Chapter Two

The Call to Discipleship

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting 45
at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him" (Mark 2:14).

The call goes out, and without any further ado the obedient deed of the one called follows. The disciple's answer is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus. Instead, it is the obedient deed. How is this direct relation between call and obedience possible? It is quite offensive to natural reason. Reason is impelled to reject the abruptness of the response. It seeks something to mediate it; it seeks an explanation. No matter what, some sort of mediation has to be found, psychological or historical. Some have asked the foolish question whether the tax collector had known Jesus previously and therefore was prepared to follow his call.[1] But the text is stubbornly silent on this point; in it, everything depends on call and deed directly facing each other. The text is not interested in psychological explanations for the faithful decisions of a person. Why not? Because there is only one good reason for the proximity of call and deed: *Jesus Christ himself.* It is he who calls. That is why the tax collector follows. This encounter gives witness to Jesus' unconditional, immediate, and inexplicable authority. Nothing precedes it, and nothing follows except the obedience of the called. Because Jesus is the Christ, he has authority to call and to demand obedience to his word. Jesus calls to discipleship, not as a teacher and a role model, but as the Christ, the Son of God. Thus, in this short text Jesus Christ and his claim on people are proclaimed, and

[1.] This solution, which Bonhoeffer thought was to an artificial problem, was offered by Weiss, *The Life of Christ,* 2:124, and before him by Neander, *The Life of Jesus Christ,* 213.

nothing else. No praise falls on the disciple or on his espoused Christianity.[2] Attention should not fall to him, but only to the one who calls,
46 to his authority. Not even a path to faith, to discipleship, is aimed at; there is no other path to faith than obedience to Jesus' call.

What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all. Going after him is something without specific content. It is truly not a program for one's life which would be sensible to implement. It is neither a goal nor an ideal to be sought. It is not even a matter for which, according to human inclination, it would be worth investing anything at all, much less oneself. And what happens? Those called leave everything they have, not in order to do something valuable. Instead, they do it simply for the sake of the call itself, because otherwise they could not walk behind Jesus. Nothing of importance is attached to this action in itself. It remains something completely insignificant, unworthy of notice. The bridges are torn down, and the followers simply move ahead. They are called away and are supposed to "step out" of their previous existence, they are supposed to "exist" in the strict sense of the word.[3] Former things are left behind; they are completely given up. The disciple is thrown out of the relative security of life into complete insecurity (which in truth is absolute security and protection in community with Jesus); out of the foreseeable and calculable realm (which in truth is unreliable) into the completely unforeseeable, coincidental realm (which in truth is the only necessary and reliable one); out of the realm of limited possibilities (which in truth is that of unlimited possibilities) into the realm of unlimited possibilities (which in truth is the only liberating reality).[4] Yet that is not a general law; it is, rather, the
47 exact opposite of all legalism. Again, it is nothing other than being

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[2.] Bonhoeffer refers here to youth associations for "Espoused Christianity" ("EC"), which were founded in 1881 and existed in Germany from 1894 onward.

[3.] The concept of 'existence', coming from Heidegger's philosophy, had become important in theology of the period in which Bonhoeffer worked. See *AB* (*DBWE* 2):27. We read in Bethge's notes of 1935: "Question of the existence of persons in discipleship. Encounter not above real human existence, not within it, not beneath it, but when Christ steps up to Levi, his entire real existence is affected" (*NL* B 8 [3]).

[4.] Bonhoeffer is using the pair of philosophical concepts, 'possibility/reality' or 'potentiality/actuality'. Aristotle uses δύναμις/ἐνέργεια. For Bonhoeffer the concept of reality takes precedence over that of possibility in theological statements. As early as 1927, for example, his fourth proposition in defense of his doctoral dissertation states: "Introducing the concept of potentiality into *Christian* thought means a limitation of divine omnipotence" (*DBW* 9:477). See also *SC* (*DBWE* 1):143, editorial note 40, and Holl, *Luther,* 235.

bound to Jesus Christ alone. This means completely breaking through anything preprogrammed, idealistic, or legalistic. No further content is possible because Jesus is the only content. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it.

