

DISCIPLESHIP IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOTERIOLOGY

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Abstract

Contrary to the general tendency to overlook discipleship as a prominent topic in the various loci of systematic theology, this article argues that this is a fruitful topic in the context of soteriology, assuming that discipleship is an integral part of the experience of the process of salvation in the development of Christian life. In order to constructively articulate the implications of discipleship for soteriology, this article investigates the concept of discipleship in the NT (the Gospels and Acts) and briefly dialogues with Bonhoeffer's reflection on discipleship and grace, since it constitutes a relevant example of a systematic articulation between discipleship and soteriology in contemporary theology. Considering the biblical picture of discipleship and Bonhoeffer's systematic articulation of discipleship and salvific grace, the article depicts the present experience of salvation in terms of a concrete process that involves the life of discipleship, not as a form of salvation by works, but rather as the divine gift of costly grace.

Keywords: Discipleship; Systematic theology; Soteriology; Grace; Bonhoeffer.

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O DISCIPULADO NA TEOLOGIA SISTEMÁTICA: IMPLICAÇÕES PARA A SOTERIOLOGIA

Resumo

Em contraste com a tendência geral de não explorar o discipulado como um tema proeminente nos diferentes loci da teologia sistemática, o presente artigo argumenta que este é um tema frutífero no contexto da soteriologia, assumindo que o discipulado é parte integrante da experiência do processo de salvação no desenvolvimento da vida cristã. Para articular construtivamente as implicações do discipulado para a soteriologia, este artigo investiga o conceito de discipulado no NT (os Evangelhos e Atos) e dialoga brevemente com a reflexão de Bonhoeffer sobre discipulado e graça, pois esta constitui um exemplo relevante de articulação sistemática entre discipulado e soteriologia na teologia contemporânea. À luz do quadro bíblico do discipulado e da articulação sistemática de Bonhoeffer entre discipulado e graça salvífica, o artigo descreve a experiência presente da salvação em termos de um processo concreto que envolve a vida de discipulado, não como uma forma de salvação pelas obras, mas sim como o dom divino da graça preciosa.

Palavras-chave: Discipulado; Teologia sistemática; Soteriologia; Graça; Bonhoeffer.

EL DISCIPULADO EN LA TEOLOGÍA SISTEMÁTICA: IMPLICACIONES PARA LA SOTERIOLOGÍA

Resumen

En contraste con la tendencia general de no explorar el discipulado como un tema prominente en los diferentes loci de la teología sistemática, el presente artículo argumenta que este es un tema fructífero en el contexto de la soteriología, asumiendo que el discipulado es una parte integral de la experiencia del proceso de salvación en el desarrollo de la vida cristiana. Para articular de manera constructiva las implicaciones del discipulado para la soteriología, este artículo investiga el concepto de discipulado en el NT (los Evangelios y Hechos) y dialoga brevemente con la reflexión de Bonhoeffer sobre el discipulado y la gracia, ya que constituye un ejemplo relevante de articulación sistemática entre discipulado y soteriología en la teología contemporánea. A la luz del panorama bíblico del discipulado y de la articulación sistemática de Bonhoeffer entre discipulado y gracia salvífica, el artículo describe la experiencia presente de la salvación en términos de un proceso concreto que involucra la vida de discipulado, no como una forma de salvación por obras, sino más bien como el don divino de la gracia costosa.

Palabras clave: Discipulado; Teología sistemática; Soteriología; Gracia; Bonhoeffer.



INTRODUCTION

Overall, the theme of discipleship is explored in biblical (see, e.g., Dunn, 1992; Longenecker, 1996; Howard-Brook; Ringe, 2002) and practical (see, e.g., Hull, 2006) theology. In systematic theology, the most intuitive *locus* for the discussion of discipleship would probably be ecclesiology, given the assumption that the discipleship process occurs in the context of the Christian community (the church). Yet, discipleship is not customarily explored, at least not explicitly or directly, as a traditional topic in ecclesiology sections of volumes of systematic theology. If this lack is observed in ecclesiology sections, we should not expect to see much on discipleship in the systematic discussion of other theological *loci*.² However, this article argues that the theme of discipleship is particularly fruitful in the context of soteriology, assuming that it is an integral part of the experience of the process of salvation in the development of Christian life.

