

Jesus' Discipleship and the Failure of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Emilia Kartika^{1*}, Hiu Willison², David Sulardi Sastro³, Yosef Antonius⁴
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel the Way

Corresponding Author: Emilia Kartika evie.emilia.kartika@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Jesus' discipleship in the Gospel of Mark by foregrounding the disciples' failure as integral to the formation process. Contemporary church practices often reduce discipleship to doctrinal instruction and measurable outcomes, resulting in a fragmented understanding of Christian formation. Using qualitative library research, this study analyzes key Markan narratives in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of *Nachfolge*. The findings show that failure is not a disruption but a formative space sustained by Jesus' faithful presence. This study offers a theological corrective to success-oriented models of discipleship and proposes a relational, process-oriented framework, contributing to biblical studies and practical theology by reframing failure as essential to authentic Christian formation.

INTRODUCTION

Discipleship remains a foundational practice in the life of the Christian church, embodying Jesus' mandate to form faithful followers who continue His mission. However, within many contemporary church contexts, the meaning of discipleship has become increasingly narrowed. It is often reduced to structured doctrinal instruction, oriented toward cognitive mastery of theological content and evaluated through attendance or program completion (Loppies & Hermanto, 2025). Such an approach tends to create the impression that discipleship is complete once knowledge has been transmitted, while relational formation, embodied example, and long-term spiritual accompaniment receive comparatively limited attention.

This reduction raises a significant theological concern, particularly when discipleship fails to produce disciples who actively participate in making other disciples. While many church members receive both foundational and advanced teaching, they often remain disengaged from the process of discipling others (Yeniretnowati dkk., 2021). This phenomenon indicates a gap between contemporary ecclesial practices of discipleship and the pattern demonstrated by Jesus during His ministry. Addressing this gap requires careful biblical reflection, especially on the Gospel of Mark, which distinctively portrays discipleship through relational dynamics and the recurring failure of the disciples.

In the Gospel of Mark, the disciples are not presented as spiritually prepared or ideal figures. Rather, they are depicted as individuals who repeatedly misunderstand Jesus' teachings, misinterpret His mission, and exhibit fragile faith. They appear fearful, ambitious, doubtful, and, at critical moments, even deny and abandon Jesus (Christian, 2013). Yet, despite these failures, Jesus continues to call, accompany, and form them within the context of shared life. Notably, Mark does not conceal or soften the disciples' failures; instead, these failures function as an integral component of the discipleship narrative. This portrayal challenges dominant models of discipleship that prioritize success, competence, and spiritual readiness.

To engage this portrayal theologically, the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a fruitful analytical framework. Bonhoeffer conceptualizes discipleship through the notion of *Nachfolge*—the concrete following of Christ in all dimensions of life. For him, discipleship extends beyond the reception of doctrinal teaching to encompass obedience expressed within a lived relationship with Christ, even amid imperfection and failure (Şuteu, 2018). His critique of *cheap grace*, grace divorced from the cost of following Christ; offers a critical lens for evaluating contemporary ecclesial practices of discipleship (Lazar, 2013).

Although previous studies have examined both Markan discipleship and Bonhoeffer's theology, these discussions often remain disconnected. Scholarship on the Gospel of Mark tends to emphasize Christological themes or the suffering of Jesus (Astuti, 2021), while studies on Bonhoeffer frequently focus on ethics or the theology of the cross (Sandu, 2023). This study seeks to bridge this gap by bringing the narrative of discipleship and the failure of the disciples in the Gospel of Mark into dialogue with Bonhoeffer's theological perspective. Through this

integrative approach, the failure of the disciples is reinterpreted not as a hindrance, but as a formative space within the process of discipleship.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how the Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus' discipleship as unfolding amid the failures of His disciples and to explore how Bonhoeffer's theology offers a framework for interpreting this reality. The central hypothesis proposes that the failure of the disciples in Mark does not signify the failure of Jesus' discipleship; rather, it constitutes an essential dimension of the formation of authentic disciples. This study is expected to contribute to both biblical scholarship and practical theology by offering a renewed understanding of discipleship that is relational, process-oriented, and more faithful to the example of Jesus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discussions on discipleship span biblical, theological, and practical domains, yet often remain insufficiently integrated. In Markan studies, the disciples are consistently portrayed as misunderstanding, fearful, and failing (Wilkins, 2004; Henderson, 2006; Trainor, 2018). Rather than incidental, this negative depiction serves a theological function by shifting attention from human competence to Jesus' identity and faithfulness. Thus, failure is embedded within the narrative structure of discipleship itself.

