

J. Heinrich Arnold

30th Anniversary Edition



*Following
Jesus in
Daily Life*



Discipleship

“A prophetic book in a time in which few people dare to speak unpopular
but truly healing words.” *Henri J.M. Nouwen*

Discipleship



This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

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Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

Plough produces books, a quarterly magazine, and Plough.com to encourage people and help them put their faith into action. We believe Jesus can transform the world and that his teachings and example apply to all aspects of life. At the same time, we seek common ground with all people regardless of their creed.

Plough is the publishing house of the Bruderhof, an international Christian community. The Bruderhof is a fellowship of families and singles practicing radical discipleship in the spirit of the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2 and 4). Members devote their entire lives to serving God, one another, and their neighbors, renouncing private property and sharing everything. To learn more about the Bruderhof's faith, history, and daily life, see Bruderhof.com.

Originally published as *Discipleship: Living for Christ in the Daily Grind*.
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This thirtieth anniversary edition published in 2024.
ISBN: 978-1-63608-144-1
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-63608-144-4

Cover linocuts by Luke Sewell.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Arnold, J. Heinrich, 1913-1982, author.

Title: *Discipleship : following Jesus in daily life* / J. Heinrich Arnold.

Description: 30th anniversary edition. | Walden, New York : Plough, 2024. |

Reprint of: *Discipleship : living for Christ in the daily grind* / J.

Heinrich Arnold. Rifton, NY : Plough Pub. House, c2011. | Summary:

"Sometimes provocative but always encouraging, a pastor offers sage advice for leading Christ-like lives amid the stresses of modern life"--
Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024018424 (print) | LCCN 2024018425 (ebook) | ISBN
9781636081441 (paperback) | ISBN 9781636081427 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life--Bruderhof authors. | Church Communities
International--Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .A758 2024 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) |
DDC 248.4/8973--dc23/eng/20240605

LC record available at <https://ccn.loc.gov/2024018424>

LC ebook record available at <https://ccn.loc.gov/2024018425>

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Discipleship is not a question of our own doing;
it is a matter of making room for God
so that he can live in us.

J. H. Arnold

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Foreword

Discipleship is a tough book. As I began reading it, Heinrich Arnold's words touched me as a double-edged sword, calling me to choose between truth and lies, salvation and sin, selflessness and selfishness, light and darkness, God and demon. At first I wasn't sure if I wanted to be confronted in such a direct way, and I discovered some resistance in myself. I want the good news of the Gospel to be gentle, consoling, comforting, and to offer inner peace and harmony.

But Arnold reminds me that the peace of the Gospel is not the same as the peace of the world, that the consolation of the Gospel is not the same as the consolation of the world, and that the gentleness of the Gospel has little to do with the "free for all" attitude of the world. The Gospel asks for a choice, a radical choice, a choice that is not always praised, supported, and celebrated.

Still, Arnold's writing is not harsh, unbending, fanatical, or self-righteous. To the contrary, it is full of love. Tough love, but real love. It is this love that flows from the broken heart of Jesus. What makes Arnold's words so healing is that they are not based on an idea, an ideology, or a theory, but on an intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Christ, is in the center of all the suggestions, advice, and care expressed in these reflections. This is truly a Christ-centered book.

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Heinrich Arnold does not speak in his own name. He speaks in the name of Jesus. He has heard clearly the words of Paul to Timothy: “Before God, and before Christ Jesus, who is to be the judge of the living and the dead, I charge you, in the name of his appearing and his kingdom: proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, give encouragement—but do all with patience and with care to instruct” (2 Tm. 4:1–2).

It is Arnold’s deep rootedness in Jesus Christ that makes him a very wise, a very safe, and a very challenging guide in our spiritual journey. But there is more: his rootedness is not simply a rootedness in the Christ who lived long ago; it is a rootedness in the Christ who is present today in the life of the community of faith.

Arnold is not a pious, sentimental guide. Every word he speaks comes from his experience in community, where discipleship is lived. It is in community that we are tested and purified. It is in community that we learn what forgiveness and healing are all about. It is in community that we learn who our neighbor is. Community is the true school of love. Arnold lived community all of his life. He knew its demands and its rewards. Most of all, he knew that it is in community that we encounter the Christ of the Gospel.