At least two examples in the literature emphasize the importance of the relationship between discipleship and soteriology. The first one comes from *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, in which Dallas Willard underscores, “how one understands salvation turns out to be the key to what one makes of discipleship” (Willard, 2010, p. 239). Nonetheless, he assesses that post-WWII evangelicalism has “no essential place for discipleship in its view of salvation” (Willard, 2010, p. 239). Willard attributes this problem to a narrow view of soteriology in post-WWII evangelicalism, as it narrows the gospel down to mere “forgiveness of sins and assurance of heaven after death upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ—or, minimally, profession of faith in his having suffered the penalty for our sins upon the cross” (Willard, 2010, p. 237). Based on this assessment, he suggests that post-WWII evangelicalism should develop a theology of discipleship to “naturally conduct its converts and adherents into a life of discipleship” (Willard, 2010, p. 245). More specifically, this suggestion assumes that soteriology needs to relate to discipleship, since, according to Willard, “the doctrine of grace and salvation” in post-WWII evangelicalism “prevents it from developing an understanding of discipleship that makes discipleship [...] a natural part of salvation” (Willard, 2010, p. 245).

² I acknowledge that the concept of discipleship is broadly used in theological and doctrinal studies. See Johnson (2015); Volpe (2013).



Another example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's influential reflection on discipleship in contemporary theology (see Bonhoeffer, 1963; Taylor, 2020). While his reflection is not necessarily articulated in the systematic overall context of soteriology, Bonhoeffer insightfully thinks of discipleship in relation to salvific grace. More specifically, he contrasts two types of grace, namely, *costly* grace and *cheap* grace. This distinction ultimately implies that only *costly* grace is genuine grace. It is noteworthy, especially considering the purposes of the present article, that *costly* grace is particularly defined by the reality of discipleship. On the other hand, *cheap* grace describes the absence of discipleship. The strong connection between discipleship and grace in Bonhoeffer provides a promising perspective in contemporary theology for the systematic articulation of discipleship in the context of soteriology, as I will further explain in the final part of this article.

Nevertheless, before I start the constructive task of formulating the topic of discipleship from a soteriological perspective, it is important to point out what is probably an influential reason why the connection between discipleship and salvation has often been neglected or insufficiently developed in many Protestant circles: a soteriological understanding of discipleship could be seen as salvation by works. For instance, Robert Guelich indicates that, given the perspective offered in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer could "be accused of surrendering his Lutheran heritage of sola fide for salvation by works" (Guelich, 1982, p. 22). Moreover, in his discussion of discipleship in the Synoptic Gospels, Alan Stanley devotes part of his study to the reflection on the relationship between discipleship and salvation, especially because "there are some who view the conditions of discipleship as 'works'" (Stanley, 2006, p. 68). In fact, if we take into account Willard's (2010) assessment of post-WWII evangelicalism, the concern with discipleship and works could explain why contemporary evangelicalism tends to reduce the understanding of salvation basically to the forgiveness of sins at the cross instead of broadening soteriology to a process that also includes the life of discipleship. Therefore, as I engage in the constructive task of thinking about discipleship from a soteriological perspective in this article, I have to consider the implications of a potential relationship between discipleship and works for understanding salvation.

With this soteriological focus in view, I will explore the concept of discipleship in the NT and briefly dialogue with Bonhoeffer's reflection on discipleship and grace. The article is



organized into four main parts. First, I will broadly survey the specific terminology for disciple(s) in the NT (the Gospels and Acts). In this section, I will make more comments about the occurrences of the language of discipleship in Acts, considering that the next sections will be focused on the Gospels. While the movement from comments on Acts to more specific remarks about the Gospels in the other sections of the article does not follow a historical sequence of discipleship in the NT, the systematic effect of this approach is that we first get an overall picture of discipleship in the church (Acts), and then move back to see the dynamics of its initial development in the interaction of Jesus with the disciples in the Gospels.

Based on the overview offered in the first section, the second section will provide a more detailed reading of discipleship in the Gospels by delineating the overall discussion of this topic in Matthew. Given the impossibility of a larger scope of analysis in this article, the selection of Matthew is justified by the fact that it is one of the books with the greatest number of occurrences of discipleship terminology in the NT, along with the Gospel of John, and that Matthew's account has many parallels with the other synoptic gospels.

In light of the overall picture of discipleship in Matthew provided in the second section, I will offer a few remarks on how the other Gospels deepen and/or balance the points presented in Matthew in the third section. Then, considering the biblical discussion of the previous steps, I will discuss Bonhoeffer's reflection on discipleship and grace in the fourth section, as his reflection constitutes a relevant example of a systematic articulation between discipleship and soteriology in contemporary theology. Finally, as I summarize the main points of the biblical picture of discipleship and Bonhoeffer's systematic articulation of discipleship and salvific grace in my concluding remarks, I will highlight a few suggestions about the connection between discipleship and soteriology. Overall, the suggestions envisage salvation as a concrete process, involving the life of discipleship, in the reflection of systematic theology.

