

## THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

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### I

This article is an attempt to raise some questions about the relationship of Jesus Christ to human morality. In particular, I am concerned to explore an aspect of the relationship of the grace of God to human ethical activity; I want to consider the possibility of combining an emphasis on the prevenient reality of Jesus Christ as the agent of our salvation with a proper sense that human persons are themselves agents whose characters are realised in their acts. If Christians are what they are by virtue of their participation in the benefits of God's saving acts in Christ, then what room is left for human ethical activity in our account of what makes a person into the person he or she is? Or, as the question is phrased by Donald MacKinnon, 'Is it tolerable for a serious morality to speak of our sufficiency as being of God?'<sup>1</sup>

Much Protestant theological ethics has found considerable difficulty in establishing a satisfactory relationship between grace and morality. The difficulties surface particularly in trying to hold together the indicative material of the New Testament, which articulates the origins of man's agency *extra se*, and the New Testament imperatives, which seem to suggest that man is in himself a 'substantial centre of activity'.<sup>2</sup> The suggestion which I would like to explore here is that one of the ways in which we might

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1. D. M. MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (London: Black, 1957) 270. For some recent explorations of these questions, see also D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ET London: SCM, 1978<sup>2</sup>); J. K. S. Reid, *Our Life in Christ* (London: SCM, 1963); D. Sölle, *Christ the Representative* (ET London: SCM, 1967).
  2. Reid, *Life* 48.

try to resolve that difficulty is close attention to the New Testament material on the imitation of Christ. For it is there, I suggest, that we begin to move towards affirmations of the reality of human agency without implying unwarranted moral autonomy. That is to say, the imitation material of the New Testament may help us hold together the derivative character of human morality and its character as a human project involving choice, conscious allegiance and deliberation. And so I hope I may be able to put a little exegetical flesh on James Gustafson's cryptic comment that 'the Christian life is not less moral because it is not primarily moral'.<sup>3</sup>

Even from these opening remarks, it will perhaps be evident that I approach the material as one whose primary interests lie in the fields of systematic theology and theological ethics. But my concerns do, I hope, coincide with areas of significant debate amongst biblical scholars, notably over the way in which 'following Jesus' and 'discipleship' are to be understood in the gospels, and especially over the relationship of Christology and ethics in Paul, particularly in Philippians 2. In his recent book *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*, T. W. Ogletree notes the 'troublesome gap' which has 'developed between biblical scholarship and studies in Christian ethics',<sup>4</sup> and his work as a whole is a sustained argument that 'biblical studies cannot retain their pertinence if they are unable to inform contemporary questions about the moral life; (and) that Christian ethics soon loses its distinctive power if it cuts itself off from its biblical foundations'.<sup>5</sup> This paper is a modest attempt to address something of the same set of issues.

I shall not be considering questions of the history-of-religions background of either the ἀκολουθεῖν word-group or the μιμεῖσθαι word-group, an area which has attracted several substantial monographs over the past twenty-five years, on such matters as rabbinic or

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3. *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968) 183.

4. *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) xi.

5. *Ibid.* xii.

hellenistic influences on the New Testament material.<sup>6</sup> Nor shall I be devoting a great deal of attention to the ethical significance of the 'discipleship' material in the gospels. This is mainly because I want to direct my attention primarily to the Pauline epistles, since it is they above all which have furnished the fundamental categories for much Protestant thinking on the relationship of justification to ethics.

## II

The question before us, then, is this: how far does the language of 'imitating Christ' enable us more satisfactorily to relate the indicative and imperatival aspects of Christian ethics, so as to be able to affirm equally that human agency is real and that it is rooted in God's own action in Christ? Because my suggestion is by no means incontestable, and because it involves a quite critical appraisal of some of the ways in which Protestant exegetes have traditionally handled the imitation material in the New Testament, it is perhaps valuable to begin by sketching some of the reasons why this material often gains only a low profile in presentations of New Testament ethics.

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6. See, e.g., A. Schulz, *Nachfolgen und Nachahmen. Studien über das Verhältnis der neutestamentlichen Jüngerschaft zur urchristlichen Vorbildethik* (Munich: Kösel, 1962); H. Kosmala, 'Nachfolge und Nachahmung Gottes. I: Im griechischen Denken; II: Im jüdischen Denken', *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 2 (1963) 38-85; 3 (1964) 65-111; H. D. Betz, *Nachfolge und Nachahmung Jesu Christi im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967); M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and his Followers* (ET Edinburgh: Clark, 1981). These works supplement the material in *TDNT* 1. 210-16 (ἀκολουθεῖν); 4. 415-461 (μαθητής) and 4. 659-674 (μιμῆσθαι).

It is certainly true that explicit discussion of the imitation of Christ is not a major theme of either the theology or the ethics of the New Testament. Whilst there are scholars like E. J. Tinsley who seek to argue that *imitatio Christi* is one, if not the, distinguishing feature of the ethos of the New Testament, their case founders simply on the slight space devoted specifically to the theme by the New Testament writers.<sup>7</sup> There are a number of passages which use imitation language in the course of exhortation to undertake certain courses of ethical action or certain paths of spiritual development, but it is notable that nearly always the object of imitation is not Christ himself but a human person or persons. Paul urges his spiritual children in 1 Corinthians 4:16: 'Be imitators of me'; to the Philippian Christians he writes, 'Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us' (3:17); and, again, he tells the Thessalonians 'you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat anyone's bread without paying, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate' (2 Thes. 3:7-9). Similarly, he gives thanks for the way in which the brethren at Thessalonica 'became imitators of the churches of God in Jesus Christ which are in Judaea' (1 Thes. 2:14). Along the same lines, the writer to the Hebrews desires that his readers be 'imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises' (Heb. 6:12) - presumably referring to the heroes of faith catalogued in 11:4 - 12:1. Later in the same letter the recipients are urged, 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life,

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7. *The Imitation of God in Christ* (London: SCM, 1960); 'The Way of the Son of Man', *Interpretation* 7 (1953) 418-425; 'Some Principles for Reconstructing a Doctrine of the Imitation of Christ' *SJT* 25 (1972) 45-57. See further K. Giles, '"Imitatio Christi" in the New Testament' *Reformed Theological Review* 38 (1979) 65-73; R. E. O. White, *Biblical Ethics* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979) 109-123.

and imitate their faith' (13:7). None of these passages makes mention of the imitation of Christ; indeed, only two texts use such language, and then only in conjunction with imitation of the apostles: in the thanksgiving at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians, Paul recounts how 'you became imitators of us and of the Lord' (1:16), and in 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul concludes his discourse with 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ'.

