

BILL HULL &
BRANDON COOK

THE COST OF

CHEAP GRACE

RECLAIMING THE VALUE
OF DISCIPLESHIP

Bill Hull and Brandon Cook point to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's path, which is the journey away from cheap grace and toward costly discipleship. This is an important book for serious Christians to work through. It grapples with the fundamental issue of what it really means to place our faith in Christ and follow him. I recommend the content of this book for serious reflection.

BOBBY HARRINGTON, founder and director of Discipleship.org and Renew.org

The Cost of Cheap Grace is refreshing for those who long to learn about Jesus' life and teaching about discipleship (which is so rarely reaffirmed) and rebuking for those who have wandered into a self-defined, alternate version of discipleship. Bill Hull and Brandon Cook clearly remind us of the calling Jesus set before us and help us juxtapose it against contemporary teaching that has invaded our theology and churches. I anticipate that after our dozens of house-church pastors and network of churches in the Church Project read *The Cost of Cheap Grace*, our decisions to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus will radically increase.

JASON SHEPPERD, lead pastor of Church Project

Briskly written, theologically rich, and always engaging, *The Cost of Cheap Grace* uncovers the roots of the nominalism that undermines the church's witness to the world. Brandon and Bill offer biblical, practical, and challenging pathways to transform your disciple making. This enjoyable book will supercharge you and your church!

ALEX ABSALOM, founder of Dandelion Resourcing, coauthor of *Discipleship That Fits*

The popular understanding of grace has been a costly deception, causing many to buy a cheap imitation of God's original. Hull and Cook joyfully invite us into grace's ability to fully transform us through true discipleship. This is a potent read for every follower of Jesus who longs for a life of ever-deepening union with God.

DR. LARRY J. WALKEMEYER, lead pastor of Light & Life Christian Fellowship

Like a clap of lightning splitting the darkness or the sound of a muffled drone, *The Cost of Cheap Grace* is a jolt to a nation of us struggling to focus on the singular work of discipleship. Bill Hull and Brandon Cook begin upstream at the source, where we're encouraged to rethink our conception of Jesus' gospel so we might better imagine the makeup of a disciple of Jesus. After guiding us through a litany of factors contributing to our lethargy toward discipleship—cultural and theological, historical and philosophical—they put us on the line. Will we stand up and start walking?

KYU HO LEE, Navigators 20s leader in Los Angeles/Orange County, CA

Bill and Brandon challenge the theology and church culture that have created a chasm among followers of Jesus. They aren't, however, simply doom-and-gloom prophets, but rather they point us toward a better way forward with thoughtful insights and practical advice. The introduction alone is worth the price of the book and will make you yearn for a better way forward for the church.

MIKE GOLDSWORTHY, pastor, author, and adjunct professor

This book was refreshing, life-giving, freeing, and deeply meaningful to my walk with God and to my pastorate. I was encouraged and challenged, and I received great hope to step into the responsibility of sounding the clarion call: Following Jesus begins and ends with grace, but the middle is filled with a path paved by our willingness to obey Jesus' words and emulate his life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

KELLY M. WILLIAMS, senior pastor of Vanguard Church

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The Cost of Cheap Grace: Reclaiming the Value of Discipleship

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IN MEMORIAM

BILL

We remember Eugene Peterson as we publish this work. His impact on both of us has been immense.

I have been reading him for years and have always been awestruck by his capacity with words. His very life as a pastor was both a rebuke and a lifeline. I recall him telling a story about going to a very hip conference, a leading-edge environment. He said that the experience sucked all the Jesus out of him. It took him a week of reading Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics to set him right. He said that things were so different, it was like he was seeing the world through a unique set of eyes. He recommended dedicating seminary education's first year to reading great novels and literature. This had to do with expanding the pastoral imagination. I recently saw a short film on his life. When the interviewer asked him what he hoped the effect of his life had been, he said he hoped he was able to change American pastors' imaginations. I know he did mine—he got me to slow down, think, and pray.

In that tradition, Brandon and I hope to get you, the reader, to expand your understanding of what it means to be saved. In the end, we hope that you agree with us that salvation without discipleship is not salvation at all but a cheap imitation of what God offers us. We may need to live outside our safe mental boxes, to leave our either/or world and live in the both/and world. Eugene Peterson was an expert at expanding our understanding and helping us embrace paradox. So here's to you, Eugene: Well done.

The fundamental hallmark of belief is how you act.

WISDOM OF THE AGES

Faith is only real when there is obedience.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

*I think we ought to read only the kind of books
that wound or stab us. If the book we are reading
doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head,
what are we reading it for?*

FRANZ KAFKA

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INTRODUCTION

BILL

“SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE.” It’s a modern theological cliché—by definition, “a phrase or opinion that is overused and betrays a lack of original thought.”¹ This cliché has become the way you establish your bona fide evangelical credentials. It is meant to bolster a doctrine that emerged from the Reformation, that salvation has nothing to do with behavior. The phrase has provided a secure hiding place for millions, somewhere they could rest from the obvious labor the gospel requires. The divorcing of grace from behavior is responsible for the church relieving itself of the moral burden to live better and be better than the general population. Dietrich Bonhoeffer applied his stinging rebuke of this development in his 1937 manual for ministers, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Cheap grace means justification of sin but not of the sinner. . . .

The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace upon itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins.²

There are actually Christians who proudly proclaim that they are no better behaved than people of other religions or no religions at all. If this is the gospel—that you are saved, you get your sins forgiven, and you gain entrance into heaven but that your morality, behavior, and the collective contribution of the church will not improve life on earth—why would anyone be interested? Any honest person with moral integrity would be repulsed by such an idea. Skeptics would (rightly) say, “Christians go to heaven regardless of life and conduct, but non-Christians go to hell forever, even if they live better and contribute more to society.” Even flawed humans reserve life sentences for only the most heinous crimes.