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

As M. J. Wilkins points out, the concept of discipleship in the NT can be understood in two senses. The narrower literal sense describes the historical relationship between master and disciple, while the broader religious sense refers to the experience of Christian life as a whole (Wilkins, 1992, p. 182). Obviously, these two senses are not mutually exclusive. Both



will be explored in this article, but there is a greater interest in the broad sense of the term, where the connections between discipleship and soteriology become clearer, given that salvation involves the experience of the Christian life as a whole. From this perspective, discipleship constitutes a concrete manifestation of the experience of the process of salvation in Christian life.

Investigating the theme of discipleship in the NT opens up different possibilities for study (see, e.g., Longenecker, 1996). For the purposes of this article, I will use the criterion of occurrences of the Greek noun μαθητής. According to Bauer *et al.* (2000, p. 609), this noun conveys two interrelated meanings. The first has a more basic sense, and the second elaborates on the first meaning: (1) “*pupil, apprentice*” (one who learns through the instruction of another); (2) “*disciple, adherent*” (one who is “constantly associated with someone who has a pedagogical reputation” or a particular vision). The relationship of μαθητής with teaching and learning becomes even more evident as we note that the verb μανθάνω basically means “to learn” (Bauer *et al.*, 2000, p. 615).

A survey of the 261 occurrences of μαθητής in the NT shows that the term appears in the gospels and Acts with the following frequency: 72 times in Matthew, 46 times in Mark, 37 times in Luke, 78 times in John, and 28 times in Acts.³ The various occurrences indicate that μαθητής is predominantly used as a reference to the disciples of Jesus, but it also describes the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees (cf. Mark 2:18), and even the disciples of Saul (Acts 9:25). With regard to Jesus’ disciples, μαθητής refers both to the twelve specifically (cf. Matt 10:1), and more generally to the group of followers beyond the twelve (cf. John 6:66; Acts 6:2). Interestingly, the Gospel of John also speaks of a secret disciple of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, who avoided open discipleship for fear of the Jewish leaders (John 19:38).

The book of Acts reports the multiplication of the number of disciples (Acts 6:1, 6; 14:21) and names several of them: Ananias (Acts 9:10), Saul (Acts 9:26), Tabitha (Acts 9:36), Timothy (Acts 16:1), and Mnason (Acts 21:16). By pointing out that “in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians,” Acts 11:26 (ESV)⁴ seems to suggest that the term disciple basically denotes in the NT what we call a Christian. Saul’s persecution of the church is described as a

³ Search results from Logos Bible Software (lemma:μαθητής), *Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament*, 28th edition.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible references are taken from the 2001 English Standard Version.



mortal threat “against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). In addition, the plural form μαθητάς is used to refer to the believers in Damascus (Acts 9:19), the believers in Antioch (Acts 11:26), the converts in Derbe (Acts 14:21), the believers in the region of Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:23), the believers in Achaia (Acts 18:27), the believers in Ephesus (Acts 19:1), the believers in Tyre (Acts 21:4), and the believers in Caesarea (Acts 21:16). Overall, in the narrative of Acts, the terminology of μαθητής (especially in its plural form) is used to describe the Christian community in general.

In fact, the growth of the Christian community, described in terms of disciples, in Acts raises interesting soteriological questions. In Acts 6:1 and 7, the disciples are multiplying, and this language is associated with obeying faith (Acts 6:7). This growth is also expressed in Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 11:24. Even though these passages do not use the term μαθητής, they underline the same idea of the growth of disciples highlighted in chapter 6, and this growth is portrayed through the language of *addition* (Greek verb προστίθωμι), emphasizing baptism (Acts 2:41), salvation (Acts 2:47), and belief (Acts 5:14). According to Acts 2:47, “the Lord *added* to their number day by day *those who were being saved*” (προσέτιθει τοὺς σωζομένους, emphasis supplied). Thus, the parallel reading of the *addition* passages (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 11:24), especially considering the soteriological emphasis of Acts 2:47 and the multiplication of disciples in Acts 6, suggests that discipleship is associated with soteriology in the description of the growth of the Christian community. Notably, when we consider the context of Acts 2:38 in relation to the language of addition in 2:41, the soteriology implied in the addition passages does not refer only to belonging (or being added) to a community of disciples but closely follows the soteriological events of personal repentance and baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of [...] sins,” and the reception of “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Therefore, the forgiveness of sins in Christ is the crucial starting point for thinking about salvation. Yet, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the experience of belonging to a community of disciples indicates that salvation is more than the event of forgiveness of sins, and implies a process of transformation and communal service, which seems to be captured by the soteriological language of ongoing action: “being saved” (Acts 2:47).