In contrast, contemporary discipleship literature (Ogden, 2025; McKnight, 2025) emphasizes relational formation, spiritual practices, and intentional processes. While these approaches recover important dimensions of lived faith, they often retain implicit outcome-oriented assumptions, leaving the role of failure underdeveloped.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of *Nachfolge* provides a critical bridge between these streams. He defines discipleship as a concrete and relational response to Christ's call, grounded in "costly grace" rather than measurable success. Discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, unfolds within human limitation, where faithfulness is expressed through continued following rather than achievement.

Recent theological voices (Rose, 2019; Smith, 2016) further reinforce this perspective by recognizing failure and limitation as integral to formation. Transformation is understood as gradual, embodied, and non-linear, occurring within the realities of lived experience.

Building on these perspectives, this study proposes a unified framework: discipleship as a relational and processual participation in Christ, in which failure is not a deviation but a formative dimension. The Gospel of Mark provides the narrative foundation, Bonhoeffer offers the theological grounding, and contemporary scholarship clarifies its communal and practical implications. This synthesis challenges outcome-driven models and redefines discipleship in terms of relational fidelity, grace, and ongoing formation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method, grounded in the critical analysis of written sources relevant to the research focus (Ultavia B. dkk., 2023). The research begins by establishing the Gospel of Mark as the primary biblical text, with the scope of analysis limited to pericopes that explicitly portray the relationship between Jesus and the twelve disciples, particularly highlighting the dynamics of their failure within the process of discipleship. The analysis is conducted through a narrative and thematic reading that considers the literary context, plot development, and characterization of the disciples in Mark's Gospel. To maintain analytical clarity and depth, the study does not engage in comparative analysis with other Gospels, but instead focuses on Mark as a coherent narrative with its own theological emphasis. In addition, the theological thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer especially his concept of *Nachfolge*, understood as the concrete following of Christ is employed as an interpretive framework to examine the reality of discipleship within the text. The research materials include the biblical text, scholarly commentaries on the Gospel of Mark, Bonhoeffer's major works, and relevant contemporary literature on discipleship theology. Sources are selected based on their direct relevance to the themes of discipleship and the failure of the disciples, the academic credibility of the authors, and their contribution to the discourse of biblical and practical theology. This study does not involve fieldwork, interviews, or empirical observation; therefore, all findings and analyses emerge from a critical dialogue between the biblical text and theological reflection. Through this approach, the study aims to produce a coherent and academically accountable theological understanding of Jesus' discipleship in the Gospel of Mark, as well as its implications for contemporary church practices.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Jesus' Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark

The findings indicate that discipleship in the Gospel of Mark is fundamentally a relational process initiated by Jesus and enacted within the disciples' ongoing spiritual immaturity. Rather than presenting discipleship as a response grounded in human readiness or moral capacity, Mark portrays it as a sovereign act of Jesus, who calls and forms His disciples amid their limitations (Laloan & Sendow, 2024). The calling narratives underscore that the basis of discipleship lies not in human qualification, but in Jesus' will to choose and accompany His followers in a shared journey.

At its core, discipleship in Mark is defined by relational proximity. Jesus appoints the twelve "to be with Him," establishing companionship as the primary context of formation. This relational dynamic extends beyond physical presence to include participation in Jesus' life, ministry, and suffering (Wenar dkk., 2025). As a result, the disciples' knowledge of Jesus emerges not only through instruction, but through lived experience. Discipleship is thus portrayed as formative participation rather than mere transmission of teaching.

Mark further situates discipleship within the ordinary and often unpredictable contexts of daily life. Whether on the road, in the house, on the boat, or among the crowds, the disciples are formed through continuous engagement with Jesus' identity and mission (Henderson, 2006). This pattern reflects an incarnational model of discipleship, where formation takes place within the complexities of real life rather than controlled instructional settings.

Importantly, the narrative presents discipleship as a non-linear process marked by misunderstanding, misplaced ambition, and fear (Laloan & Sendow, 2024). The disciples' failure culminates in their abandonment of Jesus, yet this portrayal serves a theological purpose: discipleship is not measured by human success, but by Jesus' enduring faithfulness. Their failure becomes the very context in which His grace and patience are revealed.

This emphasis reframes failure not as a breakdown of discipleship, but as an integral dimension of spiritual formation. Mark thereby challenges result-oriented models of discipleship and invites a reorientation toward a process that is gradual, dynamic, and grounded in grace. Jesus' consistent engagement teaching, correcting, and remaining present demonstrates that discipleship is sustained not by performance, but by relational commitment (Rojas, 2019).