There are, of course, other passages where ethical exhortation is made by reference to the model or example of Christ. In his discussion of the collection for the saints in 2 Corinthians, Paul makes the famous appeal to the 'becoming poor' of the Lord Jesus Christ himself (8:9), and later entreats his hearers 'by the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (10:1). In Romans 15, the exhortation to please one's neighbour for his own good (v. 2) is rooted in the historical observation that 'Christ did not please himself' (v. 3) but 'became a servant' (v. 8). Ephesians picks up the point by exhorting Christians to 'walk in love, as Christ loved us' (Eph. 5:2; cf. 1 Jn. 2:6) - and the whole theme is, of course, amplified in the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5-11. Again, the instruction to servants in 1 Peter is built around the principle that 'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps' (1:21; cf. 4:1,13). But for all this the precise notion of the imitation of Jesus Christ does not have a high profile. The paucity of explicit reference to the notion of *imitatio Christi* does not of itself disqualify its significance, and I hope later to show that it has a broader exegetical base than simply the passages to which reference has already been made.

But it is more than simply exegetical hesitations which lie behind what Tinsley calls the 'perceptible nervousness' about *imitatio Christi* amongst many Protestant exegetes and theologians.<sup>8</sup> The language of imitation appears to detach moral obligation from the objective accomplishment of human righteousness in Christ, in this way cutting the Christian life adrift from election and justification. A number of recent

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8. Tinsley, 'Principles' 45.

studies of discipleship in the synoptics, for example, emphasise that the call to 'follow Christ' should not be interpreted to suggest that Christ becomes a model to be imitated in such a way that the disciple comes to be like the Lord. Rather, the calls to obedient following presuppose election by the Lord: the possibility of hearing and obeying resides not in the disciples' act of allegiance but in the creative initiative of the Lord himself. To 'follow Jesus' is thus not merely to engage in moral striving but to participate in the salvation accomplished by Jesus.<sup>9</sup> As E. Best notes in Mark, Jesus is not merely 'an explorer who marked out a path through an impenetrable jungle to make it easier for others to follow. Through his cross and resurrection, which are their redemption, he creates the very possibility of journey for them; the judgement which should fall on them is taken away, and they are freed'.<sup>10</sup> Discipleship, that is, is a gift<sup>11</sup> and not simply a call.<sup>12</sup>

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9. So G. Kittel, *TDNT* 1.216.

10. *Following Jesus. Discipleship in Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 248. For a slightly different version of the analogy, see E. Schweizer, *Lordship and Discipleship* (ET London: SCM, 1960) 11. More tersely, E. Thurneysen: 'Following Jesus never means imitating Jesus. Following Jesus always means coming under his fulfilment' (*The Sermon on the Mount* [ET London: SPCK, 1965] 71).
11. G. Wingren, 'Was bedeutet die Forderung der Nachfolge Christi in evangelischer Ethik?' *ThL* 57 (1950) 386-392. Wingren speaks of discipleship as 'ein Teil der Christusgemeinschaft, die im Glauben empfangen wird und in erster Linie ein Geschenk ist' (386).
12. The point would probably be strengthened if the calls to take up the cross were originally addressed only to Jesus' close disciples, as argued, for example, by J. C. O'Neill ('Did Jesus Teach that his Death would be Vicarious as well as Typical?' in W. Horbury and B. McNeil [ed.], *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament* [Cambridge: CUP, 1981] 9-27) and R. Schnackenburg ('Nachfolge Christi' in *Christliche Existenz nach dem Neuen Testament. Abhandlungen und Vorträge. I* [Munich: Kösel, 1967] 87-108).

The point becomes weightier when we move on to consider Paul. Because of the way in which Paul roots the imperative in the indicative, many refuse the suggestion that he envisaged the behaviour of Jesus as constituting an ethical ideal. Such a move would sever the all-important connection between obligation and the effective establishment of human righteousness  $\chi\omega\rho\iota\varsigma \epsilon\rho\gamma\omega\nu \nu\omicron\mu\omicron\nu$ . In this way it would overthrow Paul's fundamental restructuring of the relationship between human righteousness and human conduct.<sup>13</sup> It is not simply that we need to beware of a confusion of soteriology and ethics, since 'the ethical consequences of redemption do not consist in imitation but in response to what has been achieved'.<sup>14</sup> Much more is it a need to avoid any sense that the value of the person (and thus his righteousness) can be realised and guaranteed by works of the law. The status of the Christian, his stature as son and heir, is not actualised through his own works, even though such works be modelled on Christ himself. Rather, status is imputed to the ungodly in such a way that the justified sinner is first and foremost a passive recipient of righteousness, and only subsequently a doer of good works. As Luther noted in his 1519 lectures on Galatians - a classic statement of his account of the relationship between the 'inner' and the 'outer' man - 'It is not the imitation that makes sons, but the sonship that makes imitators.'<sup>15</sup>

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13. See L. Keck, 'Justification of the Ungodly and Ethics' in J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann and P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Rechtfertigung. Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann zum 70. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976) 199-209.
  14. B. Lindars, 'Imitation of God and Imitation of Christ' *Theology* 76 (1973) 401.
  15. *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan, vol. 27 (St Louis: Concordia, 1964) 263. On Luther, see E. Wolf's classic essay 'Die Christusverkündigung bei Luther' in *Peregrinatio. Studien zur reformatorischen Theologie und zum Kirchenproblem* (Munich: Kaiser, 1962<sup>2</sup>) 30-80, esp. 37-38, 73-74, 77. The ontology of Paul's and Luther's account of the relationship between person and works is explored in E. Jüngel, 'Die Welt als Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit', in *Unterwegs zur Sache. Theologische Bemerkungen* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972) 206-233.