The connection between discipleship and soteriology can also be observed in the Gospels, which are the focus of discussion in the next sections, starting with the picture of discipleship in Matthew.



DISCIPLESHIP (AND SOTERIOLOGY) IN MATTHEW

Taking into account the alternation of narrative and discourse in Matthew's literary structure (see McKnight, 1992, p. 531), this gospel presents narratives that portray the disciples' actions and discourses where Jesus teaches something about discipleship.⁵

The narrative depicting the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Matt 4:12-25) highlights the preaching of the kingdom of heaven and healings (Matt 4:23). In this context, the fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John are called (Matt 4:18-22). Jesus' invitation emphasizes that he will make them "fishers of people" (Matt 4:19), and they immediately respond by leaving everything and following him (Matt 4:20, 22).

This narrative precedes the discourse of Matt 5:1-7:29, which is the Sermon on the Mount. Without disregarding the crowd as part of the audience (Matt 5:1; 7:28), the introduction to this section underscores that the discourse is a teaching to the disciples, who were close to Jesus (Matt 5:1-2). The first part of the discourse (Matt 5:3-12), known as the Beatitudes, underlines access to the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3, 10), the inheritance of the earth (Matt 5:5), and seeing God (Matt 5:8). While these expressions have a soteriological connotation, they also imply an inversion of values, since the reason for joy or beatitude (Μακάριοι) is paradoxically related to adverse situations such as poverty of spirit (Matt 5:3), weeping (Matt 5:4), and persecution (Matt 5:10-12). The assurance of a great reward in heaven is affirmed both at the end of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:12) and in the rest of the discourse, in the context of giving alms in secret (Matt 6:1, 4), praying in secret (Matt 6:6), and fasting in secret (Matt 6:18). The inversion of values stipulates here an attitude of humility rather than the attempt to show off righteous or pious deeds (Matt 6:1). Moreover, Jesus' teaching highlights the importance of entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:20; 7:21), mentions the danger of hell (Matt 5:29-30), and contrasts the wide way/gate leading to destruction with the narrow way/gate to life (Matt 7:13-14).

In the narrative (Matt 8:1-9:34) following this discourse, the disciple's action is ideally portrayed in terms of following Jesus (Matt 8:21-23). But those who follow him are afraid and show little faith amid a storm (Matt 8:25-26). In the discourse (Matt 9:36-11:1) that follows this narrative, the reference to disciple(s) focuses on the twelve, who are individually named

⁵ For a helpful study on discipleship in Matthew, see Wilkins (1988).



(Matt 10:2-4) and are “called” (verb προσκαλέω) by Jesus to exercise ministry with authority over unclean spirits and all diseases (Matt 10:1). As Jesus gives them authority, he sends them out with specific instructions (Matt 10:6-11:1), in which Jesus indicates that “a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Matt 10:24).

In the narrative of Matthew 13:54-17:27, the disciples are unable to cast out demons, as they had hoped, due to their little faith (Matt 17:19-20). In Matthew 14:26, they are fearful again at sea, as they wrongly assume they are seeing a ghost. In the context of Matthew 16, Jesus becomes more explicit in the discussion of the identity of the Son of Man (Matt 16:13-20) and begins to underline the prediction of his suffering death and resurrection (Matt 16:21). Following this Christological perspective, Jesus teaches that a true disciple is marked by humble self-denial, in the sense that following him implies self-denial, the crucifixion of self-interest (Matt 16:24).

In the discourse of Matthew 18:1-19:1, Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven challenges their mindset by seeing greatness in the humble position of children (Matt 18:4). From this standpoint, the conversion of the disciples involves a reversal of human values about greatness that is necessary for entering the kingdom (Matt 18:3). Ironically, in the narrative of Matthew 19:2-20:34, the disciples rebuke those bringing children to Jesus (19:13) but are confused about Jesus’ affirmation of the difficulty of a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:23-24). Astonished by Jesus’ statement, they raise a soteriological question: “Who then can be saved?” (Matt 19:25). Paradoxically, Jesus answers that salvation is humanly impossible but divinely possible: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26). In fact, Jesus’ dialogue with a young man (Matt 19:16-22) who “had great possessions” (Matt 19:22) is the narrative that precedes this conversation with the disciples about the difficulty a rich person faces in entering the kingdom. Indeed, the dialogue begins with the young man’s question about what one must “do to have eternal life” (Matt 19:16). Jesus’ response initially refers to the importance of keeping the commandments (Matt 19:17-19), but the climax of the answer points to the ideal of storing up treasure in heaven, which involves selling one’s possessions, giving to the poor, and following Jesus (Matt 19:21). In contrast to the call to discipleship of the first disciples, who immediately left everything and followed Jesus (Matt 4:20, 22), the young man sadly went away because “he had great possessions” (Matt 19:22). Indeed, Peter’s



