

# Mere Discipleship

**RADICAL CHRISTIANITY  
IN A REBELLIOUS WORLD**

**SECOND EDITION**

*Lee C. Camp*



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To Laura

Jesus was not just a moralist whose teachings had some political implications; he was not primarily a teacher of spirituality whose public ministry unfortunately was seen in a political light; he was not just a sacrificial lamb preparing for his immolation, or a God-Man whose divine status calls us to disregard his humanity. Jesus was, in his divinely mandated prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships. His baptism is the inauguration and his cross is the culmination of that new regime in which his disciples are called to share. Hearers or readers may choose to consider that kingdom as not real, or not relevant, or not possible, or not inviting; but . . . no such slicing can avoid his call to an ethic marked by the cross, a cross identified as the punishment of a man who threatens society by creating a new kind of community leading a radically new kind of life.

John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*

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## Preface to the Second Edition

I am grateful for the opportunity to publish a second edition of *Mere Discipleship*. The primary addition to this second edition is the study guide prepared by Joshua Graves. I thank Josh for his hard and conscientious work in making the study guide available. I hope it will make the book more useful for group study and discernment.

Though I have clarified some points, I have not tried to answer all of the many excellent questions that have been raised by articulate readers who have written to me in response to the first edition. A number of reviewers have suggested that the final chapter says too little, that more should be offered as to what such an ecclesiology practically entails. They are, of course, correct. But I still leave this rightful critique unsatisfied, except for suggesting that first, if we rightfully attend to such practices as worship, baptism, prayer, and communion, as I have tried to describe herein, it will give us plenty of constructive work to do. Second, the paltriness of the final chapter might perhaps be paralleled to the short ending of the Gospel of Mark that implicitly leaves open to the reader the invitation to live out the story themselves. Indeed, I find that I am still sorting out myself what it means to live out the Gospel, and suspect that this is no ill thing. Third, one might consult the “further reading” lists provided by Josh Graves. Finally, for those looking for further resources of study, I do on occasion post some resources at [www.LeeCCamp.com](http://www.LeeCCamp.com).

In the first edition I failed to acknowledge the kindness of Dr. James W. Dunkly, School of Theology Librarian, who allowed me to make use of the wonderful library at Sewanee, The University of the South when I was writing the book. I have many fond memories of the delightful summer weeks my family and I spent there on the mountain while working on this project. I also thank my colleague and friend Prof. Matt Hearn who provided helpful editing advice for part one.

# 1

## “Radical” Discipleship

Today, as in days past, there is no way to tell from a person’s life, from his deeds, whether or not he is a believer.

Leo Tolstoy<sup>1</sup>

Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>2</sup>

### “The Most Christian Country”

On an April morning in 1994 I heard the radio transmission of the BBC’s report—the airplane carrying the president of Rwanda had crashed. My wife, Laura, and I were far from our home, working with a Christian school in Nairobi, Kenya, only a few hundred miles from the site. Foul play was suspected, and the terror had begun. But at that point, no one appeared to have any premonition of the slaughter soon to occur. Over the next several months, Rwanda—“the most Christian country in Africa,” with as much as 90 percent of the population claiming some Christian church affiliation—suffered a genocide unlike any in recent history, with as many as 800,000 men, women, and children slaughtered within a one-hundred-day period. Ethnic tensions between the two dominant tribes, the Tutsis and the Hutus, erupted into widespread slaughter. The national army,



vigilante groups, and ordinary citizens hunted those of different ethnic identity, often using machetes to hack their enemies to death.<sup>3</sup> Neighbors murdered neighbors.