Once we begin, then, to set the Christian life in the context of participation in the benefits of Christ's finished work, characteristic Protestant reserves about imitation language fall into place. Two further considerations, moreover, add weight to the case.

First, imitation language is sometimes criticised because it directs our attention towards the actions of men rather than the prior agency of God. In an important essay on Paul's ethical thought, Eberhard Jüngel argues that 'a Christian doctrine of conduct oriented primarily to the conduct of man is from the outset disoriented'.<sup>16</sup> For at the heart of Paul's ethics lies his affirmation that 'I through the law have died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:19-20). In much Protestant, and particularly Lutheran, theological ethics, to 'die to the law' is in effect to reverse the relationship of consequence between human agency and human value. The real ethical question is thus no longer 'what is to be done?' but rather the two-fold question 'what has been done?' and 'what remains to be done?'.<sup>17</sup> To begin, via the language of imitation, to draw attention to man's moral agency may be to turn the gospel into a *nova lex*, and so undermine its character as an unconditional and freely-offered transformation of the situation of the doer of the law.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the notion of *imitatio Christi* may be bound up with a deficient Christology. Partly this is because the language of imitation often appears to envisage Jesus Christ as simply an exemplar whose work is the revelation of the perfect love of God for men and the

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16. E. Jüngel, 'Erwägungen zur Grundlegung evangelischer Ethik im Anschluss an die Theologie des Paulus', in *Unterwegs zur Sache* 237.

17. Jüngel ('Erwägungen') uses the contrast between these questions as the basis of his exposition.

18. Cf. H. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics I. Foundations* (ET London: Black, 1968) 96; W. Kreck, *Grundfragen christlicher Ethik* (Munich: Kaiser, 1975) 81, 124-139.



demonstration of a perfect human response to that love. Such a theology, usually (and mistakenly) associated with Abelard,<sup>19</sup> accords neither with Paul's understanding of the justification of the ungodly, of the weak who may not attain God, nor with any understanding of Jesus as the embodiment of the Kingdom of God rather than a mere rabbi. But more than this, imitation language may make it acutely difficult to state the distinction between Christ and the Christian, since it may imply that human morality is in some sense an extension or continuation of his work rather than a testifying to it in properly human and derivative action.<sup>20</sup> W. A. Beardslee notes that 'it is of the highest importance for Paul that Jesus was a man, but the work of God in the Man, Christ Jesus, is quite different from God's work in other men'.<sup>21</sup> Where the difference is overlooked, as in cults of martyrdom or in the so-called 'mysticism of the cross',<sup>22</sup> Christ and the Christian are confused, and the result is inadequate both as an account of atonement and as a theology of morality.

If this survey is at all correct, it suggests that we need to be cautious indeed in giving weight to the notion of the imitation of Christ, since it can apparently be abused in such a way as to sap the Christological foundations of the New Testament's account of man as moral agent. Yet even if we accept large tracts of this critique, the concept of the imitation of Christ remains, I propose, one of the chief ways in which we can get purchase on the problem of human historical action. To this point we now turn.

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19. The justice of this interpretation of Abelard is thoroughly called into question by R. E. Weingart in *The Logic of Divine Love* (Oxford: OUP, 1970). See also A. E. McGrath, 'The Moral Theory of the Atonement', *SJT* 38 (1985) 205-220.
  20. Kreck develops Barth's theme of ethics as testimony in *Grundfragen* 128.
  21. *Human Achievement and Divine Vocation in the Message of Paul* (London: SCM, 1961) 131. Similarly, Mark 'always distinguishes between the disciple and Jesus ... the position of Jesus is unique' (Best, *Following Jesus* 248).
  22. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (ET London: SCM, 1974) 32-81.

## III

At the outset, it needs to be emphasised that human obligation is intrinsic to a specifically Christian account of what God has done for us in Christ. That is to say, the writers of the New Testament do not envisage the relation of Christians to the objective ground of their salvation in such a way that what the Christian believer does is unimportant. The charge of antinomianism sometimes levelled against Paul's theology (in effect if not in intention) is to be refuted along lines such as these.<sup>23</sup> In rejecting the law as a means of salvation, Paul is not suggesting that 'there is ever a time when God ceases to be interested in the moral life of his children or to require their wholehearted allegiance'.<sup>24</sup> Rather, he is rejecting the moral strategy which uses the law as part of a project of self-justification. To say that 'by works of the law shall no-one be justified' is assuredly to reduce to rubble any notion that works in fulfilment of obligation guarantee our relation to God, the source of obligation. But it is not to say that obligation itself is somehow abolished, or that forgiveness relaxes the demands of God and so simply by-passes penitence.<sup>25</sup>

If this is so, then any account of 'life in Christ' will be deficient if it does not seek to describe the ways in which human beings act in response to obligation, and how their actions are intrinsic to what we understand of their character as persons. For any talk about human obligation remains very abstract and formal if it does not actually specify the shape that human life takes in entering into God's revealed purpose. Yet it is