question contrasts the young man's reaction with the response of the first disciples: "we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matt 19:27). Jesus replies by assuring them of the reward of sitting with him on the glorious throne in the future kingdom (Matt 19:28) and of eternal life for those who left their possessions and family for his name's sake (Matt 19:29). It is significant that Jesus concludes his teaching on eternal life by highlighting a reversal: "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matt 19:30).

Finally, in the narrative of Jesus' passion and death, the disciples' weakness is strongly emphasized. Peter and the other disciples claim that they would never deny Jesus and are even ready to die with him (Matt 26:35). Nevertheless, they slept instead of watching and praying with Jesus (Matt 26:40, 45), and eventually fled when he was arrested (Matt 26:56). At the end of the gospel, however, there is a positive note about discipleship. The resurrected Christ commands his disciples to make new disciples, baptizing and teaching them to observe what the disciples have learned from Jesus (Matt 28:19). The occurrences of μαθητής in Acts, particularly underscoring the multiplication of disciples, as mentioned in the previous section, seem to attest to the fulfillment of Jesus' command at the end of Matthew.

In light of this narrative overview of the references to the language of discipleship in Matthew, what could be said about the relationship between discipleship and soteriology? First, discipleship begins with Jesus' call to follow him. A positive response to this call involves leaving everything to follow Jesus immediately. One of the main goals of this call is to attract people ("fishers of people") to discipleship. In the process of leaving and following, there is a radical rethinking and reversal (conversion) of the traditional (selfish) values of greatness in human society. A proper understanding of this reversal is informed by Jesus' teaching on what it means to be happy or blessed in reference to those who will inherit the kingdom of heaven. To a large extent, the discussion of salvation is related to belonging and entering God's kingdom. Paradoxically, salvation is humanly impossible and only divinely possible. Humility is the real path to greatness in the divine inversion of human values. If the climax of messianic action is suffering, death, and resurrection, the path of discipleship (following Jesus) is the way of humble resignation but of ultimate reward in the kingdom of heaven.

Strikingly, Matthew not only presents the ideal of discipleship but also vividly portrays the reality of its human ambiguities, given the disciples' limitations and imperfections. Clearly, they follow Jesus. But they have little faith, are overwhelmed by fear in challenging situations,



and fail to carry out their ministry when they try to cast out demons. They do not appreciate the humble status of children and are astonished by the idea that human greatness and riches are a challenge to divine salvation. Furthermore, the disciples fail in their inability to keep watching and praying and, more remarkably, in the eventual abandonment of the master at his arrest and death. Despite these striking failures, the risen Christ maintains his grand plans for the disciples, who will make other new disciples, and the book of Acts testifies to the success of this continuity plan. This provides a concrete example of human impossibility and divine possibility.

BRIEF NOTES ON DISCIPLESHIP (AND SOTERIOLOGY) IN THE OTHER GOSPELS

There is a wealth of information about discipleship in the other gospels, which cannot be explored in the limited space of this article.⁶ Nonetheless, I will briefly highlight relevant points about discipleship in Mark, Luke, and John that enrich the overall picture outlined above of this topic in Matthew.

In Mark, the disciples' ambiguities and shortcomings are emphasized even more than in Matthew.⁷ One important example is how Mark portrays the disciples' misunderstanding of Christ's teaching about his suffering and death as a crucial mark of his messianic work. There are three cycles in the gospel (Mark 8:31-34; 9:30-37; 10:33-45) that attest to their reaction and begin right after Peter affirms Jesus' messianic identity (Mark 8:27-30).⁸ Each cycle is composed of three main parts: (1) Christ's prediction of his humiliating suffering and death (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33); (2) the disciples' reaction reveals incomprehension (Mark 8:32; 9:33-34; 10:35-41); (3) Christ teaches what it means to be a genuine disciple, who, like the Messiah, is defined by the relativization of human greatness and experiences the greatness of humility (Mark 8:33-35; 9:35-37; 10:42-45). At least two points can be highlighted in this Markan picture of discipleship. First, the lack of proper understanding regarding the messianic work leads to the misunderstanding of what it means to be a disciple, especially considering that the disciple is the one who follows in the footsteps of the messianic master. If there is no room for humiliation and suffering in the definition of what it means to be the Messiah, who is

⁶ For a helpful overview of discipleship in the gospels, see Wilkins (1992, p. 182-188).

