*; where he calls us to follow; and where he expects of us the obedience which is both his due and our fulfilment: 'They left... and followed him.'