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23. On this see J. Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (London: Black, 1954) 141-159, and esp. his *The Ethic of Jesus in the Teaching of the Church* (London: Epworth, 1962).
  24. C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation. A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1985) 35.
  25. See C. F. D. Moule, 'Obligation in the Ethic of Paul' in *Essays in New Testament Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982) 261-277, and Barrett, *Freedom* 53-90.

precisely this which some accounts of the material fail to achieve. In his important discussion of *Faith and Sanctification*, for example, G. C. Berkouwer so emphasises the antecedent grace of God that he is led to propose that 'sanctification is not a "process", certainly not a moral process, but it is being holy in Christ and having part, through faith, in his righteousness. The imperative in Paul is identical with: Believe!'<sup>26</sup> Such a definition fails to persuade because it is, in the end, idealist: it does not lodge the moral life in the continuities of human historical existence, or give any sort of contour or extension to human life as lived in obedience to God's will.<sup>27</sup> My counter-suggestion is that a proper handling of the notion of imitation enables us to get some way towards specifying both the content of obligation and the shape of human morality. For above all it is required that we avoid what Otto Weber calls 'pneumatological docetism'.<sup>28</sup> By this he means a clear separation of the person of the Christian from his works 'in which works would no longer be the work of a person, but an event independent of the person, so that they could be described but would never need to be the object of someone's responsibility'.<sup>29</sup> Weber's point is an acute one, and identifies very clearly a tendency in some Protestant theological ethics whereby the subject as agent with duration through history all but vanishes, displaced by the sole agency of Christ. How might the notion of imitation help us to overcome this?

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26. *Faith and Sanctification* (ET Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 104.

27. The lack of an adequate sense of human continuity in some Protestant discussions of sanctification is noted in G. Outka, *Agape. An Ethical Analysis* (London: Yale University Press, 1972) 233-255, and S. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio: Trinity University, 1975).

28. *Foundations of Dogmatics. I* (ET Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 322.

29. *Ibid.*

It is, of course, quite clear that imitation cannot be divorced from conformity, for otherwise the relationship of indicative and imperative becomes very disordered. The indicative possesses a certain finality independent of its realisation in subsequent conduct. Nevertheless, the imperative is intrinsic to the indicative; as Allen Verhey puts it, 'The indicative has an important priority and finality in the proclamation of the gospel, but the imperative is by no means merely an addendum to the indicative or even exactly an inference drawn from the indicative. Participation in Christ's cross and resurrection (the important priority of the indicative) and anticipation of the new age of God's unchallenged sovereignty (the important finality of the indicative) are constituted here and now by obedience to God's will (the imperative)'.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, imitation is intrinsic to conformity, whose meaning for the configuration of human life is articulated imperatively, as well as indicatively. To spell this out, I wish to look in a little detail at the controversial passage Philippians 2:5-11, and then more generally at the relation of baptism and ethics in the theology of Paul.

(i) It is well-known that Ernst Käsemann's highly significant 'critical analysis' of Philippians 2:5-11 has made it increasingly difficult to maintain an ethical interpretation of that passage.<sup>31</sup> Käsemann understands the hymn as a 'setting forth of the event of

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30. *The Great Reversal. Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 104-105. See further V. P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 224-227, and H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of his Theology* (ET London: SPCK, 1977) 253-265.
  31. 'Kritische Analyse von Phil 2,5-11' in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960<sup>3</sup>) 51-95. Käsemann's case is amplified and defended in R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983<sup>2</sup>) and finds expression in his *Philippians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980<sup>2</sup>) *ad loc.*

salvation'<sup>32</sup> from glory in eternity to exaltation through obedience. The function of the hymn is not to hold up the conduct of Jesus as an example of virtue, but rather to reinforce the truth that the Philippians are 'in Christ' and therefore already participants in the sphere of salvation-history. The ἐν Χριστῷ of verse 5 is thus not to be understood 'paradigmatically'<sup>33</sup> but rather as meaning 'in the domain of Christ'.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the paraenesis of the passage is not grounded in the ethical model of Christ's own behaviour but in the Lordship of the exalted Saviour: as those who are 'in the domain of Christ', Christians are to live in submission to the one who is 'the new man, and so lord of the new world'.<sup>35</sup>

The cogency of Käsemann's case derives from his stout refusal to allow for a Christian ethos detached from the 'Heilsgeschehen'. As Professor Morna D. Hooker expresses it, 'The behaviour which is required of those who are in Christ is required of them - and possible for them - precisely because they are in Christ, and their being in Christ depends on the saving acts proclaimed in the Gospel'.<sup>36</sup> But, as she goes on to argue, it is not necessary to infer from that state of affairs that we are faced with a choice between 'an interpretation implying that Christian behaviour is simply a case of following Jesus' and 'the conviction that the passage is to be understood only as a recital of saving acts to which the Church responds in adoration'.<sup>37</sup>

The core of the debate is thus whether we allow any intrinsic connexion between Christological-soteriological affirmations and affirmations about human morality. There is, I suggest, a good deal of weight in

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32. 'Analyse' 91.

33. *Ibid.* 90.

34. *Ibid.* 91.

35. *Ibid.* 94.

36. 'Philippians 2:6-11' in E. E. Ellis and E. Grässer (ed.), *Jesus und Paulus. Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 156.

37. *Ibid.*

Edvin Larsson's objection that Käsemann's interpretation proposes 'an unexpected sharpness of division between the fact of redemption and the derivative paraenesis'.<sup>38</sup> Not only is this uncharacteristic of Paul, but it coarsens the delicate arrangement of indicative and imperative which we find here as elsewhere in his writings. For Käsemann's insistence that 'the hymn is dealing with eschatology and soteriology and not ethics'<sup>39</sup> underplays the imperative in such a way as to make both human action and the character of Jesus virtually redundant.