⁷ For helpful studies on discipleship and salvation in Mark, see Colijn (1998); Markusse (2018).

⁸ See Strauss (2007, p. 184-185).



supposedly depicted only in human terms of greatness and honor, then discipleship must be thought of only in terms of human greatness and honor as well. Conversely, the better the work of the Messiah is understood, the better the meaning of discipleship is comprehended. In other words, the best way to properly understand discipleship is by seeking to comprehend the messianic work.

Like in Matthew 16:25, Jesus' explanation of the meaning of discipleship in Mark's first cycle (Mark 8:33-35) uses soteriological language. Following Jesus on the path of self-denial and the cross means saving one's life, as paradoxically his/her life is offered/lost for the sake of Christ and his gospel (Mark 8:35). In the explanation of the meaning of discipleship in the second cycle (Mark 9:35-37), Jesus emphasizes the inversion of the first and the last, stressing the idea being "servant of all" (Mark 9:35). From the perspective of human values, the servant is the last. But from a messianic perspective, which is a reversal of human values about greatness, the last becomes the first precisely and paradoxically using service. In light of this reversal, Jesus emphasizes the humble greatness of a child (Mark 9:37). In Mark 10:15, Jesus teaches that how a child receives the kingdom of God provides a paradigm for all who wish to enter the kingdom. Following this scene with the children (Mark 10:13-16), Jesus dialogues with the rich young man (Mark 10:17-22) and emphasizes the tension between riches and salvation, which leads to the conversation with Peter and other disciples about the reward for those who leave everything to follow Jesus (Mark 10:23-31). In this context, the third cycle about the Messiah and discipleship in Mark begins. Jesus reaffirms the prediction of his sufferings and death (Mark 10:32-33), which is ironically followed by James and John's request for honor and greatness in the kingdom (Mark 10:35-41). The cycle concludes with Jesus' explanation of genuine discipleship that finds greatness in service to others (Mark 10:44), for this is what the Messiah came to do in the world. In fact, Christ's service costs his own life, as the Son of Man gives "his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

These cycles suggest a soteriological principle: the disciples will receive a heavenly reward. But the reward does not come as a result of the pursuit of human greatness, meritorious works, or honorable achievements, but rather as a divine gift of superabundant blessing, considering the losses related to the high cost of service rendered by the disciple, who does not spare even his/her own life. Thus, by giving up one's life in service to Christ and others, the disciple finds salvation (Mark 8:35).



Within this framework, the Gospel of Luke significantly contributes to a theology of discipleship is the emphasis on the cost of discipleship. While in the parallel account of Matthew 10:37-38 Jesus speaks of situations when someone is not worthy of him, Luke 14:26-33 portrays these situations as conditions for discipleship. More specifically, anyone who comes to Jesus but loves one of his/her family members or his/her own life more, cannot be a disciple of Christ (Luke 14:26). Likewise, anyone who does not take up their cross and follow Jesus cannot be his disciple (Luke 14:27). Jesus illustrates these conditions in terms of cost calculation and planning (Luke 14:28-32), and concludes that “any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). While these teachings point to the high cost of discipleship, it is also significant that the disciples themselves do not seem to be fully aware in the narrative of the high cost of the messianic work and, consequently, of the real cost involved in their own discipleship. The disciples’ ambiguities of misunderstanding and other limitations represent an important aspect that must be included in this picture of discipleship. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, Peter indicates that the disciples left everything and followed Jesus, which was an attitude different from the situation of the rich young man.

In the context of the Gospel of John, several disciples (in the broad sense of followers of Jesus) abandoned the master after hearing his speech and having considered it too harsh (John 6:60-66). But the twelve remained with him because, according to Peter, they believed that Jesus has “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). In addition, Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple (John 19:38, this appears to be the case with Nicodemus; cf. John 19:39) out of his fear of the Jewish authorities. However, Joseph was proactive in taking care of Jesus’ body on the occasion of his death, in a context where most of his visible disciples had abandoned him. The combination of this picture of secret discipleship in John with the picture of a high cost for discipleship in the Synoptic gospels, which is also underscored in John 6:60-66, suggests that the way and the time the cost is experienced may vary, according to different circumstances and personal decisions.