Much of the subsequent international attention focused on the breakdown of U.N. “peacekeeping” forces to restrain violence effectively or to protect the weak.<sup>4</sup> But the breakdown of Rwandan Christianity, its inability to stem the tide of mass murder, is all the more puzzling. Rwanda had often been cited as a case study for the success of Christian missions, after the so-called *Tornado* in the 1930s swept the Tutsi aristocracy into the folds of the Catholic church. Following the conversions of its leaders, the country was dubbed a “Christian Kingdom.” But the genocide demonstrated—in a graphic and horrific way—that the Western Christianity imported into the heart of Africa had apparently failed to create communities of *disciples*. In actuality, the triumph of Christian missions preceded the triumph of ethnic hatred. When push came to shove, the Jesus who taught his disciples to love your neighbor went missing when young men were hacking old men, women, and children to death simply because these neighbors were ethnically different. Numerous Christian martyrs—both Hutu and Tutsi—died resisting the massacres. But that these faithful martyrs were a minority among the fold of Christians has led critics to suggest that the “gospel” imported into Rwanda failed to ever challenge the ethnic identities of its converts—they became Christian, but many remained first and foremost either Hutu or Tutsi.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the Rwandan genocide highlights a recurrent failure of much of historic Christianity. The proclamation of the “gospel” has often failed to emphasize a fundamental element of the teaching of Jesus, and indeed of orthodox Christian doctrine: “Jesus is Lord.” That is a radical claim, one that is ultimately rooted in questions of allegiance, of ultimate authority, of the ultimate norm and standard for human life. Instead, Christianity has often sought to ally itself comfortably with other authorities, be they political, economic, cultural, or ethnic. Could it be that “Jesus is Lord” has become one of the most widespread Christian lies? Have Christians claimed the lordship of Jesus yet systematically set aside the call to obedience to this Lord? At least in Rwanda, with “Christian Hutus” slaughtering “Christian Tutsis” (and vice versa), “Christian” apparently denoted a faith brand name—a “spirituality,” or a “religion”—not a commitment to a common Lord.

A Rwandan couple who barely escaped the slaughter themselves shared their story at our university campus. Faculty and students listened in disbelief. Their report of the carnage was simply mind-boggling. But as I

listened, a frightening question occurred to me: We American Christians, are we any different? Would our cultural assumptions about Christianity ever allow us to shelve our discipleship, to compartmentalize our faith, so that we too could fall prey to such demonic forces? Do we have on the same blinders? We good American Christians, *could we do that same thing?*

### The Most Christian City

My Bible Belt upbringing in Alabama has shown me what so-called cultural Christianity looks like. Particularly in the South there is a Christianity thoroughly sanctioned and supported by the prevailing winds, a Christianity I sometimes suspect to be not too different from the failed Rwandan Christianity. My wife, three sons, and I now live in Nashville, Tennessee, which has been dubbed by some to be the “Protestant Vatican.” It is also the Jerusalem for my own Christian heritage, with over one hundred congregations of the Church of Christ in the greater metropolitan Nashville area. According to some reports, as many as one thousand houses of Christian worship call Davidson County home. Add to that mix the multitude of denominational boards and institutions, Christian book publishers, the contemporary Christian music industry, and even the largest Christian diet marketer in the country, and you get a culture in which “church” is inextricably intertwined with every facet of life. Nashville is as “Christian” as it gets.

Ryman Auditorium aptly symbolizes the relationship between Christianity and Southern culture. In the heart of Nashville, the Ryman was built in the late 1800s as a home for revivals. Were one to be plopped unknowingly in the midst of the Ryman, one could only presume it to be a house of worship, given the trademark pews and churchy architecture. Southern gospel has long been tied to Southern sectionalism and patriotism, as the balcony of the Ryman aptly illustrates—the “Confederate Gallery” it’s called, built to hold the Confederate veterans for one of the last reunions of those who fought in the “Lost Cause.” And then the real claim to fame of the Ryman: its early Spirit-led revivals in time became the locale of the internationally renowned Grand Ole Opry, whose roots are inseparable from gospel music. Beer drinking, wife cheating, flag waving, and “Amazing Grace” appear almost as one, so subtly are country-and-western culture and Jesus woven into the same fabric of both the Ryman and Nashville.

The two largest Christian traditions in Nashville—the Southern Baptists and the Churches of Christ—have a long tradition of mutual enmity.

Baptists, often unaware of their own tradition of exclusivity, have often chided members of Churches of Christ: “You think you’re the only ones going to heaven, don’t you?!” And not without cause: there was a basis for the accusation of sectarianism. Particularly in north-central Alabama, we in the Churches of Christ took Luke’s account of Jesus’s proclamation “Whoever is not with me is against me” (11:23) as our battle cry. My adolescence was inundated with preaching that drew lines in no uncertain terms between the (“New Testament”) church and the world. Often those lines were drawn through a number of boiled-down points, among which the most important were the proper acts of worship (like *a cappella* singing and weekly communion), adult baptism by immersion (for “remission of sins”), and upright personal conduct (no drinking, dancing, or cussing).