So we can conclude that “salvation by grace alone” is a cliché: It clearly reveals a lack of thought. But it’s a cliché with consequence: What it has created is cleverly presented in the classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

THE GRAND INQUISITOR

One of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous brothers, Ivan, keeps a notebook of God’s mistakes—particularly atrocities that God has allowed. Dostoevsky uses newspaper headlines similar to real events recorded in 1876 to make Ivan’s argument:³

- the nobleman who orders his hounds to tear a peasant boy to pieces in front of his mother
- the man who beats his struggling horse
- the parents who lock their tiny daughter in a freezing privy all night while she knocks on the walls, pleading for mercy

- the Turk who entertains a baby with a shiny pistol before blowing its brains out⁴

Alyosha, Ivan's brother, believes in God and his goodness but cannot counter Ivan's argument, which culminates in the story of the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan's indictment of the hypocritical church.

The story Ivan tells takes place in Seville in the 1500s, during the period of the Inquisition. Jesus has come to Seville and moves about silently, but he is recognized immediately. People are drawn to him—they follow him; they gather around him. He stretches out his arms to the people, and just by touching them, his healing power begins to flow. The blind can see, the lame walk, and people weep and kiss the ground where he has walked. He stops at the cathedral steps, where a small white coffin sits with a dead little girl inside. The mother throws herself at his feet, Jesus reaches out, and the girl rises from the dead. There is shouting and weeping.

Just then the Cardinal of Seville, the Grand Inquisitor, crosses the cathedral square. He notices what has happened, recognizes Jesus, and promptly has him arrested.

The Grand Inquisitor comes to Jesus' dark cell, holding a light. He doesn't speak for two minutes, and then he lays the light down.

"You? Is it really you?"

Jesus has come at a very bad time, the Inquisitor proclaims. He is making things difficult for the church leaders, interfering with their business. "The church is no longer yours to run," he tells Jesus; his authority has been transferred to the pope. "It has

taken us fifteen hundred years to reduce the burdensome and unrealistic demands you left behind. We can't have you coming back and undoing all that good work, dogma, and traditions of the church. Tomorrow, I will pronounce you a heretic, and the people will believe me."

Jesus never speaks a word. He only walks over to the old man and kisses him gently on his old, bloodless lips. The old man quivers, walks to the door, and says, "Go now, and do not come back . . . ever. You must never, never come again!" And he lets the prisoner out into the dark streets of the city.⁵

The Grand Inquisitor understands (and our contemporary church unconsciously recognizes) that Jesus comes with a gospel that expects personal change—and not just in general temperament or by ceasing to commit socially unacceptable sins. The Jesus who lives among us demands everything of us. Another word for that is *discipleship*.

The discipleship that Jesus offers us as his gospel is a matter of *following him and learning from him how to live our lives as though he were living them*.⁶ That alone constitutes a saved life; everything else is a cheap imitation.

It's the cheap imitation that the Grand Inquisitor insists the church had worked hard to create and didn't want to give up. When Jesus shows up, even if only briefly, this cheap imitation of the gospel begins to crumble: Everyone knows it is him, and lives are changed immediately in ways that the imitation can't imitate. Many present-day "Christians" have no serious expectation that Jesus will return as he promised—which is a good thing for their psyches, because if he did, most of them would not like what came with him, much less want to spend eternity

in his presence. In the eyes of the modern world, the Jesus of the Bible is intolerant, judgmental, harsh, and unforgiving toward the unrepentant.

THE THREAT OF DISCIPLESHIP

The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ. Such a man knows that the call to discipleship is a gift of grace, and that the call is inseparable from the grace.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this assertion as a way of reconciling two seemingly incompatible ideas, at least according to the spirit of the age: grace and discipleship. It is the person who has given the most to his or her salvation, Bonhoeffer recognizes, who understands best that only by grace could they have lived it out. Here Bonhoeffer echoes a powerful call from the apostle Paul: “Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear” (Philippians 2:12, NLT). The more you place yourself at risk, the more profound are your experiences of grace and mercy—you come to know, at a bone-deep level, that it is all by grace. This is a knowledge that is never gained by semiobedient people or by the majority of Christians.

Bonhoeffer was significantly influenced by Martin Luther. He agreed with Luther’s emphasis on “justification by faith alone” (a companion assertion to the clichéd “salvation by grace alone”) and defended it. In fact, Bonhoeffer lamented the damage that had been done to Luther’s teaching:

Nonetheless, what emerged victorious from Reformation history was not Luther's recognition of pure, costly grace, but the alert religious instinct of human beings for the place where grace could be had the cheapest. Only a small, hardly noticeable distortion of the emphasis was needed, and that most dangerous and ruinous deed was done. . . . Luther knew that this grace had cost him one life and daily continued to cost him, for he was not excused by grace from discipleship, but instead was all the more thrust into it.

Bonhoeffer went on to connect the "ruinous deed" to people's lives.

The followers' own teaching ["by grace alone"] was, therefore, unassailable, judged by Luther's teaching, but their teaching meant the end and the destruction of the Reformation as the revelation of God's costly grace on earth. The justification of the sinner in the world became the justification of sin and the world. Without discipleship, costly grace would become cheap grace.⁷

This ruinous deed led to the favorite evangelical bumper sticker of the 1980s, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." In other words, don't expect much from us.

The "ruinous deed" Luther's followers committed was done primarily because they were human and did what humans naturally do: take the easiest, least costly path, which was to separate grace from behavior and responsibility—to separate discipleship to Christ from salvation in Christ, thus making

discipleship an optional activity, the optional domain of “serious” Christians. Of course, this led to the creation of a church dominated by nominalism, people who used the church as a community service for birth, marriage, baptism, and death. It is quite common to engage well-meaning people in conversation who present themselves as respectable, nonpracticing Christians who are church members. This, we would venture to say, is the largest Christian demographic on earth.

“Salvation by grace alone” protects the option to live as a partial Christian—to take advantage of religious goods and services, the assurance of heaven, the immediate and unconditional availability of forgiveness. You can come and go as you please, live a selfish life, be critical of the church and its leadership but not help solve the problem—and still get Communion.