I am very grateful for this book. It is a prophetic book in a time in which few people dare to speak unpopular but truly healing words.

I pray that those who read this book won't be afraid to be confronted, and I trust that the word of God that comes to them through it will bring true comfort, true consolation, true hope, and true courage.

Henri J.M. Nouwen

Introduction

Some books are easiest to describe by saying what they are not. This is not a collection of devotions or meditations, not a “feel-good” journal about walking with God, and not a guide for self-improvement or personal spiritual growth. It is, very simply, a book about discipleship—about following Christ humbly, obediently, and with an open heart. And it is written by a man whose message cannot be understood in any other way.

Johann Heinrich Arnold (1913–1982) grew up surrounded by people for whom such discipleship took shape in a dramatic way. When he was six, his parents, Eberhard and Emmy, left their upper-class home in Berlin and moved to Sannerz, a village in central Germany. There, with a small circle of friends, they set out to live in full community of goods on the basis of Acts 2 and 4 and the Sermon on the Mount. It was a time of tremendous upheaval. The same post-war restlessness that drove his father, a well-known editor, theologian, and public speaker, to this leap of faith drove thousands of others to rise up against the rigid social and religious conventions of the period and seek new ways of life. These were Heinrich’s formative years, and the steady stream of young anarchists and tramps, teachers, artisans, and free-thinkers who came through the little community influenced him profoundly. All of them had abandoned the hypocrisy of a Christendom

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that had grown meaningless, and many felt drawn to the life of dedication and joy they found at Sannerz.

Heinrich himself felt the call to follow Christ at the age of eleven. Later, as a young man, he committed himself to life-long membership in the church community, known by then as the Bruderhof, or “place of brothers.” In 1938 he was chosen as a servant of the Word, or pastor, and from 1962 until his death he served as elder for the growing Bruderhof movement.

The flock in Arnold’s care was not what one could call a typical church, and he was anything but a pastor in the conventional sense of the word. He was not a charismatic personality, and he had no formal theological training. He was a true *Seelsorger* or “spiritual guide” who cared deeply for the inner and outer well-being of the communities entrusted to him. And he served his brothers and sisters in the first place as an equal who shared their daily lives in work and leisure, at communal meals, business meetings, and worship services.

The excerpts in this book were compiled and edited over several years by people who knew Arnold personally. It was no easy task to sift through the material, for there was so much to choose from, and it ranged from published articles to personal correspondence, from transcripts of worship meetings to circulars written on behalf of the congregations he served. The purpose of this selection is simply to bring to the reader the full impact of his witness.

Arnold's style is straightforward and spontaneous. He rarely spoke with notes, and when he wrote, he quickly and sometimes almost aggressively met the heart of the issue. There were those who felt he was too blunt. Yet it was precisely his simplicity that made his witness accessible to so many. His faith was not a matter of reasoned, theological terms, but something that had to be expressed in deeds: "We are tired of words; they are cheap and can be heard almost anywhere, for who will say that he is against brotherhood and love?"

Arnold was called on to address every aspect of spiritual life, personal and communal. But there is a visible thread that runs through all he wrote: Christ and his cross as the center of the universe. Again and again, Arnold insists that without meeting Christ personally—without being confronted by His message of repentance and love—there is no possibility of a living Christian faith. It mattered little, for instance, whether a problem he had to face was of a practical or an inner nature, or whether the demands of the day arose inconveniently or unannounced. Every issue was faced on the solid ground of Christ's commands. This was true not only for the internal questions of communal life but also for all matters that needed attention beyond it, such as current political events or social issues and trends.

Arnold's Christ-centeredness gave him an unusual courage to confront sin. He could not tolerate indifference to the demands of the Gospel. But just as he

fought evil in others, he fought it in himself, and the fight was never against a person, but against sin. At times, this earned him the criticism of being too “emotional,” but how can one who loves Christ be coolly detached when the honor of the church is at stake? “I protest against the idea that it is wrong to react with strong emotion or excitement when God is attacked, when brothers and sisters are mistreated, or when the church is harmed. I will protest my whole life long against cool soberness in the face of cruelty or anything else that destroys God’s work.”

