



# BONHOEFFER'S DESCIPLESHIP

REFRAMING THE LANGUAGE OF RADICALISM IN ADOLESCENT CONTEXTS

BY JON WASSON

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I am a student director. Before that I was a student intern. Before that I was a student volunteer. Before that I was just a student. I thought I wanted to be a student pastor because I thought it meant I could take cool trips that the church paid for.

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I've always felt a healthy ambivalence toward student ministry, though. On the one hand, I think it is important for the church to invite students to be a part of its spiritual rhythm and to include them in the life of the church (this is why I have dedicated much of my adult life to student ministries).

On the other hand, the student ministry subculture has often been thoughtless, shallow and gimmicky. Actually, we've been cultish. We have an awkward infatuation with all things radical or extreme. Everything from the name of the ministry (Revolution, Front Line, Extreme Youth, Xtreme) to particular events, retreats and conferences have fed this unhealthy rhetoric.

Of course, this radical ideology is not exclusive to the student ministry world. Churches, para-church organizations, Christian conferences, et al, have all used this as a way to inspire people to live a particular lifestyle—one that cuts against the grain of so-called worldly or secular ideas and values. Who wants to be ordinary when one can live *radically*? In reality, this plays more on a desire to be on the inside of what's *really* going on rather than living an actual radical lifestyle—whatever that even means.

**Be radical!** (Pray once a year around your school's flagpole.)

**Be radical!** (Only listen to wholesome music and watch wholesome movies.)

**Be radical!** (Save sex for marriage. And don't kiss or touch each other either.)

**Be radical!** (Invite all your friends to church to be saved.)

**Be radical!** (Go on a mission trip that will change *your* life.)

**Be radical!** (Wear t-shirts that play off of secular advertising in order to sell Jesus.)

**Be radical!** (Don't use profanity.)

**Be radical!** (Wear pro-life t-shirts and protest at clinics.)

**Be radical!** (Stand for heterosexual ideas and against homosexuality.)

**Be a radical!** (Love the sinner, hate the sin.)

**Be radical! Be radical! Be radical!**  
Do all these things and indeed, *you will be so subversive.*

At first glance, exhortations toward this type of radicalism appear to be well grounded. There is some truth, justice

and beauty present in them. There are, however, two major problems—the first being that they are more about creating a social dream rather than a community shaped by the person of Jesus Christ. The second problem is that they grossly miss what it actually means to be—for lack of a better expression—radical, namely, to follow Jesus as he invites followers to come and die.

## RADICALISM AS IDEALOGY

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th-century German theologian and pastor, attacks this poor ecclesiological perspective in *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer first and foremost saw Christian transformation as a result of an encounter with Jesus Christ, not as a result of conforming to an ideal.

*In Christian brotherhood everything depends upon its being clear right from the beginning, first that Christian brotherhood is not an ideal, but a divine reality. Second, that Christian brotherhood is a spiritual and not a psychic reality.<sup>1</sup>*

This is what student ministry has done with its abuse of radical terminology. It has created an ideal social dream for students instead of calling them to encounter the living Christ. For Bonhoeffer, this is where it can no longer be part of Christian ethos—that is, when the encounter with Jesus Christ is subverted by a reality marked by standards or values.<sup>2</sup> Further, constructing student ministries around these radical actions and behaviors hints at our own misplaced understanding that our good action in changing the world is the ultimate end in following Christ.

Bonhoeffer stands in opposition to this ideology. Following Christ is not about moral behavior but about the costly call on our lives to come and die. In light of this, we must seek out new ways to frame discipleship that escape the temptation of hyping up the gospel so it seems relevant, sexy and revolutionary to our students. In essence, radicalism present in the youth ministry subculture is like discipleship in Caps Lock.

May I recommend we all take a step back and chill out?

My suggestion is that there might be more faithfulness to the gospel found in the dialectic between what it means to be radical and what it means to be ordinary. What this means is that those who are indeed considered uncommon or radical in church history have been those who arrive at those positions in ordinary and hidden ways. This dialectic is what the student ministry world is missing and really needs to grasp.

Conversations about radicalism should be balanced by healthy conversations of what it means to be ordinary, what it means to live faithfully to Jesus on a daily, mundane level, to accept the arcane and the unknown, to doubt, to enter into despair, to share ordinary life with ordinary people. This is

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what Bonhoeffer has experienced and written about in *Life Together*—to share in the ordinary, everyday existence with others in thankfulness, prayer and confession, all of which are seemingly ordinary Christian practices. Bonhoeffer calls us to repent for chasing a dream world without paying attention to the normal, nonchalant areas of life. He writes:

*If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>*

The problem is that in our juxtaposition of radical versus ordinary, most of our ears are conditioned to hear something that sounds like those who *really* love Jesus and those who are merely apathetic. This is not what I am getting at. The radical/ordinary dialectic is more like a play between overt and subtle action. The radical overt action is typically used as a gimmick to advertise authentic Christian discipleship while the subtle, mundane and ordinary actions of the Christian life are emphasized to a lesser extent or not at all. The irony is that radical Christian discipleship (the coming-and-dying kind) depends on the ordinary call and practice of the Christian life. To be truly radical is to be involved in the ordinary.

## DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH PARADOX

Though it may seem otherwise, radicalism itself is not what is under the microscope here. The creation of radicalism as some sort of end for discipleship is what Bonhoeffer opposes. To set up an end other than the person of Christ is to create an ideal as an ultimate reality. It is the type of radicalism that is presented as an attachment or prefix to Christianity. There is a tension and irony here that must be upheld if this dialectic is going to be fruitful: *There is enough of a call inherent within Christian discipleship to be counterintuitive and to be subversive without our attaching something else too.*

Radicalism is not something one can pursue. It is something one naturally becomes (most likely through ordinary

means). We need to deconstruct radical discipleship against discipleship in general. In fact, what might become clear is that paradox we find hidden in the gospel that things are often backwards—that perhaps to be radical is actually to be ordinary, mundane even.

We see this in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.<sup>4</sup> The main character, Myshkin, is portrayed as this sort of naive yet distinctly good man—uninterested in the pursuits of wealth, sex and power plaguing the rest of Russian society. As the story develops, Myshkin is depicted as an idiot because of his lack of interest in this broken system. But it isn't a pursuit of idiocy that leads Myshkin there in the first place. He subverts the very ideals plaguing his culture not by boldly and overtly resisting them but conversely by consistent practice of an ethic of love.

There is a parallel between Myshkin's idiocy and the counterintuitive demands of the gospel. To be radical is to be truly dissatisfied with the brokenness in humanity and our struggle within ourselves to control, conquer and consume. But this is accomplished through ordinary acts like forgiveness, compassion, self-control, generosity, self-denial and simplicity. These types of actions cannot be produced by radical ideology but instead flow from an encounter with Jesus Christ as the one who ultimately forgives, offers compassion and forsakes heaven to die on the cross.

Finally, radical ideology is created within a comparative framework, meaning radical discipleship is usually defined by what the world around us values, loves and idolizes rather than being based on the answer to the question *Who is God?* Again, we need to hear Bonhoeffer's voice telling us that the community of the church is bound together by Jesus Christ and from him alone receives its identity.<sup>5</sup>

## PITFALLS OF RADICALISM

When we enter into this comparative game with the world around us, we start the devastating process of trying to one up each other—both within and outside the church. The question of how the church is to function within its own community or in the world at large is always the wrong question to begin with. It must begin by exploring who God is through the revelation of God's Son, Jesus Christ. We do this by encountering the presence of Christ in the humanity of the people with whom we share life.

It is also important to realize that this discussion is highly contextual. This emphasis on the ordinary is not meant to leave out room for radical, uncommon, counterintuitive action. The point is to reframe it with the call of Christ to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. There are times when we are called to act, even *radically* so. To revisit the Caps Lock illustration, both capitalized and lowercase letters are essential parts of a grammatically correct sentence. In the same manner, both subversive and ordinary actions are imperative for the Christian life. This is why the dialectic conversation is so important. The Christian life is a life filled with ordinary, mundane, hidden action. The Christian life is also a life filled with opportunities to be subversive, radical and counterintuitive.

The student ministry world has emphasized extreme action to jolt students into caring about the gospel we love. But we have not noticed the ordinary elements of life that are in need of transformation by the gospel. We can no longer challenge students to be pro-life without first challenging them to volunteer at the Planned Parenthood clinic. We can no longer hype up the See You at the Pole rally and neglect to invite our students to pray with us on a weekly, even daily, basis. We have to stop leaving our communities to go on mission trips when we have yet to live missional existences inside them. We can no longer hold outreach events where we share the gospel with their friends without challenging them to invite their friends into a life together, shaped by the gospel. To be frank, we *have* to stop wearing and promoting Christian kitsch, like Jesus is something to be marketed.

Unfortunately, when we ignore this dialectic and continue to use radical language with our students, we are susceptible to three major pitfalls.

**We make radicalism the end—the *telos*—of Christian transformation.** The *telos* of the gospel is the action of God in Christ to bring about a future that only God can bring to bear on the world. In further wrestling with this idea that discipleship is about overt, radical action, Bonhoeffer writes, “We are therefore confronted with a paradox. Our activity must be visible, but never done for the sake of being visible.”<sup>6</sup>

Bonhoeffer is remembered for his radical disobedience to the Nazi regime. But would Bonhoeffer have considered himself radical? Or would he rather have considered himself living the very existence Christ had called him to, one shaped by the cross? He felt he needed to endure the suffering being forced on his nation alongside his countrymen and countrywomen, or he would have lost the right to minister to them when the war was over and his country was in disarray.