This problem is the church’s worst-kept secret. Consider the words of Friedrich Nietzsche well over one hundred years ago:

The Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed to them; and the impudent garrulous talk about the “justification by faith” and its supreme and sole significance is only the consequence of the Church’s lack of courage and will to profess the *works* Jesus demanded.⁸

We would not sign off on the outworking of Nietzsche’s philosophy nor on his ethics, but his critique of the church as he knew it still resonates today. What is sorely needed in our midst is a return to the imitation of Christ in which Jesus’ followers demand of themselves and the church Jesus’ work in the world and in their own lives.

THE WORLD OF HALF-TRUTH

Like most clichés, “salvation by grace alone” isn’t wrong. Complicated ideas are often distilled into shorthand phrases to make them easier to access. Over time, however, such shorthand phrases can come to mean something much different from what their authors meant when they crafted them. The following is what we consider the contemporary understanding of “salvation by grace alone.”

Salvation. A person is saved from their sins. Their sins are forgiven, and as a result, they gain admission to heaven. Salvation is thus a singular event focused exclusively on forgiveness of sin, partitioned off from any requirement for behavioral change.

By grace. Grace is a derivative of God’s mercy, and the greatest portion of it comes to us at our “point of salvation.” This often is called the moment you were “saved” or received new life, forgiveness, new birth—the big moment when you became a child of God. Grace is something you cannot seek or earn; you only receive it. The human’s relationship to grace is a passive one: God is the one who distributes it as he wills.

Alone. *Alone* contrasts grace with human effort. Life in Christ is separate from human action: There is nothing you can do to earn it, there is nothing you can do to lose it, and there is nothing you can do to supplement it.

There is something powerful and right about each of these elements. They are profoundly true: All people need to be saved, salvation can only come about by God’s grace, and we are completely unable to achieve salvation on our own. Hardly anyone consciously teaches cheap grace. (Some do, but they are in the minority.) You just don’t hear leaders, pastors, or evangelists proudly spouting, “I make everyone who has said the magic

sinner's prayer as comfortable as possible in my ministry because I want all their friends to feel welcome. We want all of them to pray the prayer and be baptized. If we remove many of the traditional barriers, we can fill up heaven and our churches. It doesn't really matter how well-behaved or transformed they are here in this life; it is the next life that counts, where everyone will be perfect."

And yet "salvation by grace alone" has a larger meaning, one that cheap grace suppresses. Here is the other side of each word:

SALVATION

Salvation is a comprehensive idea covering the process of God calling a person to a reconciling relationship, leading to repentance, forgiveness, new birth, and a life of following and learning from Jesus. This includes participating in his values and his mission. The culmination of this good life is stepping into the eternal state of an active life with him.

The focus of salvation is much grander than the minimal requirements for making it into heaven. There seem to be endless conversations about Aunt Harriet or Grandpa Joe who made a profession of faith but never lived it out—did they make it? Reading the Gospels, one gets the strong impression that Jesus taught the nature of salvation as more intricate: Salvation to Jesus included individuals, but individuals were not the only focus. God made promises to people and to *his people*. Also, to Jesus, salvation seemed to be more of a process and less of an event. We have made it an event so we can count it and assure people they have nothing to worry about.⁹ We will unpack this further over the course of the book.

The spacecraft *Voyager 1* has returned photographs from

what is called interstellar space. One such photo showed a thin vertical shaft of yellow light, inside of which was a white speck. That speck was Earth. The sight of us as that small speck in the vast universe was at the same time frightening and wondrous. The fullness of the gospel has a similar impact. Trying to connect the ancient story of the creator God, the incarnate Word, and the Spirit's vastness and mystery is too much for the human mind. When we think of what God is saving when we say *salvation*, we must remember that it is a much larger project than forgiveness of a single person's sin. The book of Revelation states it in one of its salvation songs:

Hallelujah! The Salvation, the Glory, the Power all belong to our God. The judgments are accurate and right. He judged the Great Whore! The earth ruined with her cheating sex, and God's servants' blood spilled by her hand He restored to rightness.

REVELATION 19:1-3, AUTHOR'S PARAPHRASE

Eugene Peterson describes salvation as “the answer to catastrophe”—the totality of the impact of sin on creation:

All parts of creation—Arcturus and the Mississippi, Lebanon cedars and English turnips, rainbow trout and parula warblers, eskimos and aborigines—have been jarred out of the harmonious original and are in discord. The transparent complementarity of male and female is darkened into rivalry and accusation. The cool evening conversation between God and humans

is distorted into furtive evasions. The “fit” between heaven and earth, between creation and creature and Creator, is dislocated: form no longer matches function, result no longer flows from purpose. Instead there is pain, travail, sweat, death.

Nothing is exempt from the catastrophe.¹⁰

Fully appreciating what God goes through, what we all go through to rescue our planet from the catastrophe could require a shot of Maalox. Peterson sums up the catastrophe with the help of novelist Walker Percy’s little book *Lost in the Cosmos*: “We don’t know where we are. We don’t know who we are.”¹¹

The simple prayer of a person at an altar or over coffee with a friend touches this wondrous salvation project but in no way grasps its massive impact. Salvation is the plot of history; it is a rescue mission. Salvation is God’s action, his project, and it includes the entire creation.

The world’s alternative is to put the world right by good deeds and so to leave God out. To the secular mind, for God to conduct himself in the way he sees fit, even though great human minds cannot fathom it or agree with it, is scandalous. Many think of God as a megalomaniac because he violates their modern sensibilities (Isaiah 55:8-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25). But what it takes to turn around the world, save it, and rescue its people is a strong stomach and an absolute commitment. Salvation requires bloodshed. Can we agree then not to trivialize salvation by reducing it to whether a person is safe and secure in the arms of Christ based on a prayer or religious ritual prescribed by the priestly class?

