

A CONFESSION AND A CHALLENGE: AN OPEN LETTER TO MY FELLOW CHRISTIAN SOCIOLOGISTS

Charles Faupel



*The following was a letter originally written to fellow sociologists who are serious about their faith in Christ. It is a challenge to be both a professional sociologist and a faithful follower of Christ, at least in American sociology, as the discipline is so dominated by either an atheistic or non-theistic world view. It was clearly difficult for me as will be clear as you read the short biographical sketch below. This article was written in response to an invitation by Paul Serwinek, editor of **The Christian Sociologist Newsletter** and subsequently published there under the same title, with the exception that I have added the subtitle for purposes of this website. I am moved to share this letter with our readership, as it contains the message that is most central to our call and to the purpose of this website.*

I want to thank Paul Serwinek for the invitation to reflect on the intersection of my faith with a career in sociology. I retired from Auburn University in the summer of 2010 after teaching there for 27 years. I suspect that Paul thought I might have some wisdom to pass along to others who struggle with the tension

between their faith as a Christian and this discipline of sociology in which we are engaged. As I have prayed on how the Lord would have me present this, however, I know that what I must share comes more in the form of a confession and a challenge to my colleagues than as a reflection. I hope that it will not offend, but I fully expect that it will offend some. What I have to share would have offended me, even as recently as ten years ago. However, after attempting a more sublime reflection in response to this invitation, I could not submit it. This is the message that God has put on my heart.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his now classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, stated bluntly, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." This is the call to which every single follower of Jesus must respond. Unfortunately, it was a call that I did not understand until I was approaching retirement. As a young sociologist, I was enamored of the insights that this discipline had to offer, and my faith quickly took a back seat to the incredible insights of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and all the others. I found myself filtering my faith through the lens of sociology, and evaluating the claims of faith through the theorems of my new found discipline. This would later require a major repentance—a *metanoia*—which, most directly translated from the Greek means a change of mind. I'm not talking about a change of mind in the trivial sense in which we use the term. It would require a major *paradigm shift* that would change the way I looked at everything, including sociology.

This *metanoia* began in 1993 when, at the age of 42, God delivered me of a stronghold in my life that I thought never would or could be removed. God became up close and personal to me then. I told the Lord that I was now ready to do things His way, no matter the cost. I also let Him know that this was the most frightening decision that I had ever made. Nevertheless, I had no idea what was in store.

This decision would lead to a crisis point in 2005, when the Lord spoke very clearly to me to leave the institutional church. I understood the church as a social institution well, had studied it and taught my students to understand the church in this way as a social institution. As a sociologist, I also understood the

oppressive nature of bureaucracies—yet in modern society we live virtually all of our lives in bureaucratic prisons, and the church is no exception, at least for most people who call themselves Christians. But God said, “I don’t want you there.” The reader must understand that I was an elder in my church, and incredibly devoted to it. This was one of the most painful decisions that I had ever had to make up until that time. I would later learn more of why God called me to this decision, but this is not the venue to discuss that. I was misunderstood for this decision, and this was the beginning of Christ’s bidding to me to “come and die.” I would also have to suffer the breaking up of my 30-year marriage because my wife was not able to join me on this path down which God was now leading me. More misunderstanding, as I suffered the loss of some of my closest friends and confidants who simply could not understand how God could demand such a thing. Suddenly, scriptures that I had glossed over before with glassy eyes now began to jump off the page to me. Jesus’ assurance, for example, that he came not to bring peace, but a sword, dividing even families--now became a reality to me. There are many other hard sayings of Jesus that, frankly, the contemporary church would rather not hear and has effectively excised them from its Sunday morning and other public venues.

Nevertheless, the call to “come and die” remains. This will be a repeated process for any faithful follower of Christ. Brothers and sisters, and fellow colleagues, there is an urgency in this radical call to come and die. We cannot—I repeat, we *cannot*—be faithful to Christ unless we have taken up our own cross. Jesus did not say, “Come, follow me.” He said, “Come, *take up your cross* and follow me.” The cross is an instrument of death. It is the instrument of *our* death. We do not have a choice in this. It is not an option. And we have no choice in the form that our cross takes. That has been determined by God. Our only choice is whether we are willing to take it up when presented to us. As we do, it will purge us of a self-life built around soulish desires and expectations. This cross will totally strip you of all confidence that you have in your natural abilities. It will crucify in you every sense of righteousness that you had in living an upright moral life. Everything must be purged through this instrument of death that God has prepared for you.