So the call to discipleship is a commitment solely to the person of Jesus Christ, a breaking through of all legalisms by the grace of him who calls. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It is beyond enmity between law and gospel. Christ calls; the disciple follows. That is grace and commandment in one. "I walk joyfully, for I seek your commands" (Ps. 119:45).[5]

Discipleship is commitment to Christ. Because Christ exists, he must be followed. An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship. In truth, it even excludes discipleship; it is inimical to it. One enters into a relationship with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship. Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. It is an idea, a myth.[6] A Christianity in which there is only God the Father, but not Christ as a living Son actually cancels discipleship. In that case there will be trust in God, but not discipleship. God's Son became human, he is the *mediator*—that is why discipleship is the right relation to him. Discipleship is bound to the mediator, and wherever discipleship is rightly spoken of, there the mediator, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is intended. Only the mediator, the God-human,[7] can call to discipleship.

Discipleship without Jesus Christ is choosing one's own path. It could 48
be an ideal path or a martyr's path, but it is without the promise. Jesus will reject it.

[5.] The NRSV reads: "I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts."

[6.] Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard:* "'Discipleship' . . . really provides the guarantee that Christianity does not become poetry, mythology, and abstract idea" (2:348 [trans. altered]; in the Kierkegaard text Bonhoeffer is using, this passage has underlining and "!!" in the margin.). On the following, cf. ibid.: ". . . that it is 'the mediator' himself who makes things difficult. For if I have only God to deal with, no 'imitation' [Efterfølgelse] is required" (2:347–48).

[7.] In Bonhoeffer's 1936 draft of a catechism for a confirmation lesson plan he writes with 1 Tim. 2:5 in mind: "Jesus Christ is entirely God and entirely human in one person. Therefore, he is the mediator between God and me and my savior" (*DBW* 14:804 [*GS* 3:352]); see also *CC* 44–45 (*DBW* 12:294–95 [*GS* 3:180]).

"Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' " (Luke 9:57-62).[8]

The *first* disciple took the initiative to follow Jesus. He was not called, and Jesus' answer shows the enthusiastic man that he does not know what he is doing. He cannot know at all. That is the meaning of the answer which shows the disciple the reality of life with Jesus. The answer is spoken by the one who is going to the cross, whose whole life is described in the Apostles' Creed with the one word "suffered." None can want that by their own choice. None can call themselves, says Jesus; and his word receives no reply. The gap between the free offer of discipleship and real discipleship remains wide open.

When Jesus himself calls, however, he overcomes the widest gap. The *second* disciple wants to bury his father before he follows Jesus. The law obliges him.[9] He knows what he wants to do and has to do. First he has to fulfill the law; then he will follow. Here a clear command of the law stands between the one called and Jesus. Jesus' call forcefully challenges
49 this gap. Under no circumstances is anything permitted to come between Jesus and the one called, even that which is greatest and holiest, even the law. Just at that point, for the sake of Jesus, the law which tries to get in the way has to be broken through, because it no longer had any right to interpose itself between Jesus and the one called. So Jesus here opposes the law and bids the man follow him. Only Christ speaks that way. He has the last word. The other person cannot contradict. This call, this grace, is irresistible.[10]

[8.] The NRSV has this passage begin at verse 56, not 57 as in the Luther Bible being used by Bonhoeffer. On this passage see Bonhoeffer's sermon on Psalm 129 in *DBW* 9:513–32; see also his "Devotional Writing for the New Year" in *DBW* 13:344–46 (*GS* 4:171–74), and his letter to Henry L. Henriod, April 7, 1934, in *DBW* 13:120–21 (*GS* 6:351).

[9.] See the fourth of the Ten Commandments in Exod. 20:12: "Honor your father and your mother."