It reduces the significance of human action by envisaging statements about the Christian's being 'in Christ' as purely indicative and not entailing the transformation of human character. Ethics is effectively reduced to acknowledgement of Christ's Lordship; the obedience to that lordly reign, which Käsemann sees as the human response to the soteriological drama, appears to be an almost disembodied state, and certainly not something recognisable as a human course of action, a virtue, or the disposition of a subject in history. Once again, the subject as agent has all but vanished.

'We become obedient,' writes Käsemann, 'not through an example (*Vorbild*) but through the word which testifies that we belong to him'.<sup>40</sup> The problem with this account of Christian obedience is partly that it seems unnecessarily to ease the tension of the present era of co-existence between the old and new ages. 'The imperative acknowledges that Christians are still threatened by the powers of the old age, though their doom is sure, and therefore that they are responsible for holding fast to the life that is given them in Christ against the powers of sin and death'.<sup>41</sup> But

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38. *Christus als Vorbild. Eine Untersuchung zu den paulinischen Tauf- und Eikontexten* (Uppsala: ASNU, 1962) 234.

39. 'Analyse' 94.

40. *Ibid.* 95.

41. Verhey, *Reversal* 105. See also the discussion of obedience in Furnish, *Theology* 226, 227. It remains an open question whether in Philippians 2 'eschatology is collapsed into the present "experience" of the acclaimers who offer their tribute to the already glorified Lord' (Martin, *Carmen* xxviii). See further O. Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6-11* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976); J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I* (ET London: SCM, 1971) 310 (on 'provisional enthronement').

whatever view be taken of the handling of eschatology in the enthronement verses of the hymn, Käsemann seems to envisage the relation of Christians to the Lord Christ in such a way that their response is not essentially moral, since there is, again, nothing left to be done but to acknowledge. But, to quote Professor Hooker again, the 'interchange' between Christ and the Christian does not take place 'automatically. It is necessary, not only for Christ to identify himself with us, but for us to identify ourselves with him. Our union with Adam is involuntary and automatic, but our union with Christ is the result of a deliberate act on our part, and therefore not completely analogous'.<sup>42</sup> And if this is so, 'the sufferings of Christ are no substitute for ours, but a pattern to which we need to be conformed'.<sup>43</sup> In terms of our understanding of Paul's paraenesis in Philippians 2, this means that it is difficult to justify a reading of the passage which makes the life of Christian obedience anything less than a chosen human policy. 'The salvation-event ... is not some sort of soteriological-spiritual "natural happening"; rather the obedience proclaimed in the hymn must be - in our eyes paradoxically - carried out by men ... Participation in the lordship of the Christ, in the salvation-event, happens where a concrete human historical being is prepared for ὑπακοή and ταπεινοφροσύνη'.<sup>44</sup>

Over against Käsemann, then, I am suggesting, first, that Philippians 2 implies the fact of the Christian life as involving the obedient action of the believer. My second suggestion is that here Paul gives clues not

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42. 'Interchange and Suffering' in Horbury and McNeil (ed.) *Suffering* 71.
  43. *Ibid.* 82. Note, too, her remark that 'life in Christ is not, as Paul sees it, simply a case of being on the receiving end of God's redemptive act; nor is it simply a question of Christians modelling their lives on the example of Christ' (*Pauline Pieces* [London: Epworth, 1979] 81).
  44. H. D. Betz, *Nachfolge und Nachahmung*, 167. For Betz this constitutes the presence of the 'unmythical, ungnostic, historical', what he calls the '"ethicising" of the myth' (*ibid.*).

simply to the fact of the Christian life but also to its shape. It is contoured by reference to the historical existence of the Saviour and not merely by an abstract 'salvation-event'.

Some recent interpreters have, as is well-known, drawn attention to the significance of the word 'Ἰησοῦς in verses 5 and 10.<sup>45</sup> The subtle difference between ἐν Χριστῷ and ἐν Χριστῷ 'Ἰησοῦ is important because the addition of the earthly name 'Jesus' connects the paraenesis to an observable human career. This is not, of course, to say that Paul is simply putting forward a *Vorbildsethik*. But it is to say that he evinces some interest in delineating the character of life in Christ. 'The life which should be demonstrated in the lives of those who are ἐν Χριστῷ, which is possible only because of the salvation-events, is precisely the kind of life seen in Jesus Christ'.<sup>46</sup> Jesus Christ is not here envisaged simply as a lordly redeemer whose authority is confessed, but as one whose human history is to be impressed on the histories of those who participate in his life.

The reasons why that point is sometimes overlooked are complex. Foremost among them may be the persistence in one of its various forms of the conviction that Christology is not about the life which Jesus lived. 'It is only the dogma that the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith belong in separate compartments that leads to the belief that the appeal to a Christian

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45. E.g. C. F. D. Moule, 'Further Reflexions on Philippians 2:5-11' in W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (ed.), *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970) 264-276; Hooker, 'Philippians' 154; J.-F. Collange, *The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians* (ET London: Epworth, 1979) 106.
46. Hooker, 'Philippians' 154; cf. her *Pauline Pieces* 80, and G. Bornkamm, 'Zum Verständnis des Christushymnus Phil. 2,6-11' in *Studien zu Antike und Urchristentum* (Munich: Kaiser, 1959) 177-187. More generally, see also F. Neugebauer, 'Das paulinische "in Christo"', *NTS* 4 (1957-8) 124-138.



character appropriate to those who are in Christ is not linked to the pattern as seen in Jesus himself'.<sup>47</sup> From this perspective, Käsemann's lordly Saviour appears to lack any historical density or extension, and so response to him is similarly not specified in terms of the fashioning of contingent human history. But behind this may lie a further dogma, characteristic of some strands of Protestantism, in which justification virtually cancels out sanctification, Christology swallows ecclesiology, and soteriology leaves ethics in suspension. If, on the other hand, the argument which I have tried to phrase has any validity, then precisely because Philippians 2:5-11 is the recital of the saving history of Jesus Christ, it is equally an exhortation to the Christian life as a life moulded by the same history.