These findings carry significant implications for contemporary church practice. Discipleship cannot be reduced to doctrinal instruction or programmatic efficiency aimed at measurable outcomes (Ogden, 2025). Instead, the Gospel of Mark calls for a recovery of a relational, incarnational, and grace-centered model of discipleship one that embraces weakness as the context of transformation and reflects the faithful presence of Christ in the ongoing formation of His followers.

The Disciples' Failure as an Integral Part of the Discipleship Process

A central finding of this study is that the Gospel of Mark does not treat the disciples' failure as a deviation from discipleship, but as an inherent dimension of its formative process. Mark consistently portrays the disciples as failing to grasp Jesus' identity and mission, even after prolonged proximity to His life and ministry. Their repeated misunderstanding evident in their inability to interpret parables, their distorted expectations of power and glory, and their resistance to the notion of a suffering Messiah (Paul, 2022) is not presented as an anomaly, but as a recurring pattern within the narrative. In this way, failure emerges as a defining feature of the discipleship journey rather than an interruption of it.

This failure is most clearly seen in the tension between relational closeness to Jesus and the disciples' inability to internalize the meaning of their calling. Although they are invited to "be with Him," they remain shaped by prior frameworks oriented toward status, power, and self-preservation. The ambition of James and John for positions of honor, the disciples' fear during the storm, and Peter's denial all exemplify this dissonance. Yet, significantly, Jesus does not revoke their calling. Instead, He continues to accompany, correct, and form them, allowing failure to function pedagogically within an ongoing relational process (Kgatle, 2017).

From a biblical-theological perspective, the prominence of failure serves both narrative and theological purposes. Mark shifts the reader's focus away from the competency of the disciples toward the identity and faithfulness of Jesus. Discipleship, therefore, is not grounded in the disciples' capacity to understand or remain faithful, but in Jesus' unwavering commitment to them (de Campos, 2021). This reorientation challenges performance-based paradigms of discipleship and reframes it within the logic of grace that operates precisely in the context of human weakness. Notably, Mark leaves this tension largely unresolved, underscoring that authentic discipleship remains inseparable from the risk of failure (Geddert, 2004).

In dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, particularly his concept of *Nachfolge*, the disciples' failure can be understood as an essential space of formation. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that following Christ is not a path of perfection, but of concrete obedience lived amid human incompleteness (Mawson, 2018). Within this framework, failure does not nullify the call to discipleship; rather, it exposes the disciple's dependence on Christ's grace. Bonhoeffer's critique of superficial Christianity marked by the pursuit of piety without costly discipleship resonates with Mark's portrayal, where true discipleship necessarily involves struggle, correction, and transformation over time (Saragih, 2025).

Accordingly, failure should not be viewed as a problem to be resolved prior to discipleship, but as a constitutive element of it (Eppang dkk., 2022). Much of the existing scholarship tends to emphasize the end result and the transformation of the disciples into faithful witnesses, while overlooking the prolonged process marked by repeated failure. By foregrounding this dimension, the present study highlights that Jesus' model of discipleship is fundamentally processual and relational, rather than mechanistic or outcome-driven.

This insight carries significant implications for contemporary church practice. When discipleship is framed as a failure-free process, it often produces exclusionary systems oriented toward performance and selection. In contrast, the Gospel of Mark, read alongside Bonhoeffer, invites the church to reclaim failure as a space of learning and formation. Faithful discipleship, therefore, involves walking with individuals through their imperfections, trusting that God's grace is most active within human weakness (Hefley, 2025).

In this light, the disciples' failure in the Gospel of Mark should not be understood as the antithesis of discipleship, but as one of its primary mediating contexts. Such a perspective enriches the theological discourse on discipleship by affirming that faithfulness is not measured by the absence of failure, but by the continuity of relationship and the ongoing willingness to follow Christ amid human limitation.

Discipleship According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of discipleship offers a critical theological lens for rereading the dynamics of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship is not a staged process of spiritual advancement oriented toward measurable outcomes, but an existential response to Christ's call that demands the whole of one's life. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he emphasizes that discipleship begins with the call to follow Christ; a call that cannot be reduced to intellectual assent or doctrinal agreement (Bonhoeffer, 2015). Rather, discipleship is a concrete act of following, often undertaken without full clarity regarding its direction or outcome.

Central to Bonhoeffer's framework is the personal and relational nature of discipleship. He resists any abstraction that detaches discipleship from lived reality, insisting that following Christ takes place within the concrete conditions of the world—marked by risk, tension, and frequent failure. This perspective resonates strongly with Mark's portrayal of the disciples, who continually struggle to understand their calling. Within Bonhoeffer's thought, failure does not disqualify the disciple; instead, it reflects the reality of following Christ in a world that remains unfinished and broken.