To enter into suffering was, for him, the badge of Christian discipleship.<sup>7</sup> So he turned down a teaching position in the U.S. and returned to Germany to face and act upon the injustice carrying on there. This is indeed counterintuitive action, but is this not the kind of action Jesus spoke about when calling people to follow him? To literally die to themselves for his sake? Is this not what we expect every Christ follower, young or old, to ordinarily enter into? Bonhoeffer was not a radical—he was a follower of Jesus who took his call to come and die seriously.

He writes in *Cost of Discipleship*:

*The disciples are told that they can possess the extraordinary only so long as they are reflective: they must beware how they use it, and never fulfill it simply for its own sake, or for the sake of ostentation. The better righteousness of the disciples must have a motive which lies beyond itself. Of course it has to be visible, but they*

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*must take care that it does not become visible simply for the sake of being visible. There are of course proper grounds for insisting on the visible nature of Christian discipleship, but the visibility is never an end in itself; and if it becomes so we have lost sight of our primary aim, which is to follow Jesus.*<sup>8</sup>

There is a big difference between chasing radicalism as an end to discipleship and taking the time to be conformed to the image of Christ through the consistent taking up of our cross and following him. Our focus on radicalism shifts our identity to being defined by the actions we take rather than on the person we are encountering. Surely, after encountering Jesus Christ and answering the call to come and die, we will have indeed lived a *radical* existence. But this is merely a byproduct of our encounter with Jesus Christ.

There is no such thing as a radical Christian; there is only Christian. Jesus calls his followers to enter into a way of life shaped by the cross. For Bonhoeffer, there is no life in Christ without taking this cruciform reality seriously. Inviting students to follow Christ with us means inviting them to die with us—this is discipleship. Attaching the word *radical* to it makes it seem like we are selling something rather than inviting them into an existence shaped by daily death.

**Radicalism creates positions of power.** “I’m radical and you’re not” quickly evolves into “I have exclusive rights to the gospel because I am *radical* enough to *do this* or *experience that*.” When we begin to unravel certain levels of Christian discipleship over against others, we are closer to the pharisaical tradition than we might think. This is especially pertinent to adolescents who consistently compare themselves to one another in any context.

Calling students to be a kind of radical that is shaped by an ideal social dream and not by a cruciform reality sets up unhealthy positions of power for students to judge one another based on how visible or active their faith might be.

Following Jesus is not about power—at least, not the type of power we typically attempt to exert over other people. Following Jesus, *a la* Bonhoeffer, is about the entering into death and experiencing the loss of attachment with this world.

*Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*<sup>9</sup>

**Calling students to be radicals is exploitative.** Adolescence is filled with angst. Students naturally want to shirk authority, rage against the machine and create identities where

they feel acceptance and belonging. Playing on this already existent tendency to be *radical* is manipulative.

I used to wonder why students could go through such seasons of fire and then abruptly experience such drought and apathy. Students who were radical in high school walk away from the church at 20, 22 or 25. Why? Maybe they were called to be radical in a particular time and place, surrounding particular issues, but never invited into a life of ordinary, mundane existence that is less about being on a mountaintop and more consistently about dwelling in the valleys below. My inclination is that the call to follow Jesus in concrete ways in the mundane, everyday existence is far more boring to promote. But our students desperately need us to invite them into that rhythm of life.

I realize this subversion of the radical Christian will be wildly unpopular in some circles. I also realize the very word *ordinary* is far less sexy than its counterpart, *radical*. But I think there is something hidden within it that is worth getting after.

Tolstoy was onto something profound in his assertion that “everybody thinks of changing humanity but nobody thinks of changing himself.”<sup>10</sup> In essence, we all want to be a part of something big or radical or extreme but never realize it begins with the call to come and die in ordinary ways. It’s much easier for us to imagine these grandiose ideas to change the world (and to pass them off to our students). It is a much more difficult task to begin to live out our ordinary existence with purpose, passion, discipline and consistency—and to invite our students to share that life with us.

1. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. Trans. John W. Doberstein. Harper San Francisco, 1954. p. 26.
2. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics*. Trans. Neville Horton Smith. Macmillan Publishing, 1955. p. 189.
3. *Life Together*, 29.
4. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. Trans. Constance Garnett. Bantam Dell, New York.
5. *Life Together*, 36.
6. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Cost of Discipleship*. Simon & Schuster, 1959. p. 158.
7. *Ibid*, 191.
8. *Ibid*, 157-158.
9. *Ibid*, 89.
10. Tolstoy, Leo. *Pamphlets*. Translated from the Russian. Free Age Press. Available from <http://books.google.com/ebooks?id=kVBYAAAAAAAJ>.

Jon is the junior high director at Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas. He has been involved in youth ministry for the past eight years, serving in multiple roles and contexts. He is primarily excited about narrowing the gap between youth ministry and critical theological reflection. He really, really loves snowboarding.