The gospel is, then 'not a mere objective fact to be believed ... but a way of life to be accepted'.<sup>48</sup> None of this is to say that Christ is merely an exemplar or that the salvific acts of the *Kyrios* are in principle repeatable in Christians. It is merely to affirm that, in this particular context, Paul understands the gospel of Christ's saving deeds as calling forth human morality and conduct.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, Christ's action is more than vicarious: it is also evocative, or, perhaps better, provocative, in that it constitutes a summons to a properly dependent mimesis.

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47. Hooker, 'Philippians' 154. The influence of this notion on Käsemann is similarly noted by L. W. Hurtado, 'Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11' in G. P. Richardson and J. C. Hurd (ed.), *From Jesus to Paul* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1984) 113-126, and by H. T. Wrege, 'Jesusgeschichte und Jünerggeschichte nach Joh 12,20-33 und Heb 5,7-10' in E. Lohse (ed.), *Der Ruf Jesu und die Antwort der Gemeinde* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970) 286-287.
48. Hooker, 'Interchange and Suffering' 83.
49. The importance of the particular context is noted by Moule, 'Reflexions' 269, and G. N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge: CUP, 1974) 100-103.

(ii) Some interpreters envisage a baptismal setting for the Philippians 2 hymn, and this may be an appropriate point at which to move from a specific Pauline passage to look more briefly at the features of his understanding of the relationship of baptism to ethics.<sup>50</sup> The broader canvas is worth inspecting because it shows that the New Testament material on the 'imitability' of Jesus Christ is not restricted to those passages which draw on the μιμήσασθαι word-group. My suggestion is that something of the same coinherence of conformity and imitation which we found in Philippians 2:5-11 is also present in Paul's material on baptism.

There can be no doubt that the thrust of Paul's understanding of baptism is to say that human identity is not achieved through human acts but is the gift of God through union with Jesus Christ. Baptism dramatically portrays the origins of the Christian life *extra nos*, in a way which makes plain that that life is the fruit of the creative act of God and not simply of human moral dispositions. For it is in baptism that the old self is crucified (Rom. 6:6); the previous identity of the Christian is buried (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12) and a new identity is brought to life through the Christian's share in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ (Col. 2:12). In baptism we are, in short, 'made alive' (Col. 2:13).

Clearly this fundamentally shifts our perspective on human agency. The baptisand is passive, submitting to death and receiving new life; baptism for Paul is not primarily about allegiance to professed goals, nor about commitment to the prosecution of a moral policy. Nevertheless, we would be mistaken if we concluded that Paul completely detaches baptism from moral obligation. The exposition of baptism in Romans 6:3-11 is followed in verses 12 to 14 by the exhortation 'let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies'.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the allusion to baptism in Colossians 3:3 ('you have died,

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50. Käsemann hints at this ('Analyse' 95), but for a fuller account see J. Jervell, *Imago Dei* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960) 206-209.

51. See N. Gäumann, *Taufe und Ethik. Studien zu Röm 6* (Munich: Kaiser, 1967).

and your life is hid with Christ in God'), is followed by the appeal to 'put to death what is earthly in you' (v. 5) and to 'put on' (v. 12) Christian virtues. 'Baptism', as R. Schnackenburg suggests, 'is the place where every individual shares in salvation, where he enters into communion with Christ and becomes a member of the "Body of Christ". But it is precisely this deeply significant sacramental act itself which is for St Paul the point of insertion of moral obligation'.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, for Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus, in which the Christian participates at baptism, do not simply originate human morality. They also characterise its pattern of growth. Jesus' history, abbreviated to the focal points of death and resurrection, thus furnishes the objective possibility of the new life of the Christian believer and its structure as a form of human conduct. These focal points 'disclose for Paul not simply the basis of the Christian life but also its fundamental shape and its substantive content'.<sup>53</sup> And so Paul articulates the primary character of Christian experience to be that of 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies' (2 Cor. 4:10). It is perhaps significant that the word for 'death' used here is not Paul's more usual term *θάνατος* but *νέκρωσις*, which suggests a process rather than a point. The saving events are not represented as a mere 'that', a purely objective fact simply to be acknowledged. They are, rather, events in which the apostle participates - derivatively, not in a supplementary fashion, yet in such a way that the events themselves constitute the integrating structure of Christian existence. R. Bultmann is certainly correct to distinguish Paul's statement here from Ignatius' overtly similar theology of martyrdom as imitation; but he overstates his case when he proposes that *imitatio* is 'completely foreign' to Paul.<sup>54</sup> For, as Professor Hooker remarks à propos of Colossians 1:24, 'If Christ died for

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52. *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (ET London: Burns and Oates, 1965) 270.

53. Ogletree, *Use* 151. For further treatment of the theme, see R. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967).

54. 'Ignatius and Paul' in *Existence and Faith* (ET London: Collins, 1964) 328.

all, this means, not only that all have died, but that they must continue to work out the meaning of dying with Christ'.<sup>55</sup> Baptism, we might say, gives the Christian not simply his form but also his mission.<sup>56</sup>

#### IV

If the foregoing argument has any substance to it, it suggests that the notion of imitation may be helpful in specifying how the acts of Christ are both that which accomplishes human salvation and that which elicits and gives a distinctive character to the Christian life. I now offer some concluding reflections from the standpoint of systematic theology, reflections which I trust are not too detached from the exegetical observations which have gone before.

The material examined above sets before us a quite definite account of the relation of Christ to the Christian. That account has consequences not simply for the construction of theological ethics or for a theology of sanctification and the Christian life: it also has *Christological* consequences.

