

## **Following Jesus** **What's Wrong and Right About the Imitation of Christ**

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Sharing his priorities for the next thirty years, best-selling author Richard Foster disclosed his "spiritual formation agenda" in a January 2009 Christianity Today article. Foster observes that there is a lot of interest these days in "social-service projects." "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but where, oh where, are those who think of changing themselves?"

Besides the obsession with world transformation, he complains that an overemphasis on grace in some circles "will not allow for spiritual growth."

Having been saved by grace, these people have become paralyzed by it. To attempt any progress in the spiritual life smacks of "works righteousness" to them. Their liturgies tell them they sin in word, thought, and deed daily, so they conclude that this is their fate until they die. Heaven is their only release from this world of sin and rebellion. Hence, these well-meaning folks will sit in their pews year after year without realizing any movement forward in their life with God....People may genuinely want to be good, but seldom are they prepared to do what it takes to produce the inward life of goodness that can form the soul.

Foster also blames much of the distraction from spiritual growth to "a Christian entertainment industry that is masquerading as worship" and "an overall consumer mentality that simply dominates the American religious scene."

I find much of what Foster says about contemporary spirituality persuasive. It should come as no surprise to a regular reader of this magazine that I would find him spot-on in his worry that the holiness of God has been eclipsed by the ephemeral exuberance of entertainment passing for worship and consumerism packaged as mission and discipleship. I think he's right that there is a kind of "cheap grace" that fulfills the fond dreams of the antinomian who comforts himself with the syllogism: "God likes to forgive, I like to sin: what a great relationship!" Even if we eschew antinomianism, there is a kind of laziness that does not revel equally in the "already" of new life in Christ and the "not yet" of its consummation. There are too many passages in Scripture that call us to go on to maturity, to leave our old life behind, and to strain toward the prize. Many of those passages are found in the same chapters as our favorite verses on the Good News of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For example, after announcing that we are saved by grace alone-and that even faith is a gift-Paul adds, "For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which he predestined us to walk in" (Eph. 1:8-10).

More than Imitation

The Reformers recognized that grace is first and foremost God's favor toward sinners on account of Christ. This "justice" or "righteousness" by which we stand accepted in God's presence is imputed, not infused; declared immediately, not progressively

realized. At the same time, they just as strongly affirmed that God's Word does what it says. Everyone whom God declares to be righteous is also progressively sanctified. While remaining sinful, believers now struggle against indwelling sin.

But why? If the full remission of sins and favor with God is the believer's possession through faith alone, and God's grace is greater than our sin, why shouldn't we go on sinning? That is the question Paul knew his teaching on justification would provoke. His answer, in Romans 6, is that the same Good News that announces our justification also announces our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. Paul does not threaten with the fears of purgatorial fires or worse, but simply declares to those who believe in Christ that he is not only the source of their justification but of their deliverance from sin's all-controlling dominion. They still sin, but never in the same way that they did before. Now they love what they hated and hate what they loved. I am among a dwindling number of exegetes who still believes that Romans 7 focuses on this paradox: only believers struggle with sin, because sin is both an enduring reality (with many setbacks) and yet the believer's enemy.

Nowhere in this lodestar passage for the Christian life does Paul direct our attention to the imitation of Christ. He has already painted too dark (realistic) a picture of human depravity to imagine that the devil, the world, and our sinful hearts could meet their match in our deeper commitment to follow Christ's example. He calls us not simply to imitate Christ but to live out our union with him. But before he speaks an imperative, he announces the indicative of the gospel: Christ's saving work has accomplished far more than we imagined. The Spirit's work of uniting us to Christ makes us not mere imitators but living members of his body. We are incorporated-baptized-into Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Jesus said the same thing in John 15. His disciples are not only forgiven; joined to him as the life-giving Vine they become living branches, bearing fruit that will remain. We have no life in ourselves, he tells them. There are no resources for following Jesus, imitating him, becoming his disciple. We are dead branches, cut off, without hope in this world. Only then does Jesus issue his imperatives to love and serve each other as he has loved and served us.

There is a world of difference between having a role model whose example we fall short of ever reproducing and having yourself "killed" and re-created as branches of the Tree of Life. Doing what Jesus did is different from bearing the fruit of Christ's righteous life. In fact, the most important things that Jesus did cannot be duplicated. Because he fulfilled the law in our place, bore our curse, and was raised in glory to take his throne at the Father's right hand, we can have a relationship with him-and with the Father-that is far more intimate than the relationship of a devotee to a guru, a student to a teacher, or a follower to a master.