BY DISCIPLESHIP

If we replace the word *grace* in “salvation by grace alone” with *discipleship*, we have an entirely different discussion. A disciple is a person who has chosen to position themselves as Jesus’ student or follower. Discipleship is a state of being created by the work of the Holy Spirit combined mysteriously with the human will.

Critics object to an emphasis on discipleship because it often functions as shorthand for an individual’s personal growth into Christlikeness. They worry about an inbred understanding of Christian maturity that functions at odds with the great commission. They prefer to emphasize “disciple making” over discipleship. We will set aside the question of whether you can be truly Christlike and not make disciples. But it’s highly doubtful that any significant movement of God has been inhibited by referring to discipleship rather than disciple making. Reasons for the great commission being diminished in the contemporary Christian imagination run much deeper than word choice. You can’t find a church that honors Christ’s words that would not agree that making disciples of all nations is crucial. They have had the language right, but they have used the right language wrongly. The church of cheap grace makes disciples, but the disciples they make are by and large practicing a watered-down, broadened-out discipleship, such that just about anything a church does hits the target.

Making new disciples is the starting point for multiplication and the fulfillment of Christ’s mandate to reach the world. In Matthew 28:18-20, the centerpiece of the great commission is the command to “make disciples.” The critics are right both about the priority given by Jesus to disciple making in his

gospel, and about the failures of the contemporary church in making disciples. For our discussion, however, making disciples is inherent to discipleship: It is part of our ongoing interaction with Christ, learning from him and participating in his mission.

When we use the phrase “salvation by discipleship alone,” we mean that *there is only one way to fully experience your salvation*, and that is via *a lifetime of discipleship to Christ*. Everyone who is called to salvation is called to discipleship—no exceptions, no excuses.

The reason this book is being written is not to fixate on whether a person who doesn’t engage in discipleship is “saved” or not. The question itself reveals how miniaturized our understanding of salvation has become. Many cheap-grace Christians don’t even understand what they’ve been called to because no one has ever shown them what it is or trained them. Our point remains: Discipleship is a normal part of what it means to be saved.

ALONE

Decades ago, it was popular to quote John 14:6: “Jesus told him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me’” (NLT). Hardly anyone mentions it now. Jesus sounds so antiquated, out of step with the cultural mood here. His assertion seems to represent narrow-mindedness, intolerance, and absolutism. Most such objections to singular truth are self-refuting, however. Lesslie Newbigin speaks of a friend’s encounter with a fellow passenger on a flight. “At the end of the conversation, the other man said, ‘Well, of one thing I am certain: There is no such thing as absolute truth.’ My friend said, ‘Are you absolutely sure?’”¹²

Of course, this is logically absurd, even laughable. People are absolutely scandalized by Jesus' absolutist claims. Dallas Willard answered this philosophical scandal: "If Jesus knew a better way, he would be the first to tell you. And if you don't believe that, you don't know much about Jesus."¹³

ONLY ONE WAY TO BECOME JESUS' DISCIPLE

Jesus taught that the only way any person can be his disciple is to follow him. Only those who believe in Jesus follow Jesus. The only way a Christian can know they are a Christian is to follow Jesus. If you wake up one day and find yourself not following Jesus, you must take stock. If you are okay with it, then it's not in your soul. A Christian and a disciple are the same person. To believe Jesus is to trust Jesus is to follow Jesus. When someone follows Jesus, they learn from him and participate in his mission on earth. This is one seamless process, and it is called salvation.

Jesus said it plainly in Luke's Gospel.

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.

LUKE 9:23-25, NLT

The Jesus way is not only a message for those considering Christ as the answer to the human crisis. It is an explanation of what he is calling every person to do. It is not ambiguous; it requires a faith that gets your legs moving, your mind and heart engaged in learning and obeying. The way of Christ is the way

of the disciple (Luke 14:27, 33). Salvation by discipleship alone expects all those called to salvation to follow, learn from, and obey Jesus throughout their lives—no exceptions, no excuses.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT PERFECTION OR ANYTHING CLOSE TO IT

Just as Jesus calls us to the ideal, Paul writes in grand terms in Ephesians and Romans, as Eugene Peterson points out in his magnificent work *Practice Resurrection*. “Ephesians is a revelation of the church we never see. . . . The church we want becomes the enemy of the church we have.”¹⁴

We don’t live in the ideal; we live somewhere in the middle—in a world of confusion, struggle, weakness mixed with triumph. Even when Paul speaks of the great potential and power of life in union with Christ in Romans 6–8, he splays himself on the floor in chapter 7: “The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate” (Romans 7:14–15, NLT). Even Jesus’ three most trusted disciples could not stay awake while he prayed, and Jesus himself acknowledges the gap between convictions and conduct: “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41, NLT).

We conclude with a review of Bonhoeffer’s statement.

The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ. Such a man knows that the call to discipleship is a gift of grace, and that the call is inseparable from the grace.¹⁵

Salvation is by discipleship alone. It is time to wrestle with what that means. That begins with a basic principle: The only way you will experience the fullness of your salvation is through your own discipleship to Christ. Salvation can only be lived through discipleship, and if you don't live it, you don't have it.

YELLOW

*I am only writing this to remember that I was not looking for a sign
And only realized hours later, as I turned the lever and felt the rush
of untested water which caught my breath, the surprise even
worse than the blast of cold on opening a shower door (such are
the pains of all sudden absences)*

*That the yellow-breasted bird sat like a needle in the haystack of
that brown, mottled wood*

A coy reminder of something too quiet for words

A prophet whispering wordlessly, "yes, and keep moving forward"

1 THE DISCIPLE SHORTAGE

*The harvest is great, but the workers are few.
So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest;
ask him to send more workers into his fields.*

MATTHEW 9:37-38, NLT

BILL

SO YOU ARE A RECIPIENT OF GOD'S FAVOR, of his grace—now what? You have been hanging around church and church people for a while now, maybe longer than a while. Emotional appeals are made at your church services and are a regular part of the church's weekly e-mails to the congregation: There is a disciple shortage. The shortage is ever present, and the nature of the appeals is sometimes desperate and guilt producing: "Volunteers are needed, or we will need to shut down this program." Getting enough people to care about something seems to be a challenge as old as the human race.

