

Preface

HOW MUCH OF MYSELF (AND my stuff) must I give up to follow Jesus? How does belonging to a faith community shape being a Christian? How do I walk in faith with friends whose faith is unclear or uncertain? What gives Christians hope in the face of power politics? Can I be pro-life and decry war, too? How do I make peace amidst the wrongs of the world? If you wonder about such questions and identify with such concerns, this book might be for you.

It was New Year's Eve 1998, and I was approaching thirty years old. I was visiting my brother and sister-in-law in Virginia, on the heels of what would prove to be a second successive unsuccessful attempt at securing a tenure-track college teaching position. My sister-in-law was in the habit of asking, not what resolutions one would make for the New Year, but rather: What question do you want God to answer for you in the coming year? My question that year was clear: *What is the meaning of discipleship? What does it cost to follow Jesus?*

At that point, I had already been pondering this question for more than a year. Now it seemed that my life was nearing a crossroads, a crisis point, a time of decision. I needed to know which way to commit my life—and what that way would cost me. At some point in the conversation, my brother went to retrieve a copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* from his bookshelf and passed it on to me. As soon as I returned home, I began reading that book and came upon this answer: when Jesus calls someone, he bids him to come and die! I continued reading other books on Christian discipleship, including those from the Bruderhof community—*Salt and Light* by Eberhard Arnold and *Discipleship* by J. Heinrich Arnold. During the next year, and for years thereafter, God would continue to answer my question, time and again. And in response to God's answers,

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I would undergo a dramatic conversion of personal life and a substantial shift of professional focus—I would “die” and begin a new life as a follower of Jesus.

From early on in this time of hearing and discerning my calling as a disciple, Psalm 143, the epigraph of this book, became my prayer: “Show me the road that I must walk.” With this prayer as my path, I was led by the Holy Spirit “on level ground” to deliberately make sacrificial choices and spiritual commitments that continue to shape my life as a disciple. First and foremost, I withdrew from the pursuit of personal security and professional success in the academy, instead committing myself to use my gifts for the sake of the church by teaching wherever God would provide the opportunity and whatever needed to be taught. While this meant foregoing prospects for permanent employment and professional advancement, it has opened up possibilities for me to engage directly in the mission of the church through both urban service and international teaching. Simply making this commitment and seeking these opportunities did not settle all doubts or answer all questions, of course. Indeed, at several junctures over the intervening years I have had to carefully discern “the road that I must walk” even while prayerfully wondering/worrying whether I might have taken a wrong turn. Yet through each stage of the journey God has been faithful, providing meaningful teaching opportunities in both colleges and congregations, and life has been joyful, filled with friendships and communities of faith, hope, and love. I can thus testify that the promise of Jesus is trustworthy: those who have left homes or families or jobs for the sake of the kingdom of God will receive, not only life abundant when the kingdom comes, but also “very much more” than they had left behind “in this age” (Luke 19:28–30).

This is not a book *about* Christian discipleship, an attempt to define and describe it, but a book *by* a Christian disciple, the words of one who has sought to walk in the way of Jesus. This book represents my own wrestling with the call and cost of discipleship across my first decade as an intentional follower of Jesus. Arising from various circumstances and responding to various concerns, the several pieces collected here comprise a travelogue—or, better, a sketchbook—drawn from my journey of following Jesus. The chapters here are not academic essays or scholarly arguments, but personal reflections, scriptural meditations, and spiritual ponderings. Many tell stories, others issue challenges. Most are prose, some poetic. My prayer is that they may edify and encourage fellow pilgrims on the way.