[10.] Bethge's and Zimmermann's notes from Bonhoeffer's lecture here contain the Latin phrase "*gratia irresistibilis,*" instead of "*unwiderstehliche Gnade*" (irresistible grace). *NL*

The *third* one called, like the first, understands discipleship as an offer made only by him, as his own self-chosen program for life. But in contrast to the first, he thinks he is justified in setting his own conditions. Doing so entangles him in a complete contradiction. He wants to join Jesus, but at the same time he himself puts something in the way between himself and Jesus: "Let me first." He wants to follow, but he wants to set his own conditions for following. Discipleship is a possibility for him, whose implementation requires fulfilling conditions and prerequisites.[11] This makes discipleship something humanly reasonable and comprehensible. First one does the one thing, and then the other. Everything has its own rights and its own time. The disciple makes himself available, but retains the right to set his own conditions. It is obvious that, at that moment, discipleship stops being discipleship. It becomes a human program,[12] which I can organize according to my own judgment and can justify rationally and ethically. This third one wants to follow [Christ], but already in the very act of declaring his willingness to do so, he no longer wants to follow him. He eliminates discipleship by his offer, because discipleship does not tolerate any conditions that could 50
come between Jesus and obedience. Hence, this third one gets caught in a contradiction, not only with Jesus, but with himself. He does not want what Jesus wants; he does not even want what he himself wants. He likewise does not want what he thinks he wants. He judges himself; he causes his own downfall, all by [his request], "Let me first." Jesus' answer graphically attests to this person's inner conflict, which rules out discipleship. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Following Christ means taking certain steps. The first step, which responds to the call, separates the followers from their previous exis-

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B 8 (4) and *NL* B 9, 5 (43). Bonhoeffer translated the Latin phrase for the book. See Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte,* 2:234. Seeberg traces the phrase to Augustine, declaring that it would correctly render Augustine's understanding of this concept even though the phrase is not found in his writings. Seeberg then cites passages from Augustine to support his assertion. This section was eliminated in the revised, amended English translation of Seeberg. [JG/GK]

[11.] In *Creation and Fall,* Bonhoeffer uses the same expression, "Let me first . . . ," to characterize a potential disciple's fleeing into a mere possibility of following Jesus. He writes, "In other words, in this question what is possible is played off against reality [Wirklichkeit], and what is possible undermines what is reality. In the relation of human beings to God, however, there are no possibilities: there is only reality" (*CF* [*DBWE* 3]:108–9).

[12.] In a 1932 sermon Bonhoeffer contrasts 2 Chron. 20:12: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" with "Christian programmatic speech" in which "prayers become programs and petitions become orders" (*DBW* 11:417 [*GS* 1:134]).

tence. A call to discipleship thus immediately creates a new situation.[13] Staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude each other. At first, that was quite visibly the case. The tax collector had to leave his booth and Peter his nets to follow Jesus.[14] According to our understanding, even back then things could have been quite different. Jesus could have given the tax collector new knowledge of God and left him in his old situation. If Jesus had not been God's Son become human, then that would have been possible. But because Jesus is the Christ, it has to be made clear from the beginning that his word is not a doctrine. Instead, it creates existence anew. The point was to really walk with Jesus. It was made clear to those he called that they only had one possibility of believing in Jesus, that of leaving everything and going with the incarnate Son of God.

The first step puts the follower into the situation of being able to believe. If people do not follow, they remain behind, then they do not learn to believe. Those called must get out of their situations, in which they cannot believe, into a situation in which faith can begin. This step has no intrinsic worth of its own; it is justified only by the community with Jesus Christ that is attained. As long as Levi sits in the tax collector's
51 booth and Peter at his nets, they would do their work honestly and loyally, they would have old or new knowledge about God. But if they want to learn to believe in God, they have to follow the Son of God incarnate and walk with him.

