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WHY YOU SHOULD *NOT* READ THIS BOOK: ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE IMITATION OF CHRIST



IS IT FAIR to have a strike against you before you ever pick up a bat? In many softball leagues, the answer is, “Yes!” To avoid long innings and even longer games, many slow-pitch softball leagues adopt a rule intended to speed up play: the batter begins with a strike against him. But if that seems unfair, imagine a league in which players come to the plate with *three* strikes against them—they would be out before they even step into the batter’s box!

This is the situation for the imitation of Christ. Many Christians understand intuitively that growing in likeness to Jesus is an essential component of Christian discipleship, and they naturally turn to the Gospels for instruction on how to be like Jesus. Yet over the centuries, some serious objections have been raised against this very notion. As a result, many biblical scholars, theologians, and pastors treat the topic as though it were “out” before the game began. This is true among many Protestants, and especially among

those who would consider themselves Reformed (that is, committed to the doctrinal distinctives of Protestant Reformation leaders like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their theological heirs). Author E. J. Tinsley has summarized this tension well:

The idea of the imitation of Christ has an ambivalent status in the history of Christian spirituality. On the one hand it has been taken to be the classical and normative way of characterizing the Christian spiritual life. . . . On the other hand there are those, chiefly of the Reformed traditions, who have felt that the idea of the imitation of Christ matches ill with the Christian doctrine of grace.¹

Our aim in this book is to learn what Luke's Gospel has to teach us about imitating Christ. But before our study can proceed, we need to understand the nature of the objections to the imitation of Christ—what they are, why they have arisen, and what they teach us about errors we must take care to avoid.

In chapter 2, we will see that there are sound biblical and theological responses to the objections against the imitation of Christ, so that my writing, and your reading, of this book is not an exercise in futility. But for now, even though it will involve hearing only one side of the issue, we want to feel the weight of the objections—objections that make some people fear that the imitation of Christ has three strikes against it before the first pitch is thrown.

The Evangelical Argument: Imitation Diminishes Christ's Person and Work

Who is Jesus? And what did he accomplish, especially by his *death*? In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many biblical scholars

1. E. J. Tinsley, "Imitation of Christ," in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (London: SCM Press, 1988), 208. Tinsley is best known for his book *The Imitation of God in Christ: An Essay on the Biblical Basis of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

and theologians (who were later known as “liberals” or “modernists”) sought to answer these questions in terms of human reason, and without reference to anything purported to be supernatural. The implications for the first of our questions—Who is Jesus?—were staggering: all that remained was a “Jesus” who was little more than an enlightened teacher and an example of love. His death saved not by satisfying God’s justice or by absorbing the penalty sin deserved, but through its moral impact on the human heart. As Douglas Macintosh, a nineteenth-century proponent of liberalism, put it: “Christianity is the religion of deliverance from unchristlikeness to a Christlike morality, through a Christlike attitude towards a Christlike superhuman reality.”² In other words, Jesus saves by giving us an example to imitate.

Contrast McIntosh’s summary of Christianity with that of J. Gresham Machen, an outspoken opponent of liberalism:

Liberalism regards [Jesus] as an Example and Guide; Christianity, as a Saviour: liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith.

He is our Saviour, not because He has inspired us to live the same kind of life that He lived, but because He took upon Himself the dreadful guilt of our sins and bore it instead of us on the cross.³

Given these starkly opposing visions, it is not difficult to see why “evangelicals” (as those opposed to liberalism have come to be known) are suspicious of the imitation of Christ—a concept often associated with the denial of biblical truth about Jesus and his saving work. Nuanced reminders that Jesus’ example does have a proper place in the Christian life can be hard to hear on the

2. As cited in B. B. Warfield, *Christology and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 411.

3. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 96, 117.

theological battlefield; as a result, the imitation of Christ has become a casualty of war. Perhaps its wounds are not fatal, but in evangelical circles, imitation will forever walk with a limp.