It was this, too, that enabled him to call for repentance so sharply at times: “Are we ready to let Christ’s Word cut deeply into us, or will we repeatedly protect and harden ourselves against it? We do not realize how often we stand in God’s way. But we can ask him to cut us with his Word, even if it hurts.”

With the same vigor and insistence that Arnold called for repentance, he strove for compassion and forgiveness. If anyone took seriously Jesus’ injunction to forgive so that we may be forgiven, and to forgive seventy times seven, it was Arnold. People who had hurt him or broken his trust were given his undiminished trust again and again. Why? Because he believed deeply in the power of full forgiveness; because he trusted God to the depths of his being, and because this trust enabled him to overcome his fear of man.

Ironically, just as he experienced mockery and rejection because he insisted on the need for deep repentance, he was also despised because of his humility.

For even though he refused to shut an eye to sin in the church, he refused to set himself above a person who had sinned or to condone harshness and legalism toward that person. Having suffered in his own life, he identified readily with the suffering of others.

As elder of a large church community with congregations in New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and England, Arnold spent many hours reading, re-reading, and prayerfully considering the contents of a daily flood of letters, and his answers illustrate the humility with which he responded. When he was asked a question, he counselled, comforted, admonished, and even sharply censured, but he never criticized or belittled anyone who turned to him in trust. And though hundreds of people turned to him year after year, he always turned them onward—beyond their preoccupation with their sins or their personal holiness—to Christ.

Arnold knew well that he did not have all the answers. Often he said that he needed to think about a matter in question, or wished to consider it in prayer, or simply felt he did not know what to do about it. Asked to explain a difficult verse, an apparent contradiction, or the meaning of a mysterious passage in the Bible, he might say, “I have thought about these words a great deal, but I do not fully understand them myself. Let us leave it in trust to God. Some day it will be revealed to us”—and he would not attempt an interpretation. Though widely-read and entirely at home in the Old and New Testament, he was a man

whose education was the education of the heart, whose knowledge was the knowledge of the human soul, and whose understanding of God's ways was born of his love for God, for Jesus, and for the church.

Most important, Arnold was able to listen: he listened to his brothers and sisters, he listened to friends, strangers, to critics, and most of all he listened to God: "I want to listen with my inner heart to the voice of God speaking through the brotherhood. I want to confess Jesus in our time. I want to be poor with you, spiritually poor. I want to be obedient and go where the church sends me, and to do God's will. I long for a united brotherhood, a brotherhood that gathers the scattered."

There are many aspects of Arnold's writings that one might consider at greater length—the overriding influence of his own father, Eberhard Arnold; of the German pastors Johann Christoph and Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt and their vision of the kingdom as a present reality; or of Meister Eckhart, whose mysticism is reflected in Arnold's own inclination toward the mystical. There are also Dietrich von Hildebrand and Friedrich von Gagern, whose books Arnold read and referred to often. But none of these are important in themselves. Rather, they give his message as a whole a depth and a breadth of vision that cannot be ignored. This, perhaps, is the most compelling part of Arnold's witness, for it lifts us up again and again from the pettiness of daily life and opens our

eyes to perceive the greater realities we so often ignore. To use his own words:

What a great gift it would be if we could see a little of the great vision of Jesus—if we could see beyond our small lives! Certainly our view is very limited. But we can at least ask him to call us out of our small worlds and our self-centeredness, and we can at least ask to feel the challenge of the great harvest that must be gathered—the harvest of all nations and all people, including the generations of the future.

*Hela Ehrlich
Christopher Zimmerman*

The Disciple



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The Inner Life

When one considers the millions who call themselves Christians, the main impression one gets is that in our time the Christian religion consists almost exclusively in going to church on Sunday mornings. I know there are exceptions, but we have to be realistic: the church has very little to say to young people—they are bored by church services and preaching, and so they turn to other things. Yet people are vaguely aware that there is something wrong with their inner life. And even if they don't go to their pastor or priest about it, they do seek help, often by going to a psychiatrist. It is true that once the inner person really changes, everything else will change. But that will come about through God, not through people.