In addition to my church life and my marriage, I began to see this happen, almost imperceptibly in my work as a sociologist. Only in retrospect did I recognize that I was losing confidence in my ability to conduct research, and then began to lose interest in it. I thrust myself more fully into my teaching, taking comfort in the fact that I knew I was a good teacher. Eventually, I began to find myself waning as an effective teacher, as God was stripping me of even this last semblance of pride in my professional abilities. I continued teaching, but without fervor. I continued on writing projects, but knowing that I was now laboring in a vineyard that was drying up. I was experiencing my last gasp as a professional sociologist, and I knew that I needed to voluntarily allow this incredibly huge part of my life, indeed my very professional identity, take its last breath and die.

God had another call on my life, one that is requiring the surfacing of still more areas of my heart and life to which the cross must be applied. This call is to encourage and exhort the remnant Bride of Christ—those saints of God who are willing to abandon all, to take up this instrument of death, and allow the Spirit of God to have full reign in their life. This is the invitation that I extend to each of you. To those of you who have already responded to this call, I long to be in fellowship with you because as you know this is a lonely road where few travel, and few understand even (and perhaps especially) those who call themselves Christians. To those of you who have not responded to this call, but know that you desire this level of obedience and intimacy with the Lord, I can assure you there is a resurrection following this death. There is incredible liberty that comes from being free from the law (read especially the book of Galatians on this freedom), and from the expectations that the institutional church (and other groups and institutions) would place on you. As you now perform for an audience of One, no other power can deter you as you walk in the freedom that comes through this death.

I can only imagine what such radical obedience will look like in your life. For some of you, it may involve leaving the discipline of sociology altogether, as was required of me. Others, I'm sure will be called to stay in, both to challenge the paradigms of the discipline and to use the unique perspective that sociology provides to challenge the church and other social institutions.

Faithful response to our Lords call to “come and die” will involve leaving the institutionalized church for some of you. God’s judgment is now on the church, and it is involving Him calling many of His faithful remnant to leave that institutional structure. You will see the church for what it has become, and you will hear the word of the Lord to you in a personal way—“come out of her, my people.” You will not be alone in this, but will be joining tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands who are leaving the church—not in response to discouragement or faltering faith, but as a faithful response to the voice of the Lord. There is an underground church emerging in this country and around the world which is connected to one another in Spirit. There is no organizational infrastructure to this underground church, and its members are aware of one another primarily through communications that they observe on internet sites and word of mouth. Others of you will be called to stay within the organized church, sounding the prophetic voice to repent. You will be misunderstood in your churches, will be considered disloyal, and may even be asked to leave. Faithful response to the Lord’s call on you will require you to continue what you are doing until He says otherwise. Whatever the specifics of this call, it will almost surely require enduring misunderstanding, and even scandal and persecution. And for some, even a martyr’s death. It will involve taking up the cross.

I believe that as sociologists you are in a unique position to hear the voice of the Lord, but it will require spiritual ears to hear. Your training positions you to step outside of the institutional frameworks that seek to define how you see the world, and how you are to respond. You have been trained to examine the world with a critical eye. This “outsider’s perspective” to the church has never been more urgently needed than it is now. But all of your training MUST be subjected to the authority of the Holy Spirit in this process. *I must speak this forth boldly:* the Kingdom of God will only be advanced through such radical obedience that entails, first, total death. Any effort that we make to advance the Kingdom out of our own efforts or through our own natural abilities or understanding is but chaff and stubble, and will be revealed for what it is and be burned. Only that which is birthed by the Spirit out of the crucible of death, and carried forth in the Spirit will have enduring value.

If this message touches any of you, and you would like to correspond further I welcome this. I pray that God will capture you with His amazing grace and enable you to respond with an eternal "Yes!" to His call.