Things used to be different. Then they could live quietly in the country, unnoticed in their work, keep the law, and wait for the Messiah. But now he was there; now his call came. Now faith no longer meant keeping quiet and waiting, but going in discipleship with him. Now his call to discipleship dissolved all ties for the sake of the unique commitment to Jesus Christ. Now all bridges had to be burned and the step taken to enter into endless insecurity, in order to know what Jesus demands and what Jesus gives. Levi at his taxes could have had Jesus as a helper for all kinds of needs, but he would not have recognized him as the one Lord, into whose hand he should entrust his whole life. He would not have learned to have faith. The situation has to be initiated which will

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[13.] Cf. Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard:* "*Imitation* in the direction of decisive action whereby the situation for becoming a Christian comes into existence" (2:352; Bonhoeffer's copy of Kierkegaard has markings at this point).

[14.] Mark 2:14 and 1:16-18.

enable faith in Jesus, the incarnate God. This is the impossible situation, in which everything is based on only one thing, the word of Jesus. Peter has to get out of the boat into the waves,[15] in order to experience his own powerlessness and the almighty power of his Lord. If he had not gotten out, he would not have learned to believe. His situation on the tempestuous sea is completely impossible and, ethically, simply irresponsible, but it has to happen for him to believe. The road to faith passes through obedience to Christ's call. The step is required; otherwise Jesus' call dissipates into nothing. Any intended discipleship without this step to which Jesus calls becomes deceptive enthusiasts' illusion.

There is a great danger in telling the difference between a situation where faith is possible and where it is not. It is clear that there is nothing in the situation as such to indicate which kind it is. Only the call of Jesus Christ qualifies it as a situation where faith is possible. Second, a situation where faith is possible is never made by humans. Discipleship is not 52
a human offer. The call alone creates the situation. Third, the value of the situation is never in itself. The call alone justifies it. Finally and most of all, the situation which enables faith can itself happen only in faith.

The concept of a situation in which faith is possible is only a description of the reality contained in the following two statements, both of which are equally true: *only the believers obey,* and *only the obedient believe.*[16]

It is really unfaithfulness to the Bible to have the first statement without the second. Only the believer obeys—we think we can understand that. Of course, obedience follows faith, the way good fruit comes from a good tree,[17] we say. First there is faith, then obedience. If this meant only that faith alone justifies us and not deeds of obedience, then it is a firm and necessary precondition for everything else. But if it meant a chronological sequence, that faith would have to come first, to be later followed by obedience, then faith and obedience are torn apart, and the very

[15.] Matt. 14:29.

[16.] These two sentences are first found in Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann's 1936 notes from Bonhoeffer's lectures, in connection with the story of the rich young man: "Only the believers are obedient (do not generalize). Only the obedient person believes" (*NL* B 9, 5 [43]). In Bonhoeffer's lectures on contemporary theology from 1932–33, in the section dealing with Emil Brunner's book *The Divine Imperative,* Ferenc Lehel noted: "*Faith and obedience are one*" (*NL* Appendix 9 [Cf. *DBW* 12:174]). Brunner had written: "The first commandment is a promise, and grace consists in this, that we are commanded to believe in this promise. Hence faith is obedience, just as obedience is only genuine when it is faith" (*The Divine Imperative,* 81). Bonhoeffer marked this passage in his own copy of the book.

[17.] Cf. Matt. 7:17.

practical question remains open: when does obedience start? Obedience remains separated from faith. Because we are justified by faith, faith and obedience have to be distinguished. But their division must never destroy their unity, which lies in the reality that faith exists only in obedience, is
53 never without obedience. Faith is only faith in deeds of obedience.

Because talk about obedience as a consequence of faith is unseemly, due to the indissoluble unity between faith and obedience, the statement "only the believers obey" has to be paired with the other one, "only the obedient believe." In the first, faith is the precondition of obedience; in the second, obedience is the precondition of faith. In exactly the same way that obedience is called a consequence of faith, it is also called a prerequisite of faith.

Only the obedient believe. A concrete commandment has to be obeyed, in order to come to believe. A first step of obedience has to be taken, so that faith does not become pious self-deception, cheap grace. The first step is crucial. It is qualitatively different from all others that follow. The first step of obedience has to lead Peter away from his nets and out of the boat; it has to lead the young man away from his wealth.[18] Faith is possible only in this new state of existence created by obedience.