Whatever one makes of such a list, that preaching taught me a particular habit that, depending upon one’s perspective, could be taken as either a virtue or a vice: the habit of questioning professions of Christian faith sanctioned by the larger unrepentant world. Perhaps in our well-intentioned efforts to bring all things under the lordship of Christ, American Christianity has been guilty of baptizing unrepentant social systems and structures. Is it sufficient to “sprinkle” the culture of a city or nation-state and dub it “Christian”? Which brings us back to the question of whether Rwandan Christianity is all that different from Nashville Christianity, Southern Christianity, or American Christianity. Have we too often shelved discipleship, compartmentalized faith, and thus been blinded by unredeemed cultural forces that leave us prey to the principalities and powers of this world?

The namesake of the Christian university where I teach, David Lipscomb, shared with many nineteenth-century Christians a great optimism about the United States and its experiment in democracy. But the U.S. Civil War dashed it. Lipscomb witnessed the Battle of Nashville in December 1864, in which 1,500 Confederates and 3,000 Union soldiers died in a two-day period. Its battle lines passed just a few blocks north and, a day later, just to the south of his farm (which is now the campus of Lipscomb University). How, Lipscomb wanted to know, could Southern Christians slaughter their Northern Christian brothers? How could Northern disciples make widows out of their Southern sisters in Christ? Over the course of the war, six hundred thousand men were slaughtered—most of whom claimed Jesus as Lord. Brothers in Christ seeking to kill one another bathed their battles not only in blood but in prayer—and witnessing this, Lipscomb knew that there was some agenda other than the kingdom of God at work. So he began to insist that disciples prioritize *God’s* kingdom, rather than the self-seeking kingdoms of this world.

Lipscomb’s prioritization of God’s kingdom over all other kingdoms led him to make profound commitments. First, Lipscomb refused to be cowed by either Confederate or Union forces and admonished disciples to refuse to kill on behalf of either. During the war, the famed Confederate commander Nathan Bedford Forrest (subsequently a cofounder of the Ku Klux Klan and now memorialized in Nashville by a privately funded memorial prominently placed alongside Interstate 65) sent a soldier to hear Lipscomb preach so that he might judge whether Lipscomb was advocating treason. After the sermon, the soldier remarked, “I have not reached a conclusion as to whether or not the doctrine of the sermon is loyal to the Southern Confederacy, but I am profoundly convinced that he is loyal to the Christian religion.”<sup>6</sup> Neither the piety of a Robert E. Lee nor the religion of the Yankees would suffice in Lipscomb’s eyes. Lipscomb refused to separate the gospel from the real world, believing the Good News to proclaim a kingdom that held to Jesus as its head: the kingdom of heaven as a real kingdom in the midst of time and history. It is in the world but not of the world, and thus would refuse either to submit to sectional war-making and racism, or to turn a blind eye to the needs of the poor.

In addition to this countercultural commitment, Lipscomb’s allegiance to the kingdom of God led him to other practices profoundly opposed to the norms of late-nineteenth-century Southern Christianity. Not only should allegiance to the kingdom dissolve commitments to sectional and war-making factions; it should also undercut racist distinctions. Racial barriers grew only more entrenched in the decades following the war, fostered not only by the Christians who populated Nathan Bedford Forrest’s KKK but perhaps more perniciously by the moderate Christians who silently supported and perpetuated segregation. But Lipscomb refused to be silent. The kingdom of God, Lipscomb insisted, knew no such distinctions. So, for example, when a church in McKinney, Texas, objected in 1878 to an African-American man placing membership in their ranks, Lipscomb denounced such as “sinful” and “blasphemous”: “The individual who assumes such a position shows a total unfitness for membership in the church of God. A church that will tolerate the persistent exhibition of such a spirit certainly forfeits its claims to be a church of God.”<sup>7</sup>