Christ taught that there should be a complete change in every person, and that this change should begin in our inner being. Peter and the apostles taught the same at Pentecost. When the people asked Peter, "What should we do?" he said, "Believe, repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus" (Acts 2:37–38). And when they responded, the inner change that took place carried over into the practical and economic areas of their lives. They laid everything at the feet of the

apostles and no longer owned anything. Everyone gave up his property voluntarily, yet since each one shared everything with the others, no one suffered need.

For our time, too, we believe in a new society like this, brought about by a change that starts in our inner being. When God enters our inner life, the change he brings will also affect our outer life. If our Christianity is a religion for Sunday morning only, it will remain shallow and empty.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? When God breathed life into the first man, he gave every human being the possibility of experiencing the richness of heart that is in him: love, joy, humor, wrath, suffering, purity, and unity. Because all these things are familiar to us, we can see that something of God is in us—though often in a very distorted way.

The image of God is preserved most purely in children. As adults we often live very petty lives as very petty souls; our thinking centers around ourselves only and is unrelated to God. But we are created for more than this. I don't think any one of us has yet experienced to the full the richness of spirit, soul, and heart created by God for us to enjoy. Yet as his children, we are able to experience these things as no other creatures can. And he loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he says that the church "is to judge the angels"

(1 Cor. 6:3). This should give us an inkling of the deep meaning of our calling and of what it means that we are made in the image of God.

God created heaven, earth, and all the constellations of the universe. He also created something else, something very mysterious: the human spirit. God created this spirit and placed it in us because he wants to live in us. The Bible says that he does not live in temples built with hands (Acts 17:24) – we ourselves should be temples for him (1 Cor. 6:19).

My father used to say to us that stupidity is the greatest sin. He did not mean simplicity of mind, but spiritual dullness: having a dead conscience and not listening in one's heart to God.

Very few people today have any idea of the riches of the human heart. Our hearts are created to experience great things; most of us have no idea of what could happen in our lives if we would overcome our stupidity and dullness. Paul says:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that being rooted and established in love you may have power, together

with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16–19)

If we were to grasp this one passage, we would understand the whole Gospel. We are not filled with the fullness of God and it would be arrogant to think we were. But Paul's prayer should awaken and inspire us!

God said to Israel: "Pay heed to me and listen, and your souls will live!" (Is. 55:3) It is tremendously important to be able to turn to God with one's whole being and to believe that he will speak. Everything depends on our asking him to speak to us. If we hear nothing from God for a long time, it may be because there is something between us and heaven—perhaps we lack love to our brother, or we are at odds with our spouse. If this is the case, our waiting is in vain.

Of course, we cannot expect answers from God after only five minutes of silence. Think how long Jesus himself sometimes had to wait! But the more our lives belong to Christ, and the deeper our relationship with him, the more quickly he will answer us, and the more quickly he can use us for his tasks, because he knows that here is someone who is completely ready for him.

From a letter: Meister Eckhart* emphasized the importance of the listening heart, by which he meant a heart that listens to God alone. He said that God desires nothing more than a heart that detaches itself in silence from everything and turns and listens to him. This means detachment from mammon, impurity, and *schadenfreude* or malice; from lying, mistrust, and hatred; from worldly spirits and from all other spirits foreign to him.

**German mystic, 1260–1328.*

When people are healthy and happy, or when their economic foundation is stable, they all too often become lukewarm. They may give over to God the things they feel are not healthy in them—things that bring them distress or struggle. Yet even when these things drive them to prayer, they reserve their innermost person for themselves.

The fact that we seek God at all in times of misfortune shows us that our deepest being actually hungers and thirsts for him. We should bring our fears to God; we should bring him our sickness and anguish. But this is not enough. We must give him our innermost being, our heart and soul. When we humble ourselves before him in this way and give ourselves completely over to him—when we no longer resist giving him our whole person and whole personality—then he can help us, first by bringing us to bankruptcy and then by filling us with true life.