Following Christ is the consequence, not the alternative to or even means of union with Christ. Even when Scripture calls us to follow Christ's example, the relationship between master and pupil is asymmetrical. For example, Jesus refers to his impending sacrifice for sinners as the model for his followers in Matthew 20:28. It is obvious,

however, from the context that Jesus' act of self-sacrifice is unique and unrepeatable. We are not called to die for our neighbors' sins or to bear the wrath of God in their place. When Paul calls us in Philippians 2 to "have the same mind" as Christ in his self-humiliation, he obviously is not calling us to set aside the heavenly glory and power belonging to the second person of the Trinity and to descend to earth-even hell itself-in human flesh. We are not incarnations of God. Nevertheless, we are beneficiaries of his Incarnation, united in body and soul to his glorified flesh.

As George Lindbeck observed (see the "Justification and Atonement" sidebar on page 18), imitation has its place, but not under the category of "gospel." The call to follow Christ and his example is an imperative-the third use of the law directed to Christians rather than to unbelievers. The "imitation-of-Christ" paradigm of spirituality makes Christ's self-sacrifice and humility an analogy for our discipleship. The "union-with-Christ" paradigm makes our love and service an analogy of Christ's inimitable accomplishment.

Calvin offers helpful insights on this point in his comments on Jesus' prayer in John 17. Believers are "sanctified by the truth," which is God's Word (v. 17), "for the word here denotes the doctrine of the Gospel": here Calvin challenges the "fanatics" who imagine a sanctification that comes from an "inner word" apart from the external Word. "And for their sakes I sanctify myself," Jesus prays (v. 19).

By these words he explains more clearly from what source that sanctification flows, which is completed in us by the doctrine of the Gospel. It is because he consecrated himself to the Father that his holiness might come to us; for as the blessing on the firstfruits is spread over the whole harvest, so the Spirit of God cleanses us by the holiness of Christ, and makes us partakers of it. Nor is this done by imputation only, for in that respect he is said to have been made to us righteousness; but he is likewise said to have been made to us sanctification (1 Cor 1:30) because he has, so to speak, presented us to his Father in his own person, that we may be renewed to true holiness by his Spirit. Besides, though this sanctification belongs to the whole life of Christ, yet the highest illustration of it was given in the sacrifice of his death; for then he showed himself to be the true High Priest, by consecrating the temple, the altar, all the vessels, and the people, by the power of his Spirit.

The goal is "that they may be one" (v. 21). Calvin is as much on home ground in discussing the richness of the organic-horticultural metaphors as the legal. While they are distinct, the organic and the legal are two sides of the same covenantal coin.

Paradoxically, it is this very liberation that issues in constant inner struggle, since we belong definitively to the new creation-"the age to come"-with Christ as our firstfruits and the Spirit as the pledge. Yet we still live in "this present evil age" and continue to pretend that we are not those whom God has worded us to be in Christ. By contrast, the struggle of the unregenerate, according to William Ames, is "not the striving of the Spirit against the flesh but that of the flesh fearing flesh inordinately desiring." Ames's statement points up the fact that however useful Aristotelian or Kantian conceptions of "ethics," "virtue," and "duty" may be, the definitive categories for theology are

covenantal and eschatological: the tyranny of sin (flesh) and the reign of life in righteousness (the Spirit). Natural ethics and the enabling power of the Spirit in common grace may check immoderate habits, but the Spirit creates a new world through the gospel.

Just as Paul's treatment of justification led logically to the question, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1), the Reformation unleashed radical elements that went well beyond the views of the Reformers. Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde reminds us, "Luther had hardly begun to proclaim the freedom of the Christian before he had to fight against abuse of the term. He did not do this in such a way as to speak about the good works that must be added to faith. Instead, he did so by calling people back to that faith that occurs 'where the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ and thus sanctifies them.'" Luther's response at this juncture was precisely Paul's: Though justified through faith alone, this faith "is never alone, but is always accompanied by love and hope," according to the Formula of Concord (Epitome III, 11; cf. Solid Declaration III, 23, 26, 36, 41).

Apart from the imputation of righteousness, sanctification is simply another religious self-improvement program determined by the powers of this age (the flesh) rather than of the age to come (the Spirit). This gospel not only announces our justification, but our participation in the power of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore, we cannot look to Christ at the beginning for our justification, and then look away from Christ to our own progress and countless manuals that offer formulas for spiritual and moral ascent when it comes to the Christian life (sanctification). Again Forde is insightful:

In our modern age, influenced by Pietism and the Enlightenment, our thinking is shaped by what is subjective, by the life of faith, by our inner disposition and motivation, by our inward impulses and the way they are shaped. When we think and live along these lines, sanctification is a matter of personal and individual development and orientation. It is true that we also find this approach in Luther. No one emphasized more sharply than he did our personal responsibility....But this approach is secondary. 'The Word of God always comes first. After it follows faith; after faith, love; then love does every good work, for...it is the fulfilling of the law.'

Even in sanctification, "the focus is not upon the saints but upon sanctification, upon the Word of God in all its sacramental forms, and also upon secular institutions that correspond to the second table of the law....Only God is holy, and what he says and speaks and does is holy. This is how God's holiness works, which he does not keep to himself, but communicates by sharing it."