The Kingdom of God has now been around two thousand years. Jesus lived out his ministry years, was killed, was raised from the dead, appeared to his disciples and many others, and forty days after his resurrection, he left the earth to join his Father, leaving behind the commission to his followers to "Make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). He sent the Holy Spirit to be present with his followers throughout this period of Kingdom work. And yet, at all times in the two thousand years since the events of Jesus' earthly ministry, there has been a shortage of disciples. "The harvest is plentiful," Jesus told his first followers, "but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37).

In a world population of nearly eight billion, there are approximately 2.5 billion professing Christians. The shortage of workers has grown exponentially with the population. Scholars who study cultures, population trends, and political realities acknowledge that finishing the great commission is a very complex mission. "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore," Jesus told his followers in light of this challenge, "to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:38).

So why aren't you out there in the harvest field? Why don't you sense a personal responsibility to participate in the great commission of making disciples? Given the gospel that is most often preached in America, you probably don't think your salvation depends on it.

The gospel of cheap grace preaches that you can separate salvation from discipleship. Discipleship to Christ is broadly understood as a good idea, healthy for Christians, and you probably have considered and possibly even resolved to increase your commitment to the demands of discipleship. But life gets in the way, and when you don't get around to it, you face no real consequence.

In fact, we will be held accountable to God for our decisions and actions (Matthew 12:36; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Only God can give you the desire to work for him, of course. But you are involved in the decision; there is nothing robotic about a relationship with God in Christ. The Scriptures call us to believe, to obey, to strive, to run with patience, to do hundreds of things that require an act of the will. We can make good decisions, we can make bad decisions; otherwise, there would be no need for commands or exhortations in Scripture. Thomas Aquinas described the interplay between God and human will: "For him [Aquinas], my actions are caused by God without ceasing to be free."¹

Goodness can't be forced; you can't squeeze service out of a person. Paul put it so well:

Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13, NLT

If you sense a nudge or even something stronger to move you from the safe confines of your comfort zone, it probably means that an activated disciple is praying for you. That person has seen the world and its helplessness, its confusion, its pain, its stubbornness through the eyes of Jesus and has decided to ask God to send you into the workforce. You should sense God's care for you, his interest in you, and his plan to send you into his world to love it like he loved it.

But before you can move ahead, you might need to change your mind. The predominant belief that becoming involved in God's mission is an act of extraordinary dedication is erroneous; the call to participate in the great commission is, in fact, absolutely normal—the logical act of a person who has been changed by the power of Christ.

TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

Jesus taught that salvation causes discipleship, just as certain as the sun on your face creates warmth. You are not just a Christian secure in Christ; you are a disciple of Christ, called to engage in his mission to the world (John 20:21). You are not placed on earth to simply live a good life; you are an ambassador for Christ, calling out to the world, “Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). The first order of business is to reconfigure your thinking because that will determine what you do.

Charles Malik, former chairman of the UN Commission on Human Rights, once said that “if you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world.”² So what is it about the general thinking of church leaders and members that needs to change? Let's start with our message and our commission to distribute it to the

world. What if Jesus didn't come back as he promised because we had preached the wrong gospel? A broken, upside-down gospel that filled the nations with Christians in name only? Charles Spurgeon, a great orator and pastor in nineteenth-century England, compared the gospel to a caged lion, arguing that it doesn't need to be defended; it just needs to be let out of its cage.³ When priests and pastors decide how much of the gospel we get, when we get it, and under what conditions we get it, we cage our wild and dangerous story. We learn about the once-great lion when it was wild and free, but when we confront the words of Jesus, they disturb our theological categories and make us feel unsafe. For example,

Not everyone who calls out to me, "Lord, Lord!" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, "Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name." But I will reply, "I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws."

MATTHEW 7:21-23, NLT

Generations of Christians have been programmed to believe that faith is no more than simple agreement with religious dogma. So it is a scandal to hear Jesus say, "Only those who actually do the will of my Father" are people of faith, the only ones who truly believe. The church has taught that no proof or actions are necessary to prove salvation, but Jesus here suggests that proof is required. This one factor could flip the gospel,

our churches, our training, our creeds, and our worship upside down. Like Saint Francis, who allegedly threatened to stand on his head to make a point, we may need to stand on our heads to see the world aright.

The contemporary church is largely a church of effort, of showmanship, composed of well-meaning mission initiatives, but underlying it all is a nondiscipleship gospel.

Research shows that a large percentage of Christians never share their faith, which means they haven't joined the mission of Jesus in that formal way. The majority just want to survive their world, to avoid pain, shame, and failure. Wouldn't it be interesting if we required discipleship for church membership? I am sure there would be great rebellion among the church populace: "Someone has moved the goalposts! They are being legalistic; they are teaching works righteousness." In some ways, they would be right. Our default gospel has been drilled into the hearts and minds of congregations around the world for the last one hundred years. As the great Christian philosopher Dallas Willard stated, "As egg-headed as it may sound, our basic problem is our theology. The problem is our doctrine of salvation."⁴

THE NEW NORMAL

One of the things leaders do is define normal in a way that matches people's lived reality. Jesus was the master of such teaching, speaking in terms people understood and matching their experience to his insights. When you make a broad, general teaching for the masses, you want to keep it simple, you want to be clear, and you want to avoid extremes. Jesus' teaching at its simplest was this: "Follow me."