A key contribution of Bonhoeffer is his critique of what he terms *cheap grace*, grace understood without obedience or costly commitment. Such a notion, he argues, produces a form of Christianity that is comfortable yet transformative in neither depth nor practice. In contrast, *costly grace* calls the disciple to relinquish self-security and to walk faithfully with Christ (Saragih, 2025). Within this framework, discipleship is not measured by moral or spiritual success, but by the willingness to remain in the path of following Christ, even amid weakness and failure.

Bonhoeffer further deepens this vision through his reflections on communal life in *Life Together*. Discipleship, in his view, is inseparable from relationships with others and is lived out within the realities of community. It is precisely in contexts of conflict, disappointment, and the acceptance of others' weaknesses that discipleship becomes tangible (Bonhoeffer, 2015). This perspective provides a theological basis for understanding failure not merely as an individual issue, but as a formative dynamic within the community of disciples. Discipleship, therefore, unfolds not in isolation but within shared life that requires patience, humility, and forgiveness.

In contemporary contexts, Bonhoeffer's insights remain highly relevant, particularly where discipleship is often formalized into structured programs with measurable outcomes. His theology challenges such reductionism by re-centering discipleship on a living relationship with Christ one that is both personal and communal, and inherently open to the risks of failure. When read in dialogue with the Gospel of Mark, Bonhoeffer's thought reinforces the understanding that failure is not an anomaly to be avoided, but an integral aspect of following Christ. Discipleship does not progress linearly from imperfection to perfection; rather, it unfolds as a grace-sustained journey shaped by Christ's faithfulness.

In this light, Bonhoeffer provides a robust theological framework for re-evaluating contemporary discipleship practices. By affirming that failure is not the end but a formative space within the journey, his perspective calls the church to embody a model of discipleship that is relational, sacrificial, and patient faithful to the example of Jesus, who forms His disciples through shared life, enduring commitment, and transformative grace (Berg, 2009).

Dialogue between the Gospel of Mark and Bonhoeffer

The dialogue between the Gospel of Mark and the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer reveals a strong convergence in understanding discipleship as a relational process unfolding amid human limitation and failure. Mark presents discipleship as a shared journey with spiritually immature disciples, while Bonhoeffer frames it as a concrete act of following Christ within a world marked by risk and uncertainty. Both perspectives reject models of discipleship grounded in initial readiness or measurable success, instead emphasizing that its foundation lies in Christ's faithfulness to call and accompany His followers in their weakness.

A key point of convergence lies in the primacy of relationship. In Mark, discipleship begins with the call "to be with Him," a relational reality that precedes mission and ministry. Similarly, Bonhoeffer's concept of *Nachfolge* defines discipleship as an existential relationship between Christ and the disciple, rather than mere adherence to doctrine or religious identity. This relationship is both demanding and transformative, yet it unfolds within the ongoing imperfection of the disciple. Consequently, both Mark and Bonhoeffer portray discipleship as life with Christ, not as a controlled or programmatic process of formation.

At the same time, important differences in emphasis enrich this theological dialogue. Mark presents discipleship through an open-ended narrative in which the disciples' failure remains largely unresolved, even at the conclusion of the Gospel. Bonhoeffer, by contrast, writes from a modern theological context, interpreting discipleship as a conscious call to obedience amid a world resistant to faith. His work does not merely repeat Mark's narrative but rearticulates its theological impulse within the ethical and existential challenges of the contemporary church.

This dialogue is further deepened when placed in conversation with other theological voices. Dallas Willard's critique of "non-discipleship Christianity" highlights the tendency to separate belief from lived formation, echoing Mark's portrayal of disciples who fail when discipleship is reduced to conceptual understanding (Willard, 2006). Likewise, James K. A. Smith's emphasis on formative practices and habituated desires clarifies why discipleship in Mark unfolds through shared life and embodied experience, where failure becomes integral to the reorientation of love and identity (Smith, 2016). Scot McKnight's insistence on the communal nature of discipleship further reinforces this synthesis, challenging individualistic and outcome-driven models by emphasizing character formation within community (McKnight, 2025).

Taken together, this dialogue demonstrates that the disciples' failure in Mark and Bonhoeffer's theological reflections are not disparate strands, but mutually illuminating perspectives. Mark offers a realistic biblical account of discipleship shaped by weakness and incompleteness, while Bonhoeffer and contemporary theologians provide interpretive frameworks that translate this reality into the life of the modern church. Discipleship, therefore, is not a linear movement toward perfection, but a sustained journey of following Christ within human limitation. This synthesis affirms that the measure of faithful discipleship lies not in the absence of failure, but in the continuity of relationship and the ongoing willingness to follow Christ in the midst of real life.