The very precise way in which the New Testament roots the 'imitability' of Jesus Christ in the Christian's conformity to and participation in him prohibits two theological moves. It will not allow us to envisage an absolute hiatus between Christ and the Christian, nor will it allow us to affirm their identity of being. We may not, in other words, think of Jesus Christ in such a way that he merely furnishes the occasion, stimulus or incitement to our own moral projects initiated and sustained from within ourselves. Nor may we think of Jesus Christ in such a way that he is the innermost reality of human agency such that the Christian's acts are not in any real sense his own but purely an extension of Christ's agency.

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55. 'Interchange and Suffering' 82.

56. Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Prayer* (ET London: SPCK, 1973) 48.

The Christian both is and is not his own. Perhaps one of the terms we might deploy to try and catch this precise arrangement of conformity and imitation is that of 'correspondence' or 'analogy'. The actions of man in Christ correspond to Christ's own acts. This is not, of course, to underplay the ontological distinction between Christ and the Christian; it is not to suggest some sort of community of being between Christ and his people so that Christ's acts are reduplicated through them. In this sense, at least, we may not propose any *analogia entis* lest we jettison both the uniqueness of Christ and the substantiality of man as moral agent. What we may perhaps say is that, because of their gracious participation in God through Christ, Christians are enabled to act in such a way that their acts correspond to the acts of the Saviour.

In his final and very searching writings on the reality of the Christian life Karl Barth had recourse to this language of 'correspondence' or 'analogy'.<sup>57</sup> For Barth, the language was useful above all because it enabled him to state the distinction between Christ and man in Christ in such a way that human moral agency was rendered neither autonomous nor otiose. Alongside God's prevenient gracious acts there is human action, which, for all its derivative status, 'corresponds to and is analogous to his divine act'.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps more than any other, the language of 'correspondence' expresses the sense of mutuality rooted in participation, of distinction which is not distance, which the New Testament's handling of imitation sets before us.

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57. See his *Church Dogmatics IV/4* (ET, Edinburgh: Clark, 1969) 42; *The Christian Life* (ET, Edinburgh: Clark, 1981) 170-175, with *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (ET, Edinburgh: Clark, 1956) 634-635. The most perceptive exposition of this theme in Barth is by E. Jüngel in the various essays collected as *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1982).

58. Barth, *Christian Life* 70.

The consequences of such suggestions for the construction of Christology are very significant indeed. For to talk of the imitation of Christ in this way is to talk of Jesus Christ as one whose being and acts are such that they evoke human 'correspondences' or 'analogies'. Intrinsic to our understanding of the being of Jesus Christ are his effects in the histories of the baptised. To talk of human 'correspondences' to Jesus Christ is to make a *Christological* statement.

This point emerged in our brief glance at Paul on baptism, but could be differently illustrated. Some recent writers on the theme of martyrdom in the New Testament have suggested that Jesus' death is understood as in one sense a unique martyrdom and in another sense typical and exemplary, and therefore to a degree imitable. The writings of Luke are of particular interest here. The correspondences which Luke presents between the acts of Jesus and the acts of the Spirit-filled Church have long been noted.<sup>59</sup> In an essay on "Imitatio Christi" and the Lucan Passion Narrative, B. E. Beck observes that 'we see two strands in Luke's Passion narrative, one unique and messianic, the other typical and exemplary. As a martyr Jesus dies for the cause of his own teaching in obedience to the way of life that he has laid on his disciples. In this he is their pattern'.<sup>60</sup> Or again, from another perspective J. S. Pobee's recent study of *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul* proposes that in Paul 'the martyrdom of Christ is pressed into the service of soteriology,

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59. Besides the - excessively elaborate - account in M. D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London: SPCK, 1964) 34-110, see the earlier study by G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St Luke' in D. E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), and E. E. Ellis' comments on how in Luke 'the fate of Jesus is the fate of his followers' so that they are those 'whose destiny is bound up "with" Christ' (*The Gospel of Luke* [London: Nelson, 1966] 12). Compare also A. J. Mattill, 'The Jesus-Paul Parallels and the Purpose of Luke-Acts' *NovT* 17 (1975) 15-46.
60. "Imitatio Christi" and the Lucan Passion Narrative' in Horbury and McNeil (ed.), *Suffering* 47.

christology, ecclesiology, eschatology and ethics. The emphasis is not so much on the fact of the martyrdom of Christ but rather on the implications of that fact for the relationship of God to his creation'.<sup>61</sup>

What such interpretations indicate is that parts of the New Testament will not allow us always to keep Christology neatly distinct from anthropology, ecclesiology or ethics.<sup>62</sup> This is not, of course, the same as saying that no distinction is ever appropriate, or that Christology can be collapsed into anthropology, ecclesiology or theological ethics, for the New Testament is insistent that the work of Christ is precisely that - *his* work, unique, unrepeatable, in one real sense without analogies. And so I find myself ill-at-ease with a notion which recurs in some discussions of the imitation of Christ, namely that of 'sharing Christ's experiences'. Professor Hooker, for instance, talks of life in Christ as 'a sharing in the experience of Christ'<sup>63</sup>, of an 'interchange of experience' between Christ and the believer,<sup>64</sup> and of the fact that 'the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah means a willingness to share his experiences'.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, T. W. Manson in his useful survey of New Testament teaching on the Christian life in *Jesus and the Christian* proposes that 'through the manifestation of God in Christ the Christian enters into the experience of the

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61. Sheffield: JSOT Press (1985) 92. See also G. M. Styler's analysis of the way in which Paul frequently slides between discussion of the work of Christ, the Christian's inclusion in it, and the continuing life of moral obligation, in 'The Basis of Obligation in Paul's Christology and Ethics' in B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (ed.), *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973) 175-187.