According to the missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin,

The typical picture of the minister, at least in the Protestant tradition, has been that of a teacher. He faces the congregation as a teacher faces the class. They all, preacher and people alike, have their backs turned to the outside world. They face one another, and the minister encourages, exhorts, and teaches. Many biblical pictures portray Jesus in this relation to his disciples. The Italian director Pasolini . . . in the film *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* . . . shows Jesus going ahead of his disciples, like a commander leading troops into battle. The words he speaks are thrown back over his shoulder to the fearful and faltering followers. . . . They all find their meaning in the central keyword, “Follow me.”⁵

Leaders lead; they are going somewhere, and those who show interest in following them must ask questions on the run. Jesus was usually walking, and it is often said that Jesus would turn and respond to the those who would gather around him. This is so different from contemporary leadership models, so important, that it deserves an entirely different book.⁶

Jesus led with the core issue that could free people: *Following me will cost you a lot—in fact, it will cost you everything you’ve got . . . so really think about it!* Not the most market-tested statement that would make people more likely to attend future meetings. And yet we’re told in the Scriptures that “a large crowd was following Jesus” (Luke 14:25, NLT). Holding back biblical teaching of costly discipleship is not offering pastoral care to seekers; it’s pastoral malfeasance.

The great commission is built on the idea that disciples make other disciples who make still more disciples. Its genius is built on multiplication. When 96 percent of your disciples have been taught not to make disciples, you reap what you have sown.

EVERYONE MUST DECIDE

[Jesus said,] “If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.”

LUKE 14:26-27, NLT

Every person who follows Jesus does so because they want to. Jesus accepts no disciples who don't want to follow him. Any disciples who follow Jesus under compulsion are not his disciples and won't stick with him for long.

James and John dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus because they were compelled to from deep within (Mark 1:19-20). In doing so, they left their father and their family business behind. As Bonhoeffer puts it, Jesus “bids him come and die.”⁷ When you are Jesus' disciple, what Jesus wants is the only thing that matters.

In Luke 14, Jesus sets the terms and conditions of discipleship: If you want to be Jesus' disciple, everything else places a distant second. He ends this declaration with “You cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own” (Luke 14:33, NLT).

The reason Jesus wants everything from us is that he gave everything for us. Anything less would be a lousy deal. Holding

back makes for bad marriages, poor business deals, terrible sports teams, disappointing art, cringeworthy poems and songs. Being partially committed to Christ is bad religion, and bad religion has done great damage to the world.

My neighbor once told me that he went to church because his wife and daughter wanted to, but he couldn't cope with the hypocrisy and lack of authentic compassion he saw in the church. I didn't attempt to defend the church against his charges. Instead, I answered, "When the church is bad, there is nothing worse, but when it is good, there is nothing better." That is why Jesus asks for everything.

IDOLS

When Jesus told his followers "You must, by comparison, hate everyone else," he didn't mean you are called to hate. Jesus' life and teaching were based on love, a commitment to others. The idea that hate is a recommended strategy is therefore easily dismissed. It is equally obvious, however, that he wants no rivals for control of your life.

Our deepest desires are revealed in our daily life and habits. One writer put it so well:

Only about 5 percent of what we do in a given day is the outcome of conscious, deliberate choices we make, processed by that snowball on the tip of the iceberg that is human consciousness. The rest of our actions and behaviors are managed below the surface, by all sorts of learned yet now *unconscious* ways of intending and navigating the world.⁸

The overwhelming majority of our daily activities are done without thinking. They have been programmed into us by daily practices and habits, by family, culture, church, and life experience. The things that control our thinking and conduct, if they are not God—even otherwise good things, like family—are our idols. Only the one who can reach down into our hearts—the hearts he created and knows intimately—can override these unconscious patterns and change us (Jeremiah 17:9-10). God alone can get at our idols and remove them. He won't do that unless we are all in; God has chosen not to help us unless we submit to him.

There were three very powerful major idols during the time of Jesus, and they are still powerful today.

Materialist idols lead us to worship the physical universe, to the extent that unless something exists in material form, we suspect it is not real.

Idols of reason cause us to forget that reason doesn't have an independent existence; it is a human capability to be practiced, not a separate thing to be acquired. Moreover, our capacity for reason is inhibited by our humanness: Purely objective reason is impossible while we are finite—more so because we are fallen. The modern era, of course, elevated reason, giving hope to those who don't like the answers and explanations provided by a God who transcends our capacity for reason. In our idolatrous service to reason, we celebrated what can be repeatedly tested and verified and dismissed the ultimate questions of life—*What is the purpose of the universe? Why am I here? What does my life mean?*—as pointless pursuits. The idol of reason coaxes us away from these questions.

The third idol, *consumption*, dangles in front of us the joy and

pleasure of new things. We enter the malls that are our temples of worship where the transactions are made by the priests or sales clerks who pretend to be interested in us and send us home with their personalized business cards. Our best friends are personal shoppers, maître d's and the valet-parking attendant.

There are other idols to consider. Two idols—*love* and *tolerance*—are almost identical twins. Idolatrous love is understood principally as a sentiment, not an action—identification with another person's success, failure, or tragedy rather than a conscious effort to benefit another. Tolerance—the uncritical acceptance of human differences and practices—thus becomes the highest form of love. What makes these particular idols illusive and dangerous is that they are close to being true. But all kinds of moral confusion can slip in under their protection.

One more idol deserves at least an honorable mention, and that is *production*. This is particularly common among leadership types. The drive to produce results and the rewards that come with those results are seductive and addictive.

These six idols are all contemporary threats moving in and out of our lives. Family, by contrast, is largely constant. We don't typically choose our families, and yet their impact on us, and our responsibilities to them, stay with us all our days. That is the reason Jesus calls us away from them.

FAMILY MUST NOT CONTROL YOUR LIFE

Worship of family is a serious problem, one that is exacerbated by trends in Western society. Families tend to stick together regardless of the facts. In many cases, familial blood runs thicker than the blood of Christ.

Noticing that the family unit was under threat from various

societal factors pulling people away from one another, the church began to teach that family comes first (after God, of course). Spouse first, children second, parents and siblings third, then it gets a bit fuzzy. A spirit of competition slowly crept into the church calendar and the family calendar.