What this means is that we who once were curved in on ourselves, seeing the world but not really seeing it rightly, must be called out of ourselves to be judged as ungodly and then dressed in Christ's righteousness. This is necessary not only for our justification but for our sanctification as well. Our identity is no longer something that we fabricate in our bondage that we mistake for freedom. "To become new men means losing what we now call 'ourselves,'" C. S. Lewis observes. "Out of our selves, into

Christ, we must go." "Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it," he adds. "It will come when you are looking for Him." To be in Christ is to be "very much more themselves than they were before." "He invented-as an author invents characters in a novel-all the different people that you and I were intended to be. In that sense our real selves are all waiting for us in Him. It is no good trying to 'be myself' without Him." "To enter heaven," Lewis says, "is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth."

Far from creating a morbid subjectivity and individualism, as is often charged, this view frees us from being curved in on ourselves, fretting over our own souls. In a moving letter to Cardinal Sadoletto, Calvin made much the same point, when he argued that only by being freed of having to love our neighbor in the service of our own salvation are we able to really love them for their own sake. Sanctification is a life not of acquiring but of receiving from the excess of divine joy that then continues to overflow in excess to our neighbor and from our neighbor to us.

Conclusion

I agree with Richard Foster's concern to step away from our daily routines and to be silent before the Lord, to receive his commands and promises, and to pour out our cries, praises, and intercessions to the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. Many of us coming out of "monastic" evangelicalism may easily overreact, neglecting-even ridiculing-habits of daily Bible reading and prayer that nourish our souls. I think Foster is right that the problem for evangelicalism today is not that it is too monastic, but that it is too worldly. However, Christ has not left us as orphans, to fend for ourselves by finding spiritual directors and our own means of grace. He promises to work in us by his Spirit through preaching and sacrament.

Paul says in Romans 10 that the message of the gospel ("the righteousness that is by faith") has its own method: Christ himself descending to deliver the Good News through his ambassadors and to unite us to him through faith in his gospel. The imitation paradigm easily slips into "the righteousness that is by works," offering agendas for ascending to heaven to bring God down or descend into the depths as if to bring Christ up from the dead. But Christ is not dead. Nor must he be pulled down from his throne in order to be present in our lives. Paul says that he is present objectively through his Word and Spirit.

When it comes to his methods, Foster's advice is consistent with his message. Where Scripture teaches that Christ's objective work outside of us in public history is the gospel-"the power of God for salvation"-Foster writes,

The most important, most real, most lasting work, is accomplished in the depths of our heart. This work is solitary and interior. It cannot be seen by anyone, not even ourselves. It is a work known only to God. It is the work of heart purity, of soul conversion, of inward transformation, of life formation....Much intense formation work is necessary before we can stand the fires of heaven. Much training is necessary before we are the kind of persons who can safely and easily reign with God.

It would be a travesty simply to lump together medieval mysticism, the Anabaptist tradition, Quakers, Pietism, and Protestant liberalism. Nevertheless, there is a common thread running through these diverse movements—a theology of works-righteousness that emphasizes:

- Christ's example over his unique and sufficient achievement;
- The inner experience and piety of believers over the external work and Word of Christ;
- Our moral transformation over the Spirit's application of redemption;
- Private soul formation over the public ministry of the means of grace.

When we reverse the priority of these emphases, however, we experience more profoundly the delight of our inheritance, grow in our faith and gratitude toward God and our love toward our neighbors, are constantly renewed inwardly, and take from our public assembly enough morsels to feed on in our family and personal prayers and meditations throughout the week.

We do not need more spiritual directors, but more pastors who feed us, elders who guide us, and deacons who care for the flock's material welfare. Realizing more and more what it means to be living branches, we need more and more to put to death the actual deeds of unrighteousness and live more and more to the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit.

Baptized into Christ, fed richly by his Word and at his Table, let us not leave the festive day forgetful of God's service to us, but be led back each day into his Word and into the world with joyful hearts to be conformed to Christ's image as we work, play, raise children, steward earthly resources, enjoy dinner with friends, and breaks with coworkers. Don't feed off of your New Year's resolutions; rather, feed off of your union with Christ. You are part of the harvest of which the glorified Christ is already the firstfruits! Then resolve again, every day, to return to Christ, to recall your baptism, and to repent of all that weighs you down and distracts you from running the race with your eyes fixed on Christ.

1 [ Back ] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996), 179-80.

2 [ Back ] Calvin, 180-81.

3 [ Back ] Calvin, 183.

4 [ Back ] William Ames, *The Marrow of Divinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 171.

5 [ Back ] Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 56-57.

6 [ Back ] Forde, 58; LW 36:39.

7 [ Back ] Forde, 59.

8 [ Back ] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 224.

9 [ Back ] Lewis, 161.

10 [ Back ] Lewis, 225.

11 [ Back ] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 127-28.

12 [ Back ] John Calvin, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. John C. Olin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 56.

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