62. Best (*Following Jesus* 13) notes that the interpenetration of discipleship and Christology in Mark 'but illustrates a commonplace of systematic theology, that a christology or soteriology implies a doctrine of the Christian life and an ecclesiology'.

63. *Pauline Pieces* 81.

64. 'Interchange in Christ', *JTS* n.s. 22 (1971) 355.

65. 'Interchange and Suffering' 82.

Redeemer'.<sup>66</sup> Quite apart from the acute problems of its unqualified use of the term 'experience' in respect of a divine-human subject, such language easily neglects the all-important distinction between Christ and the Christian which the language of 'analogy' or 'correspondence' helps preserve.<sup>67</sup>

But with such qualifications, the point stands: our language about Jesus Christ includes language about human 'correspondences' to him. Christology envisaged in this way will be both existential and moral Christology. It will, that is, explicate Jesus Christ out of his character as the initiator and sustainer of human morality. This is not to reduce Jesus Christ to a mere function of certain human states of affairs. Rather it is to affirm that intrinsic to our perception of the character of Christ is his significance for human life and action.<sup>68</sup>

Crucially, that significance is not the significance of an abstract principle, but of a lived life, a determinate piece of human history, a subjectivity in action. An important aspect of the narrative of that life is that it enables Christian believers to formulate what action is appropriate for themselves: it enables policy-formation for those whose lives are bound up with that of Jesus Christ. A number

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66. London: Clarke (1967) 111.

67. It is presumably worries along these lines which lie behind the dissatisfaction expressed by many with a spirituality or theology of imitation which suggests literal mimicry of Jesus' behaviour. See, e.g., J. Moiser, 'Dogmatic Thoughts on the Imitation of Christ' *SJT* 30 (1977) 201-213, or A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (ET London: SPCK, 1953) 662-664.

68. The kind of existential Christology I have in mind is best exemplified by Barth in *Church Dogmatics* IV/4. E. Jüngel defines it as 'interpretation of the history of Jesus Christ as a history which grounds Christian existence', and thus 'interpretation of Christian existence from the horizon of the history of Jesus Christ which grounds it' ('Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe' in *Barth-Studien*, 273, 274 n. 74). This is quite different from the kind of existential Christology in, for example, S. M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (London: SCM, 1982). For a brief example of the kind of moral Christology I have in mind, see E. McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1982) 27-37.



of recent theologians have explored the significance of foundational narratives in the building of both individual and corporate identity.<sup>69</sup> Moral theologians in particular have found this a rich resource in trying to give sense to the relation between Christ and the moral life. James Gustafson, for example, suggests that 'if what God has done for us in Christ has a story that is the appropriate historical manifestation of it, a story to be found in the Gospel narratives, the story does give some shape and specification to what human purposes, actions and orders are appropriate expressions of man's own sharing in Christ's life'.<sup>70</sup> The story of Jesus, into which the believer is inserted at baptism and which is rehearsed at key points in the life of the Christian community, thus shapes the dispositions of the agent, forming his character and making him into the doer of his deeds.<sup>71</sup>

In order to perform these functions, the story of Christ's life as it is lodged in the worship, proclamation and exhortation of the Church, must be more than simply the story of salvific deeds on a mythical plane; it must include the narrative of individual choice, obedience and action, held out as furnishing both the basis and the pattern for our own deeds. Otherwise, I suggest, we may be left with no very persuasive answers to questions which perhaps trouble the systematic theologian more than the biblical scholar: 'why did the early Christians write gospels, and why four gospels?'<sup>72</sup>

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69. For a worked example, see P. Selby, *Look for the Living. The Corporate Nature of Resurrection Faith* (London: SCM, 1976), and more theoretically, A. C. Thiselton, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory' in *Believing in the Church* (London: SPCK, 1981) 45-78. For Christological perspectives, see S. W. Sykes, 'The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church' in M. D. Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation and Myth* (London: SCM, 1979) 115-127.

70. *Christ* 187.

71. See here S. Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1977) 15-39, 71-81; *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 68-89; *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: SCM, 1984) 17-49.

72. R. Morgan, 'The Hermeneutical Significance of Four Gospels' *Interpretation* 33 (1979) 376-388, has important reflections on these questions.

All this is excessively sketchy. In order to draw the threads together, let me conclude with a passage from a great, if greatly flawed, book, R. C. Moberly's *Atonement and Personality*, which remains in my judgement one of the classic statements of relating soteriology and ethics. In the penultimate chapter Moberly states how in his exposition

We were careful to avoid any semblance of the mistake of supposing that He was set up before men as a model mainly, or an object lesson; as an example chiefly or pattern, to be studied, and loved, and followed. Such phrases are not indeed untrue, - when the things of which they speak have first become possible. But the union with Him which is offered, and which is necessary, to men, is something far beyond the power of human admiration, or imitation, or even desire. It is not by becoming like Him that men will approach towards incorporation with Him: but by result of incorporation with Him, received in faith as a gift, and in faith adored, and used, that they will become like Him. It is by the imparted gift, itself far more than natural, of literal membership in Him; by the indwelling presence, the gradually disciplining and dominating influence, of His Spirit - which is His very Self within, and as, the inmost breath of our most secret being; that the power of His atoning life and death, which is the power of divinely victorious holiness, can grow to be the very deepest reality of ourselves.

And he goes on:

Such identification with Christ of the very inmost personality of each several man, may sound at first, to man's confused thought about himself, as if it were the surrender of the sovereign instincts and capacities which he fancies that his own self-conscious personality means.

But:

So far from surrendering the sovereignty of our proper personality by identification with Him; it is only in proportion to our reality of identification with Him, that we ever attain at all to that true sovereign freedom, and insight, and love, which are the essential truth of personality, the consummation of the meaning of ourselves.<sup>73</sup>