Nothing brings this out more than when Christmas falls on Sunday. When Christmas Sunday becomes Christmas on Sunday, families must ask, “Do we go to church and adjust our family tradition, or do we keep our family traditions and skip church?” This entire discussion may seem trivial, and Jesus was certainly not setting up a competition between church life and family obligations. Rather, he was talking about allegiance: *what* controls you and *who* controls you.

Families are wonderful and maddening, supportive and destructive, right and wrong, restful and a war zone; you long for one and you want to run from it. The family is human, and its members have human desires, jealousies, needs, resentments, scores to settle, and stereotypical views of one another that are frozen in time. Family cannot be trusted to give you the right advice or to consistently be right, all your life, all the time. This is the reason Jesus mentions it. The contemporary family has much less influence on its members than it did in the early twentieth century. American families are less controlling because of the individualistic culture in which we live. When my wife and I were first married, we felt called to join an Athletes in Action basketball team. We had been married three months. The decision required us to drive from Oklahoma to California for a training conference, and we needed \$300 to make the trip. Jane’s mother would not loan us the money; she told us that if I wanted to preach, I could do so in Jane’s hometown. Her family

was not in favor of our running around the country preaching when it could be done in a normal way. So Jane's brother, Marc, loaned us the money, and we went on our way. This was a minor conflict if put in its proper context, but it was a big moment for us. Not for a moment did we consider not going. We could not stay—even if the entire family disowned us, we were ready to go. I am afraid that now, many people would give in to the family vote, afraid of a broken relationship with a parent or some other problem.

During Jesus' time, he disrupted families. James and John dropped their nets and left their father and mother behind, taking away the expectation that the sons would take over the family business and provide for the parents in their old age. It appears that James and John requested special places in heaven and were turned down. Their mother approached Jesus later and asked for special favors, ostensibly because she thought Jesus owed her family for taking her boys away (Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45).

Jesus' own family heard rumors that he was not in touch with reality. His family feared for his life—and, of course, there was the issue of shame (Mark 3:20-21). But as Jesus said on another occasion, to the surprise of the crowds and especially our modern ears, "My mother and my brothers are all those who hear God's word and obey it" (Luke 8:21, NLT).

An even more pronounced difference between Jesus and his family occurred during a time of crisis and decision.

After this, Jesus traveled around Galilee. He wanted to stay out of Judea, where the Jewish leaders were plotting his death. But soon it was time for the Jewish Festival of

Shelters, and Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! You can't become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!" For even his brothers didn't believe in him.

Jesus replied, "Now is not the right time for me to go, but you can go anytime. The world can't hate you, but it does hate me because I accuse it of doing evil."

JOHN 7:1-7, NLT

Jesus' family's advice was to stop being an embarrassment. Or, in the case of his brothers, to take his embarrassment somewhere else: "Get lost!" It could be said the reason Jesus spoke first about the family's potential rivalry with the gospel is the fact that he knew he brought division between family members.

Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword.

"I have come to set a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.
Your enemies will be right in your own
household!"

If you love your father and mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine.

MATTHEW 10:34-37, NLT

Jesus received mixed messages from his family, especially his siblings. No one doubts that he loved them all, or that on

occasion, he enjoyed their company. He was the oldest: He had spent the first thirty years of his life in the important position of firstborn son. He worked with his father until Joseph's death, and then he took on special responsibilities for his mother. Jesus is not antifamily; he is, however, clear on first allegiance, and he will not take second place. The only way one can be a disciple is to follow the leader. It is his advice, his approval, his wisdom and guidance that delivers a life in God's Kingdom. A life of joy and fulfillment, one of purpose and satisfaction and achievement and greatness in God's eyes.

Gladly, most families are supportive of their members striving for goodness and living out their dreams. I pray that you never need to be separated or estranged from family, but if you follow Jesus, it is likely to happen now and then.

SELF CANNOT CONTROL YOUR LIFE

First-century Palestine was far different from twenty-first century Western culture. A first-century person was identified by family. Even men's names indicated whose son they were and what city they hailed from: Jesus of Nazareth; Simon son of John. Regardless of the cultural packaging, something has remained the same: Humans want to have control of our lives—we want what we want, and we want it now (Jeremiah 17:9). Jesus put it plainly: "If you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple."

Again, this is not addressed to God's best and brightest, to a select elite; he was talking to a crowd. A crowd that was filled with a variety of attitudes. Some people were seriously interested, but others were skeptics; some were conflicted about what they were hearing, the same personality of many a thrill-seeking

congregation. Jesus didn't hold back the high requirements; he was honest about what would be required. Earlier, he had been even more specific, again to a large crowd.

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.
If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.

LUKE 9:23-24, NLT

Jesus is asking anyone who would follow him to enter a project that weans them off a life focused on self to a life focused on others. This is not quick or easy; it is a process that lasts a lifetime. But it is also a project that involves many milestones of changes and leaves the sweet taste of victory on one's lips.

A lifetime of discipleship is a lifetime of change, and often the change is difficult and painful. Moving your focus off yourself is the greatest challenge because self-indulgence is the strongest drug, and rehab is a way of life.

WEALTH CANNOT CONTROL YOUR LIFE

“You cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own” (Luke 14:33, NLT). This is a jolting statement, especially if you have a lot! It might be even more startling if you don't have much and you must give that up too. But giving something up is very different from giving it away. This is an attitude; this is about how you view your wealth and for what purpose you use it.

If one were to simply think it through, this interpretation is obvious. The purpose of God is not for every wealthy person

and family to simply give away all they have. There is a reason that certain people are wealthy and others are not. Some have abused the system; others have simply stolen the wealth. That was the case in the time of Jesus, as well. But the majority of Christian wealth is held by gifted and noble people who want to use it for God's purpose. If all the foundations gave away their principal wealth, and families and individuals did the same, it would be a disaster for the church and for the advancement of the gospel. The engine of the church's missional effort in 90 percent of the world is the wealth in North America. It would not be a good idea to take all the wealth accumulated by gifted and leading workers and hand it out to people who have no wealth, who don't know how to handle money or understand how to create more wealth. Wealth in the right hands multiplies; in the wrong hands, it disappears in a generation. The issue Jesus brings up is: What are you going to do with what you own? Is it mine, or yours? Jesus has confronted everyone with what it means to be a Christian, to follow him, to be his disciple. You cannot be his disciple unless you put Christ before your family, before yourself, and before your wealth. You must clear the decks of any rivals, of idols that would replace him.