BONHOEFFER’S REFLECTION ON DISCIPLESHIP AND SALVIFIC GRACE

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (1906-1945) reflections on discipleship and salvific grace seem to capture and articulate many of the points made in the previous sections on discipleship in



the Gospels. His conception of discipleship and salvation challenges a merely abstract understanding of divine grace, seen merely as doctrine, principle, or system. This point should not detract systematic theology from the task of conceptually articulating soteriology but, at the same time, it suggests that systematic reflections on soteriology should use the narrative picture of discipleship in the New Testament as a window into concrete observations of salvific grace in Christian life.

Before we turn to the content of these reflections on discipleship, it is important to briefly describe the historical and concrete context of Bonhoeffer's work on discipleship. In the context of Nazi domination in Germany, Bonhoeffer directed a clandestine theological seminary for pastors of the German Confessing Church in Finkenwald. The seminary was in operation until 1937, when it was closed down by the Gestapo (Nazi police) and he was forbidden to teach and publish books. It was during this period that he wrote, based on notes prepared for his students on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, what is probably his most famous book *Nachfolge* (The Cost of Discipleship), published in 1937. The German title conveys the idea of *following*.

Bonhoeffer's connection between discipleship and soteriology is observed in the brilliant contrast between costly grace (with discipleship) and cheap grace (without discipleship), as grace is a crucial component of soteriological reflection. The German theologian argues that "cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth" (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 45). This "cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross" (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 47). In contrast, "costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has [...] it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him" (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 47).

Bonhoeffer highlights the experience of two key figures in the gospels in his reflection about discipleship and the contrast between costly grace and cheap grace. In both cases, the focus of discipleship is on following Jesus. Peter is the first important character, who accepted Jesus' calling to discipleship. Bonhoeffer points out that Jesus' initial and final interaction with Peter in the gospels is defined by a call to discipleship. "On two separate occasions Peter received the call: 'Follow me.' It was the first and last word Jesus spoke to his disciple (Mark



1.17; John 21.22)” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 48). The German theologian emphasizes that “In the life of Peter grace and discipleship are inseparable” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 49).

The other important character from the gospels mentioned in Bonhoeffer’s discussion on discipleship and grace is the young rich man, who did not accept Jesus’ call to discipleship. The German theologian argues that Jesus’ command to the young rich man to sell his possessions is not the main point about his access to the kingdom of God (salvation). Instead, Jesus’ key point concerns discipleship and the kingdom (salvation). The command to sell is a preparation for true discipleship. As Bonhoeffer explains, “*First*, the young man must go and sell all that he has and give to the poor, and *then* come and follow. Discipleship is the end” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 83). More specifically, the German theologian understands Jesus’ command to the young man to sell his possessions as the dying of self-interest: “Jesus’ summons to the rich young man was calling him to die, because only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ. In fact, every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 99). In this point about true discipleship being preceded by the death of self-interest, Bonhoeffer discerns the profound connection between a crucial element in the definition of Christology and a crucial element in the definition of discipleship in the synoptic gospels. More precisely, “just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 96). The concept of costly grace encapsulates this notion of discipleship. This grace “is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 47).

As the German theologian reflects on the history of Christian theology and practice, he regrets that “Costly grace has turned into cheap grace without discipleship” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 53). For instance, he stipulates that monasticism “transformed the humble work of discipleship into the meritorious activity of the saints” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 50). This affirmation assumes that discipleship is, unfortunately, transformed into salvation by works. At the same time, Bonhoeffer criticizes the opposing view that seeks to separate discipleship from salvation with the intention of avoiding the danger of salvation by works. He argues that it is a “fatal misunderstanding of Luther” to think that genuine salvific grace excuses one “from obedience to the command of Jesus” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 52). Instead, the German theologian maintains that when Luther spoke of grace, he “always implied as a corollary that



it cost him his own life, the life which was now for the first time subjected to the absolute obedience of Christ. Only so could he speak of grace” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 53).

In opposition to salvation by works, Bonhoeffer explains that discipleship is not born out of human desire or initiative. Instead, the path to discipleship begins with Christ’s call (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 68). Discipleship is not an offer one makes to Jesus but constitutes a response of faith in the call without any intrinsic worth or merit of its own. (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 94, 51). To use the beginning of Peter’s experience of discipleship as an example, he “cannot achieve his own conversion” but “can leave his nets” in response to Jesus’ call (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 70). As the German theologian points out, “The first step of obedience proves to be an act of faith in the word of Christ” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 72). In short, Jesus’ “call to discipleship is a gift of grace, and [...] the call is inseparable from the grace” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 55).