Implications for Contemporary Church Discipleship

The findings of this study indicate that Jesus' model of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark, when read in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, calls for a fundamental reorientation of contemporary church discipleship. Discipleship can no longer be primarily understood as a time-bound, programmatic transmission of doctrinal content, but must be re-envisioned as a relational, ongoing, and formation-oriented process that remains open to failure. First, this requires a shift in emphasis from curriculum to relationship. While many churches evaluate discipleship through measurable indicators – such as content completion, attendance, or program outcomes Mark's Gospel demonstrates that the core of Jesus' discipleship lies in shared life (Willard, 2006). Accordingly, discipleship should be structured as intentional relational accompaniment, where leaders walk with individuals, share life with them, and embody the message they communicate.

Second, the study reframes the role of failure within discipleship. Rather than signaling breakdown, failure emerges as a formative and pedagogical space. Contemporary practices often respond to failure with exclusion or replacement; however, both Mark and Bonhoeffer point toward a more pastoral approach in which failure is acknowledged, processed, and transformed within a supportive community. Such an approach fosters environments where vulnerability is not suppressed but engaged, allowing spiritual growth to occur through reflection, correction, and grace (Rose, 2019).

Third, the structure and purpose of discipleship must be reconsidered. Faithful discipleship does not end with the formation of pious individuals but moves toward the reproduction of disciples who, in turn, disciple others. Mark's narrative shows that even flawed disciples are entrusted with continuing Jesus' mission, challenging the church to evaluate whether its practices cultivate mature, generative disciples or merely sustain passive participation (Kgatle, 2017). This implies a commitment to long-term, life-on-life formation rather than short-term, technique-driven training.

Fourth, discipleship must be reintegrated into the life of Christian community. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on *life together* underscores that formation occurs within shared existence, where faith is tested and refined through real relationships (Bonhoeffer, 2015). Rather than isolating discipleship into specialized programs, churches are called to embed it within everyday communal practices small groups, shared rhythms of life, and mutual care (Sugito, 2023). In such contexts, discipleship is embodied through practices of bearing burdens, extending forgiveness, and growing together in faith (Adon, 2021).

Finally, these implications redefine the role of church leaders. Leaders are not primarily program managers or information providers, but embodied witnesses who participate in the often unpredictable and unfinished process of discipleship (Trainor, 2018). As seen in Jesus' persistent presence with His failing disciples, and echoed in Bonhoeffer's call to faithful, transparent community, leadership in discipleship requires relational commitment, patience, and authenticity (Bonhoeffer, 2015).

Taken together, these implications suggest that meaningful transformation in contemporary church discipleship cannot be achieved merely through the addition of new methods or programs. Rather, it requires a paradigmatic shift – from outcome-driven models toward a vision of discipleship grounded in relational fidelity, sustained process, and holistic formation. Such a perspective offers a significant practical contribution, inviting the church to recover a more authentic, contextually grounded, and Christ-centered practice of discipleship.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that Jesus' model of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark unfolds as a faithful and ongoing relational process sustained in the midst of the disciples' failure, where failure is not an obstacle but an integral dimension of authentic formation. Read in dialogue with the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the findings demonstrate that discipleship cannot be reduced to doctrinal instruction or programmatic training oriented toward immediate results, but must be understood as a concrete, lived response to Christ's call within the realities of human limitation and imperfection. In this sense, the study offers a significant theoretical contribution by integrating a narrative-biblical reading of Mark with Bonhoeffer's relational and incarnational theology, thereby reframing discipleship as relational fidelity and holistic life formation, while also providing practical implications for contemporary churches to move beyond outcome-driven models toward relational, process-oriented, and life-integrated practices of discipleship. At the same time, the study is limited by its reliance on textual and theological analysis within a literature-based methodology, without direct engagement with empirical expressions of discipleship in local church contexts; therefore, future research is encouraged to develop this framework through empirical and contextual studies on relational and accompaniment-based discipleship, as well as through comparative dialogue with other theological traditions, in order to further enrich and contextualize the discourse on contemporary discipleship.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study is limited by its reliance on textual and theological analysis without direct engagement with empirical practices of discipleship in contemporary church contexts. Future research is therefore encouraged to explore how a relational and failure-embracing model of discipleship is embodied within local communities through qualitative and field-based studies. In addition, comparative studies across different theological traditions and cultural settings would further enrich this framework, particularly in examining how failure functions as a formative dimension in diverse ecclesial contexts. Such developments would contribute to a more contextualized and practically grounded understanding of discipleship as a lived and communal reality.

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