The thirteen pieces I've selected reveal two sides of a single journey. Several are the personal reflections of "a disciple on the way." They relate and reflect on stories of my own frail (and sometimes failed) attempts at following Jesus, formative experiences through which I have learned the habits of discipleship. Others are a disciple's scriptural meditations and spiritual ponderings on "the way" of Jesus. They address concerns and conundrums that have vexed and perplexed my own heart and mind as a disciple, as well as explore the practical implications of the gospel for the disciples of Jesus. I have interspersed the personal reflections, scriptural meditations, and spiritual ponderings, prefacing each piece with a brief introduction that places it within my journey of following Jesus. Taken together, they disclose the discipleship of the heart intricately intertwined with the discipline of the mind. The book begins with a prayer reminding the disciple that following Jesus depends on God's **grace**. It concludes with a theological autobiography, an account of my **pilgrimage** to the gospel of peace in a time of war.

I've arranged the several pieces in four parts, each of which relates to a particular aspect of following Jesus and corresponds (more or less) with one of the Gospels. Part One is "The Call to Follow." Jesus' call to follow greets us in unexpected places and makes radical demands on our lives. The first chapter in this part reflects on a personal encounter that confronted me with my own call to follow and the question of the cost of discipleship. The second considers that crucial test for Christian disciples—Jesus' command that our love be perfect, including even our enemies—and reflects on my struggle to practice this perfect love in a difficult relationship. And the third reflects on Peter in the Gospel of Mark as he wrestles with what it means to confess Jesus as the Messiah and what it takes to follow this Messiah on the way to the cross.

Part Two is "The Valley of Shadows." Jesus' call to follow comes to us in a real world in which we are subject to fear and vulnerable to suffering. Following Jesus leads us through suffering and sorrow, but Jesus himself is God-with-us, God's promised presence to share our sorrows and walk with us through the vale of tears. The first chapter in this part recounts my own wandering in the shadows of fear and doubt—and God's sign of grace that showed me the way of faith and hope. The second recounts my experience walking in faith with a friend who was himself journeying through "the valley of the shadow of death." And the third reflects on the life, death, and

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resurrection of Jesus as God's personal response to the perennial question of innocent suffering.

Part Three is "The Way of Life." Jesus' call to follow comes to us in a fallen world hell-bent on destruction and death. Jesus promises his followers resurrection and life and calls us to bear witness to this good news in a dying world. The first chapter in this part reflects on the grace of Christ as integral to the way of life and my experience of the life of grace in intentional Christian community. The second summons the church to a consistent witness for life that reflects the gospel of God's life-giving love in Jesus and responds with life-affirming alternatives to the world's way of death. And the third draws out the political implications of confessing faith in Jesus as the One who is "the resurrection and the life" by reflecting on the life and death of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

Part Four is "The Way of Peace." Jesus' call to follow comes to us in a world gone wrong and warped by war. Jesus gives his followers peace and calls us to seek peace and make peace—to build communities of justice in a world of wrong, to seek the kingdom of God in a world at war, and to practice reconciliation in a world of division. The first chapter in this part recalls my own small part in practicing the way of peace during a time of war. The second reflects on the ecumenical efforts of Mennonites and Catholics to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3) And the third recounts my journey of reconciliation to a city that had once been my country's enemy.

The reader will observe that the first chapter of Part One and the last chapter of Part Four both relate to and reflect on my earliest days of following Jesus. This bracketing of the book is deliberate. It serves to remind me that, as a follower of Jesus, I am a perpetual beginner.

This book is, in many ways, a token of gratitude to the various friends and communities that have shaped me and shared in my journey of discipleship. Accordingly, before submitting this book for publication, I invited several persons to read and reflect on these pages in order to help me discern the Spirit in this book. My thanks to: Duane and Lois Beck, Arthur Boers, Brenda Herb, Ivan Kauffman, Alan and Eleanor Kreider, Jay Landry, Abraham Newsom O.S.B., Paula Snyder Belousek, Janice Yordy Sutter, and Biff Weidman. Special thanks to Arthur Boers and to Alan and Eleanor Kreider for their counsel and encouragement in support of my work as a writer. I am humbled and honored that this book is graced by Alan and Ellie's foreword. Thanks, further, to Wipf & Stock and to my editor, Rodney

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*All this is from God,
and all by grace.*

(2 COR 5:17–20; 1 COR 15:10)

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