Bonhoeffer summarizes the connection between discipleship and salvific grace as follows: “discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and [...] grace simply means discipleship” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 60).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rich conception of discipleship in the NT and Bonhoeffer’s insightful discussion of costly grace and discipleship indicate that discipleship must be a crucial element in the systematic reflection of soteriology. The biblical materials provide the foundation for the articulation of systematic thinking on soteriology and discipleship, and Bonhoeffer’s theology of discipleship seems to offer a helpful example of systematic articulation of biblical materials, inasmuch as his theology is proven to be biblical. In light of the discussion provided in this article, at least four points summarize the implications of the biblical concept of discipleship for the systematic understanding of salvation. Overall, these points assume that salvation not only refers to the event of divine forgiveness, which is absolutely foundational as the starting point of soteriology, but broadly describes a process that encompasses an ongoing life experience.

First, salvation is observed from the vantage point of concrete life development. The biblical narrative does not only instruct us about the ideal of discipleship but also shows the



ambiguities of positive and negative traits of the disciples as they follow Jesus. Even so, Christ continued to work with them, developing in them, via an educational process, his character and ideals over time. Thus, human impossibilities become a divine possibility for imperfect public disciples (as in the synoptic gospels) and secret and fearful disciples (as in the gospel of John).

Second, in the biblical narrative, discipleship is not merely individual but involves a collective experience with other disciples (the Gospels and Acts). This perspective opens up the horizon of soteriology for thinking about the reality of divine grace in Christian communal life, with all the human impossibilities/challenges (“who is the greatest?”) and the divine possibilities (“servant of all”) that this involves. Articulating discipleship and soteriology contradicts the modern individualistic view “that salvation is a purely individual experience. Although people respond to Jesus’ call as individuals, they do not respond in isolation. They become part of the community of salvation” (Colijn, 1998, p. 19-20).

Third, the soteriology of discipleship is understood from the perspective of the kingdom of God, which includes present and future dimensions. The present dimension already describes, from the perspective of human impossibility and divine possibility, a change of values related, in particular, to what real happiness and true greatness in life mean. In the context of the kingdom, discipleship is more than just a relationship between apprentice and master, but of servant and Lord (cf. Matt 10:24), where the Christian life reflects the experience of Christ’s service and lordship.

Fourth, the soteriological nature of discipleship does not imply salvation by works. Discipleship enhances, rather than contradicts, the understanding of salvation by grace alone, through faith. As Bonhoeffer indicates, discipleship is not a human initiative but begins with Jesus’ call. This call invites the answer of faith, as following Christ implies the cost of self-denial and service. However, paradoxically, by giving up a good life merely defined by human self-interest, the disciple encounters true life in Christ and his words. Bonhoeffer insightfully underscores two calls from Jesus to Peter, which mark the beginning and end of his interactions with Peter in the Gospels, and highlights Peter’s response to the first call (in the Synoptics) as an act of faith by leaving his nets. Yet, Jesus’ second call to Peter (at the end of John’s gospel), which Bonhoeffer does not further elaborate on, is also relevant to the soteriological reflection of discipleship. The context of “follow me” in John 21:19, 22, as



observed since v. 15, implies that Jesus is forgiving the betrayal of his disciple (cf. John 18:17, 25-27). In other words, Jesus' forgiveness is expressed as the grace of a second call so that Peter may start a new phase of his discipleship.

Therefore, from a systematic standpoint, the grace of forgiveness not only constitutes the beginning of discipleship (as indicated in Acts: repentance/forgiveness, baptism, and becoming part of a community of disciples) but also accompanies the life development of fallible human beings in the process of discipleship. More pointedly, the grace of divine forgiveness is not only present at the beginning of discipleship but is also available throughout the process of discipleship. Moreover, this systematic perspective enhances the understanding that the future reward promised to the disciples is a divine gift of grace. In the synoptics, Peter hears the promise of reward for the disciples' losses (not for the achievement of their works), which does not imply salvation by works. But when the grace of forgiveness offered to Peter at the end of the Gospel of John, as a renewal of his discipleship, is systematically connected to the promise of reward in the Synoptic Gospels, the future reward to discipleship is understood even more emphatically as a gift of divine grace.

In short, grace is offered at the beginning of discipleship (Jesus' call to discipleship), in the continuation of discipleship (Jesus' new call to discipleship), and in the eternal results of discipleship (the future reward of discipleship as a divine gift). From this standpoint of salvation as a process, discipleship constitutes an ongoing experience of God's salvific grace.

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