The Augustinian Argument: Imitation Denies Human Need of Divine Grace

The next two strikes against the imitation of Christ are associated with key moments in church history. The first occurred in the late 300s A.D., when a teacher named Pelagius, troubled by the moral laxity of Christians in Rome, began to emphasize the ability of believers to make real progress in holiness. To defend his notion of human ability, Pelagius denied that human beings were corrupt or “fallen” as a result of Adam’s sin. Here Pelagius appealed to the concept of imitation: we sin not because we are born corrupt, but because we are following bad examples—whether the bad example of Adam, or the bad example of others around us. As Pelagius’s teaching spread, many were concerned that it left no place for the grace of God. If we are not corrupted by sin, and are capable of righteous living, why would we need God’s grace to redeem us or to enable us to grow in holiness? Pelagius responded with a new, “external” interpretation of grace. Rather than God’s transforming grace at work *in* us, he argued, we need to take advantage of the grace God has already given *to* us: capacity to do good, Christ’s sacrifice to pardon us when we sin, and Christ’s example to replace the bad examples we follow.

It was left to Augustine, a North African bishop, to demonstrate the radical flaws in such teaching. Arguing that human beings are in fact fallen and in need of something more than the external grace Pelagius championed, Augustine returned again and again to Romans 5:12–21. Pelagius insisted that Paul had imitation in mind here: “all sinned” (Rom. 5:12) by imitating the sin of Adam. Augustine argued on several grounds that this could not be Paul’s meaning. Most importantly, the Adam/Christ parallel in Romans 5 teaches

that we become righteous not by imitating Christ, but by receiving “the free gift of righteousness” through Christ’s work on our behalf (Rom. 5:17). We cannot be made righteous by following Christ’s good example, because Adam’s sin is not merely a bad example. Rather, its guilt and power have been passed on to every one of his race. Only by God’s grace, understood not as an external gift but as a radical transformation of the sinful human heart, can we become part of a new race, that of Christ the Redeemer.

Augustine’s arguments were so compelling that even today the very notion of the imitation of Christ often comes under immediate suspicion. For instance, we hear echoes of Augustine when British theologian Alister McGrath remarks that “[s]anctification . . . is about becoming Christlike, not by imitating Christ but by being changed by the grace of God. . . . Imitation brings in its wake a whole range of ideas and attitudes that are profoundly hostile to the gospel of grace.”⁴ And, as we saw earlier, E. J. Tinsley attributes nervousness about imitation, especially among “the Reformed traditions,” to fear that it “conceals a moral endeavour of a *Pelagian* kind.”⁵ And so the second strike is called—for to speak too highly of the imitation of Christ is to sound like one of the church’s earliest and most notorious heretics.

The Reformation Argument: Imitation Exalts Christ as Example over Christ as Gift

To understand why Tinsley mentions the Reformed tradition as particularly suspicious of the imitation of Christ, we must turn to a second key moment in church history. In the sixteenth century, a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther began to realize that the teaching and practice of his church were in dire need of reform according to Scripture. Luther’s biblical insights

4. Alister McGrath, “In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, 3 (September 1991): 297.

5. Tinsley, “Imitation of Christ,” 208, emphasis added.

would ultimately lead to the Protestant Reformation—and to a strong condemnation of imitation as it was practiced at the time.

Three emphases related to the imitation of Christ featured prominently in sixteenth-century Catholic thought and life. First, many church leaders appealed to Christ's example when calling Christians to take up vows of celibacy or poverty as priests, monks, or nuns. Luther, by contrast, stressed the notion that all of life is to be lived to the glory of God, so that one need not forsake ordinary duties in order to follow Christ.

Second, for many, imitation had come to mean outward conformity to some action of Jesus, the apostles, or a saint. For instance, church leaders would often defend the custom of fasting during Lent by noting that Jesus had fasted for forty days in the wilderness. Luther was quick to point out that what mattered was not such external correspondence, but the formation of one's character and motives. And while he had deep respect for holy men and women of old, Luther could not abide the thought of yielding to them an authority that belongs only to Christ.