From a letter: The main thing for you should be to recognize the greatness of God and to live for him. Try to read the Bible—at least two or three chapters every day. This will open your eyes to the greatness of Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts. Then you will see how very small the search for personal happiness is.

From a letter: When the devil incites you to hate others, I advise you to find inner quiet. You know that in your deepest heart you do not want this hatred.

I can very well understand how unhappy you feel. Try, however, to become absolutely quiet inwardly, and believe that God loves you and wants to help you, even if this belief is attacked by doubts again and again. Then your fear will be slowly overcome.

If you try to fight your emotions with other emotions, you will only become more confused. You cannot straighten out your emotions, but you can trust in God: he knows your deepest heart, and he can straighten you out. Believe in him alone.

From a letter: You ask how to find inner quiet. Remember Jesus' words about prayer; they are very important: "Go into your room, lock the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret, and he, who sees what is secret, will reward you" (Mt. 6:6). If you detach yourself from your feelings and from the

excitements of your life and seek God in this detachment from self, you will find peace of heart.

From a letter: Long prayers are not always effective. Jesus even warns us against them. They are usually more pagan than Christian.

Let your prayer life be more alive! But do not force it—let it be quite free. When prayer becomes something living to you, the fire of the Spirit will flare up, and this will bring you life!

From a letter: We cannot live without a personal prayer life. We need prayer as much as we need water. All of us need times of quiet before God. Jesus clearly says that we should not make a show of our prayers; we should close the door behind us and not speak about them (Mt. 6:1–6). Yet hidden, personal prayer is absolutely necessary and just as important as the communal prayers of the whole church.

We tend to pray only for what we want and give little thought to what God wants of us at a particular moment. I sometimes think God would answer our prayers sooner if they were directed more to doing his will, and if our hearts were moved by the good spirit to

ask what God wants. Let me say it like this: God needs us every day—he needs people to carry out his will—so we should not pray for what we would like, but rather ask for the strength to do what he would have us do.

God needs people who ask for his will to be done; if no one is interested in it, he must leave his work on earth undone. But if there are people who stretch out their hands to him in longing, asking and seeking for his will to be done, then he can do something in this world. It is wrong to think that everything comes by itself, that nothing is expected of us. Jesus taught us to pray for God's will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:10).

We must also ask for God's will to be done in our personal lives. Because the Evil One tries again and again to lead us onto the wrong path, we must turn to God daily and ask him to renew our hearts. But we should pray not only for ourselves; we should pray for the whole world—for all humanity and all nations.

From a letter: There is wrong prayer—self-willed prayer. But if the object of our prayer is in accordance with the will of Jesus, then it is right. As long as there is nothing of self-will or self-glory mixed into it, it is not wrong.

It is completely foreign to the way of Jesus to make selfish requests in his name, for instance to wish for a successful career or for a thousand dollars. When Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do,” he means whatever glorifies the Father and the Son (Jn. 14:13).

In our prayer life we need to listen to the spirit of God. What God wants to tell us is of greater importance than what we want to tell him. Therefore common silence shared in the faith that he wants to speak to each heart will always be meaningful for us.

We should always believe that our prayers will be answered, even if they are not answered straight-away. Daniel prayed earnestly to God for days for the forgiveness of his sins and for the forgiveness of Israel’s sins. Yet he received no answer for three weeks. Then an angel appeared to him in a vision and said:

Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the very first day that you applied your mind to understand and mortify yourself before your God, your prayers have been heard, and I have come in answer to them. But the evil angel prince of the kingdom of Persia resisted me for twenty-one days, until Michael, one of the chief princes of heaven, came to help me (Dn. 10:12–13).

So Daniel's prayers *were* heard from the beginning, but dark powers made it difficult for the angel who answered him to break through.

Today, despite the victory of the cross, there are still dark powers at work. Our prayers, like Daniel's, may often not be answered straightaway. Yet God hears them. We should firmly believe this.

From a letter: Give everything over to Jesus. The more you give everything over to him, the more his spirit will fill you. Even the most sincere Christians go through times of inner dryness in which God wants to test them. But then he floods them with his great love. So do not despair if you feel inner dryness.