No realm of culture was exempt from the church’s calling to bear witness to the way of Christ and the kingdom of God. Lipscomb founded a school in 1891 whose aim was to provide a liberal arts education;<sup>8</sup> not to serve the upwardly mobile in the New South, but to serve Jesus’s kingdom. In the same way, Lipscomb had earlier insisted that money could not be hoarded but stewarded for the good of the poor. Thus Lipscomb

had admonished those Christians in the poverty-stricken Reconstruction South to share their goods: “The man that can spend money in extending his already broad acres, while his brother and his brother’s children cry for bread—the woman that can spend money in purchasing a stylish bonnet, an expensive cloak, or a fine dress, merely to appear fashionable, while her sister and her sister’s children are shivering with cold and scarce able to cover their nakedness, are no Christians . . . they are on the broad road that leads to death.”<sup>9</sup> Thus position and power were properly to be used only in authentic service for those in need. So when a cholera epidemic struck Nashville in 1873, Lipscomb refused to flee the city along with the wealthy who made their way to safer environs but worked himself in the homes of the destitute and diseased, helping to clean and care for them.<sup>10</sup> Allegiance to God’s kingdom, for Lipscomb, was an all-or-nothing proposition.

### The Hamlet of Rose-Colored Cataracts

Imagine a remote hamlet, removed from the rest of the world, in which all the inhabitants were afflicted with a strange eye disease. Suppose that this genetically inherited disease manifested itself with only one symptom—a strange cataract, which did not blur the victim’s vision. Instead, the cataract simply cast a rose-colored tint over the afflicted’s vision. In such a scenario, it’s quite likely that all the inhabitants of that small, provincial village would simply assume that the world is rose-tinted. So strong, in fact, would be this assumption that the inhabitants of that little hamlet would likely never even discuss it, and certainly never question it! And anyone who might question such an empirical assumption would certainly be considered a bit strange, if not simply irrational. What more do you need—you can see it with your own eyes!

But just *what if*—what if the Christian church looks at the world with some long-inherited presuppositions, assumptions so long held that for anyone to question them leaves us looking for a way to get out of the conversation? What if what has so long been presumed to be “common sense” and “reality” and “truth” is neither true nor real?

Logically, of course, one cannot deny that this may be a possibility. Thus, each generation of followers of Jesus must reassess our faithfulness to our calling; we must grapple with how our viewpoint and understanding have been shaped by tradition and history. James Cone, for example, is a classic example of a theologian who asks questions about historical identity and assumptions. Cone designates himself a “Black theologian”

and argues that the (white) Western tradition of theology has forgotten that our history, our “social location,” our position of wealth and prestige shapes the questions we ask of scripture. Consider Athanasius, Cone suggests, a fourth-century theologian involved in the debates regarding the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son who pushed for the use of the Greek philosophical term *homoousion*, asserting that the Son is one substance with the Father. There is indeed, notes Cone, a place for philosophical concerns like these. But had Athanasius been a black slave in America, “he might have asked about the status of the Son in relation to slaveholders.” Similarly, Protestant Reformer Martin Luther concerned himself with the “ubiquitous presence of Jesus Christ at the Lord’s table.” Had Martin Luther been an African, kidnapped and sold on the slave market in the United States in the nineteenth century, “his first question would not have been whether Jesus was at the Lord’s table, but whether he was really present at the slave’s cabin.” Luther might have asked “whether slaves could expect Jesus to be with them as they tried to survive the cotton field, the whip, and the pistol.”<sup>11</sup>

What Cone wants us to see might be put this way: someone reading the story of God’s chosen people will tend to ask different questions depending upon one’s own history, one’s own social location, one’s own position of relative power or powerlessness. One asks different questions of the meaning of “God,” depending upon whether one finds oneself in the “ivory tower” or in the slave cabin, in Pharaoh’s throne room or Pharaoh’s mud pits, in the boardroom or the sweatshop. Where we are and where we have been deeply affects who we think God is and what we think God wants us to be.

### The “Constantinian Cataract”

If one’s social location impacts or affects one’s understanding of who God is and what God is concerned with, it would appear that the *church’s* social location may affect its understanding of Jesus. For this reason, many have suggested that the meaning of “Jesus” depends upon whether one finds oneself on this side of Emperor Constantine or the other. But what possible difference could an early-fourth-century Roman emperor make to our understanding of Jesus?

Before attempting to answer that question, a brief bit of storytelling may be in order for those unfamiliar with the rise of Constantine. For the first three centuries of the church, the Roman Empire at best ignored