Third, and most complex, was an introspective, mystical approach to imitating Christ. Here the imitator sought to follow the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection, first going through affliction and spiritual "death" in order to cultivate humility, and then giving himself over to God in hopes of "rebirth." In keeping with sixteenth-century doctrine, this approach assumed the ability of sinners to prepare themselves for salvation ("rebirth"). As Luther, like Augustine, came to see that only a heart supernaturally transformed by God's grace could desire holiness, he rejected this model of "preparation-through-imitation" as Pelagian. As popular as it was, the mystical approach to imitation would have to be rejected, since it denied the biblical truth of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone.⁶

6. For more detail, see Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

Two representative quotes underscore Luther's desire to correct a misguided emphasis on the imitation of Christ. In his 1535 lectures on Galatians, Luther insists that Christ "must be grasped by faith as a gift, not as an example," for "imitation of the example of Christ does not make us righteous in the sight of God." He concludes that the "Christ who blesses and redeems is vastly different from Christ the example." Elsewhere he warns that to speak of Christ only as example is to "make of him a severe and angry judge, a fearful and horrible tyrant, full of wrath against poor sinners, and bent on condemning them."⁷ To be sure, Luther had much more to say on the topic of imitating Christ, and not all of his comments were as negative as these. Yet the Protestant and Reformed tradition has tended to remember Luther as one who offers us a choice: either Christ is gift and merciful Savior, or—strike three—example and tyrannical judge.

The Heart's Cry: Imitation Demands the Impossible

Could you live like Jesus? Could you live like him for a year? The title of a *USA Today* online article asked this very question, prompting hundreds of responses. One reader replied, "I don't think ANY of us could live like Jesus for one day." Another agreed: "No man can live like Jesus."⁸ These quotes crystallize one final objection to the imitation of Christ, which we may summarize as follows: "Being like Jesus sounds great. But it's impossible. I can't do it."

Sometimes this objection arises from a keen sense of human sinfulness in general: any suggestion that morally bankrupt

7. References are to Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86), 26:246–47; and Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, ed. Thomas S. Kepler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 115.

8. Charles Honey, "Could you live like Jesus for a year? This pastor tried," *USAToday.com*, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-01-01-jesus-year_N.htm (accessed January 28, 2011).

sinners could imitate Christ sounds like arrogance. “We’re sinners,” we might say, “so any attempt to be like Jesus will only reveal the impossibility of the task.” But sometimes this objection arises from a sense of hopelessness based on personal experience with sin. The heart that is broken from bearing the weight of its own corruption can feel the call to imitate Christ not as an invitation to spiritual growth, but as mockery: “Me? Like Jesus? What is this, some kind of cruel joke?” Even as I write these words, I wrestle with such thoughts. I know my own failings, my own history of sinning, my own tendency to abandon holiness at the first sign of serious temptation. And so I understand completely when students, church members, family, or friends wince as if in pain when I suggest to them that the imitation of Christ really should have a prominent place in our lives. “Maybe in some of our lives. But never in mine.”

Conclusion

No study of the imitation of Christ can afford to ignore the cumulative effect of the objections we have surveyed. Our heritage as evangelicals, shaped by battles against theological liberalism, causes us to shrink back from any teaching that might undermine biblical teaching about Christ and his saving death. Our heritage as Protestants, echoing with the voices of leaders like Augustine and Luther, leads us to suspect that imitation is a cover for works-righteousness, a denial of the grace of God as our only hope for salvation. And, most painfully, when anyone suggests that we should imitate Christ, our own hearts hear the mocking voices of all of our failures, past, present, and future. “He’s already out! Three strikes against him before he even stepped to the plate,” some voices cry. Yet none of the objections raised so far represents the full scope of biblical truth on the matter. And so, in chapter 2 we will hear Scripture reply, “But who said we were playing by those rules?”