This first step should, to begin with, be viewed as an external deed which exchanges one mode of existence for another. Anyone can take that step. People are free to do that. It is a deed within the *iustitia civilis* [civil justice],[19] within which people are free. Peter cannot convert himself, but he can leave his nets. In the Gospels that first step consists of a deed which affects all of one's life. The Roman church required such a step only for the exceptional alternative of monasticism. For the other faithful it was enough to be willing to subject themselves unconditionally
54 to the church and its commands. In the Lutheran confessions the importance of a first step is recognized in a significant way: after they thoroughly removed the danger of a synergistic misunderstanding,[20] space could be kept and had to be kept for that first external deed required to

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[18.] Mark 1:16-18; Matt. 14:29; and Matt. 19:21.

[19.] "Civil justice" (in contrast to faith-justice). The term is often used in Lutheran confessional writings for external justice that people can accomplish with their natural powers—reason and free will—while *iustitia spiritualis* ("spiritual justice") is only granted by the Holy Spirit. See "Apology of the Augsburg Confession" (*The Book of Concord,* 226, art. 18, par. 9, *et passim*).

[20.] The reformers rejected as a misunderstanding the notion that human "co-working" (σύν—ἔργον) for grace to happen could count as a human merit and could contribute to salvation. Cf. *DBW* 14:428–29.

enable faith—the step, in this case, to the church, where the word of salvation is preached. This step can be taken in full freedom. Come to the church! You can do that on the strength of your human freedom. You can leave your house on Sunday and go to hear the preaching. If you do not do it, then you willfully exclude yourself from the place where faith is possible. In this the Lutheran confessions show that they know there is a situation which enables faith and one in which faith is not possible. To be sure, this knowledge is very hidden here, almost as if they were ashamed of it, but it is present as one and the same knowledge of the significance of the first step as an external deed.[21]

Once this knowledge is ascertained, then something else must be acknowledged, namely, that this first step as an external deed is and remains a dead work of the law, which can by itself never lead to Christ. As an external deed, the new existence just remains the old existence. At best, a new law of life, a new lifestyle, is reached, which has nothing to do with the new life in Christ. The alcoholic who gives up alcohol or the rich man who gives away his money are truly freed from alcohol and money, but not from themselves. They remain as their old selves, maybe even more so than before. Subject to the demand for works, they remain in the death of their old lives. The works do have to be done, but by themselves they do not lead out of death, disobedience, and godlessness. If we ourselves understand our first step as a precondition for grace, 55
for faith, then we are judged by our works and completely cut off from grace. Everything we call convictions or good intentions is included in those external deeds, everything which the Roman church calls facere quod in se est [to do what is in oneself, i.e., to act according to one's own abilities].[22] If we take the first step with the intention of putting ourselves into the situation of being able to believe, then even this ability to believe is itself nothing but works. It is but a new possibility for living within our old existence and thereby a complete misunderstanding. We remain in unbelief.

[21.] See Bethge's 1935 notes from Bonhoeffer's lectures on the visible church in the New Testament, found in *NL* B 18 (3) [see *DBW* 14:426, n. 20], indicate that Bonhoeffer refers to the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, article 2: "On Free Will" (*The Book of Concord,* 531, par. 53). This passage is marked by Bonhoeffer. Cf. the student notes found in *NL* Anh. B 2, 3 (47f.), which refer to the "*practice of attending church*, approaching word and sacrament. Being able to receive, being able to be told something, being still in the realm of the church" (*DBW* 12:198).

[22.] See Holl, *Luther,* 31–32, note 2. On this concept, see the article on "Facienti quod in se est," in Höfer and Rahner, *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* 1336–37.