Now that he has told us this, there is one more thing he asks of us.

COUNT THE COST

By virtue of asking everyone in the crowd to count the cost, Jesus sets himself apart from the majority of mainstream evangelicals in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jesus asks this from the outset, but most of the church has tucked this bit of difficult

news away for later. There seems to have been a general fear that asking too much too soon chases the seeker away. Perhaps we think people find a halfhearted commitment more appealing than something that would fully alter their lives. Obviously, Jesus had no fear that such a requirement would do anything other than enhance the lives of those within his hearing. Yes, he had followers abandon him. Yes, he even acknowledged that sometimes you can tell people too much (John 6:60-70; 16:12). But people who chose not to follow—not to join—were not his focus. He was more interested in those who did say yes, because then he would get a follower with eyes wide-open.

Isn't it obvious that Jesus equated belief with action, that faith is following, and that faith is only real in obedience—otherwise, it is not faith at all?

REPENTANCE

The English word *repentance* is derived from *metanoia*.⁹ It means that after perceiving the facts, I change my mind. This is a work of the Holy Spirit; we can't make this happen on our own. But it does need to happen.

Jesus has asked the crowd to be really sure before they follow him, because this will be a full commitment, a full, unconditional surrender. He gives them two examples.

The first is the construction of a building: Make sure you have enough resources to finish the building. In an honor-shame society, you wouldn't want people laughing at you and shaming you for not being able to finish.

The second example is from the military: What is your troop strength? Do you have the number and type of soldiers who

can win? Otherwise, run up the white flag and make peace (Luke 14:28-32).

Why does Jesus ask for so much? It is essential that his followers are fully committed because the stakes are so high. If there is something that we could unleash on the world worse than no Christians, it would be quasi-Christians: tepid, weak, and unconvincing people who won't change the world and at the same time convince the world that the church is a fraud.

[Jesus said,] “Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? Flavorless salt is good neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. It is thrown away. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!”

LUKE 14:34-35, NLT

This is one of the most vivid and straightforward rationales given by Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said we are to be “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). In the first century, salt was used as a food preservative and, of course, to enhance the taste of food. If salt loses its taste, it is no good, not even for a manure pile. Jesus is uncomfortably clear: He is talking about a quasicommitted, halfhearted, semiobedient, self-indulgent church. He says that if you have spiritual ears, listen and understand (Matthew 11:15); I might add: He who has a nose, take a whiff! An unconverted church of nondisciples—“Christians” in name only—*stinks*. That church puts out a foul aroma, and no one wants to be in the vicinity.

We have a church populated with Christians who have been schooled in a nondiscipleship gospel, and we are paying the

high cost of nondiscipleship. We have a built-in problem: The majority of people in the church have not counted the cost because they don't know about the cost. No one ever told them about repentance, about following, about putting aside their selfish ways, about taking up their cross, about dying in order to live, about giving in order to receive, about the joy of loving and serving others.

The consequences are quite serious: We will be stuck perpetually in a gospel that doesn't expect converts to participate in the greatest work on earth, the fulfillment of the great commission, of representing the Kingdom of God, of taking the Kingdom of God into other people's lives and living spaces. The gospels that are most often preached have taught the combined congregation that clergy are the stars and the populace is the supporting cast. The clergy perform, and the congregation applauds. Sunday after Sunday, fewer and fewer numbers gather to watch their stars ascend the platform to perform and display their gifts. The lights on the stage go up, the congregation settles down into their seats, and the lights go down over the crowd so that those on the platform can't see them. Congregations think the clergy's spiritual lives should be better than theirs, that they should pray more and live better, and that they are closer to God. Reaching the world is the clergy's job, and they won't change their minds until we change ours.

Jesus has called us, and when he calls, there is only one thing to do—follow him, and he will teach you everything you ever need to know. He calls you to salvation; that means you take up your cross, you start putting aside your selfish ways, you start walking behind him, with no conditions, no excuses, no negotiations. It means giving up the right to say no, it means

living for others and, in doing so, finding yourself. It means not settling for a cheap substitute of salvation; namely, having your sins forgiven and obtaining the promise of heaven while you continue to live your banal life of meaningless production and consumption. Jesus promised us the good life: “The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10, NLT). Some translations call it an “abundant life.” *Abundant* is something that exists in large quantities, something that is plentiful, profuse, rich, abounding, generous, bountiful, large, huge, lavish. So it is time to stop living an impoverished life, to give up on the paltry attempts you have made for meaning and joy, to throw it all away and follow Jesus. The now-famous, martyred missionary Jim Elliot once said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”¹⁰

SOMETIMES DEATH IS NECESSARY

*The celebration feels like birds landing on my open hands
But always flying off
Like trimming a bonsai tree with shears just too small
It's hard to get my heart around it all*

*Christmas comes blustery and red
With visions of sugarplums plump in our heads
But a day clothed in pastel?
And we are surrounded by so much spring
That the mystery is almost drowned out by our over-seeing and yet,
our not believing that
The day that turns to night will turn to day again*

*But then I remember that
We pruned our rose-bushes two months ago
And that became its own Easter
I thought we killed them, but
The holy hush—not three days mind, you—but six, seven weeks
Turned them all to burning bushes
And it was too much metaphor
Life, life on every side, orange and red and white
The resurrection and the life*

*We are destined to walk, if we will, as he once walked,
In the cool of a garden
Up a long, lonely trail
Into the perfect sacrifice of love which keeps whispering,
“Sometimes death is necessary,
Keep walking, still”*