But the external works have to take place; we have to get into the situation of being able to believe. We have to take the step. What does that mean? It means that we take this step in the right way only when we do not look to the necessity of our works, but solely with a view to the word of Jesus Christ, which calls us to take the step. Peter knows that he cannot climb out of the boat by his own power. His first step would already be his downfall, so he calls, "Command me to come to you on the water." Christ answers, "Come."[23] Christ has to have called; the step can be taken only at his word. This call is his grace, which calls us out of death into the new life of obedience. But now that Christ has called, Peter has to get out of the boat to come to Christ. So it is, indeed, the case that the first step of obedience is itself an act of faith in Christ's word. But it would completely misrepresent the essence of faith to conclude that that step is no longer necessary, because in that step there had already been faith. To the contrary, we must venture to state that the step of obedience must be done first, before there can be faith. The disobedient cannot have faith.

You complain that you cannot believe? No one should be surprised that they cannot come to believe so long as, in deliberate disobedience,
56 they flee or reject some aspect of Jesus' commandment. You do not want to subject some sinful passion, an enmity, a hope, your life plans, or your reason to Jesus' commandment? Do not be surprised that you do not receive the Holy Spirit, that you cannot pray, that your prayer for faith remains empty! Instead, go and be reconciled with your sister or brother;[24] let go of the sin which keeps you captive; and you will be able to believe again! If you reject God's commanding word, you will not receive God's gracious word. How would you expect to find community while you intentionally withdraw from it at some point? The disobedient cannot believe; only the obedient believe.

Here the gracious call of Jesus Christ to discipleship becomes a strict law: Do this! Stop that! Come out of the boat to Jesus! Jesus says to anyone who uses their faith or lack of faith to excuse their acts of disobedience to his call: First obey, do the external works, let go of what binds you, give up what is separating you from God's will! Do not say, I do not have the faith for that. You will not have it so long as you remain disobedient, so long as you will not take that first step. Do not say, I have faith, so I do not have to take the first step. You do not have faith,

[23.] Matthew 14:28f.
[24.] Matthew 5:24.

because and so long as you will not take that first step. Instead, you have hardened yourself in disbelief under the appearance of humble faith. It is an evil excuse to point from inadequate obedience to inadequate faith, and from inadequate faith to inadequate obedience. It is the disobedience of the "faithful" if they confess their unbelief where their obedience is required and if they play games with that confession (Mark 9:24). You believe—so take the first step! It leads to Jesus Christ. You do not believe—take the same step; it is commanded of you! The question of your belief or unbelief is not yours to ask. The works of obedience are required and must be done immediately. The situation is given in which faith becomes possible and really exists.

Actually, it is not *the works* which create faith. Instead, you are given a situation in which you can have faith. The point is to get into such a situation, so that faith is true faith and not self-deception. Because the only goal is to have true faith in Jesus Christ, because faith alone is and remains the goal ("out of faith into faith,"[25] Rom. 1:17), this is an indispensable situation. Anyone who protests too quickly and in too Protestant a manner should be asked whether or not they are defending cheap grace. In fact the two statements, if they remain juxtaposed, will not offend true faith, but if each is taken alone it would cause serious offense. Only the believers obey—that is said to the obedient person inside the believer. Only the obedient person believes; this is what is said to the believer in his obedience. If the first statement remains alone, the believer is prey to cheap grace, that is, damnation. If the second statement remains alone, the believers are prey to their works, that is, damnation. 57

At this point let us now take a look at Christian pastoral care.[26] It is particularly important for pastors giving care to speak from knowledge of both of these statements. They need to know that sorrow over a lack of faith repeatedly comes from disobedience, which may be intentional or even no longer noticed, and that such sorrow all too often corresponds to the comfort of cheap grace. But the disobedience remains unbroken, and words of grace become a consolation which the disobedient grant to themselves and a forgiveness of sins they accord themselves. But for such people, the Christian message becomes empty; they no longer hear it.

[25.] This follows Luther's translation of ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, that is, righteousness, which comes *from* faith and leads *to* faith. The NRSV reads: "[T]he righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith."

[26.] According to his students' notes, this section corresponds largely to Bonhoeffer's lectures on pastoral care from 1935 to 1939 (*DBW* 14:559–71 [*GS* 5:367–79]).