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Imitating Paul, Imitating Christ: How does imitation work as a moral concept?

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Imitation of others is not merely a matter of choosing some deeds over others but is basic to the formation of the human subject. It is really not a matter of choosing whether we will imitate someone, but who it is we will imitate.[1] The moral self is constructed from the impress of other selves: usually consisting of an amalgam of parental and societal influences. This is both a conscious and unconscious process.

Edith Wyschogrod's book *Saints and Postmodernism* is an attempt to 'revision' an ethic of exemplarity for the secular, postmodern person.[2] Taking the canons and dogmas of postmodernity as her given—especially its distaste for heteronomous discourses—Wyschogrod seeks to explore 'sainthood' as her subject because a saint is a concrete actualization as distinct from an abstract ethical theory. As she puts it, 'to lead a moral life one does not need a theory about how one should live, but a flesh and blood existent'.[3] For her, where moral *theory* is an unsatisfactory, even unworkable way of addressing matters that require action in contemporary life, narratives of saintly life overcome this difficulty by recalling and re-presenting actual embodiments of ethical *action*. However, for Wyschogrod the possibility of an *imitatio Christi* is rather troublesome:

> A background belief of virtually all Christian hagiography is that saints live their lives in the light of Christ's life. *Imitatio Christi* is the apothegm that illuminates saintly contemplation and the command that guides saintly conduct. But if this is the imperative under which Christian saints labor, there is an insuperable obstacle to the success of their efforts. The infinite wisdom, power, and goodness of Christ are not re-presentable even by a spiritual elite. To the extent that the earthly ministry and passion of Jesus are paradigmatic, they are so in and through their transcendent ground. Human nature, however, cannot conform itself to divine perfection. Thus *Imitatio Christ* is an unrealizable imperative because the life of Christ cannot be replicated.[4]

The 'insuperable obstacle' to an ethic of imitation is that Christ's moral qualities were transcendent and unique. They are not capable of represent-ation even by a saint or an apostle. In turn, they offer an unattainable moral vision to the saint's followers. Heteronomy seems to have returned. What good could such an ethic be?

As Wyschogrod recognises, imitation (especially of Christ) has deep roots in the Christian tradition.[5] It is scarcely disputable that Jesus plays a normative role in the moral reflection—indeed the self-identification—of Christians.[6] The epistles of Paul provide a substantial, ancient and (in some way) normative instance of an appeal to imitation from within this tradition. This article offers a reading of Paul's use of imitation in an attempt to shed light as to how imitation might work as a moral concept in more general terms. My claim is that this theological account of imitation as a way of thinking about ethics provides an explanatory power that surmounts the antimonies that concern Wyschogrod. In particular, Paul teaches an imitative practice which is neither restrictively heteronomous nor completely autonomous. I shall begin with a close examination of several texts from the agreed Pauline corpus (excluding Ephesians and the Pastoral epistles, where additional pertinent material may be found) in which imitation features, before proceeding to make some generalising observations.

l.i Imitating Christ
Paul appeals to his readers to imitate the model of Christ in certain specific ways without citing a mediating model of Christ-likeness in a first group of texts.

'Accept one another': Romans 15:1-9
The paraenetic section of Romans (12-16) is an outworking of the argument of the letter itself. In 15:1-9 Paul twice enlists the strategy of urging his readers to follow Christ's example. The principle he enunciates in 15:1 is addressed to the 'strong' (*hoi dynatoi*). It is hard to imagine that Paul is not fully cognizant that most of his readership will feel themselves addressed by this term, seeing themselves in the 'strong' category as over against 'the weak' (*ta asthenemata*). The use of the second person plural address lends credence to this: Paul speaks as a co-addressee of the command. 15:1 as a summative statement refers back to the previous verses about eating appropriately for the sake of the other (14:19-23); but now leads into some fresh themes.

The strong are called upon on two accounts, a positive and a negative: firstly, 'to bear with the failings of the weak' (*ton adynaton bastazein*);[7] and secondly 'not to please ourselves' (*me heautous areskein*). *bastazein* is more than just an 'enduring' or 'putting up with', but has the connotation of 'carrying', or 'taking on'. The bearing of the weaknesses of those who are weak involves, by corollary, the restraint of one's own desire to fulfil personal needs and exercise the liberties of the justified, as we see in the example of the eating and drinking given in 14:19-23. This is further clarified by the statement in verse 2 that the aim of the believer bearing with the failing of the weak is to 'please his neighbour for his good'. The carrying of the other's load has an edificatory purpose.[8] What this 'building up' (*oikodomein*) might look like is cashed out in terms of 'endurance and encouragement' (vss. 4 and 5).

How is the failing of another 'taken on', or 'borne'? It is at this point that Paul resorts to the first of his uses of the language of exemplarity, in v. 3: *kai gar ho Christos ouk heauto eresen* ('[I]ndeed Christ did not please himself'). Christ is a model of the two parts of the exhortation in vs 1: he neither pleases himself, but rather is the object of insults directed at another. At this stage, Paul appeals to a quotation from Psalm 69:9: 'The insults of the ones who insult you have fallen on me' *(hoi oneidismoi ton oneidizonton se epepsan ep'eme)*.[9] The quotation is meant to present Christ as a model of *bastazein*. The Psalm, however, speaks of the Psalmist bearing the insults that the scoffers direct against *Yhwh himself*—it is a case of identifying so strongly with Yhwh that in fact the vile words against Yhwh are felt as insults by his servant. The parallel is thus more inexact than at first appears, for, on this Messianic reading of the Psalm, the Christ is seen bearing not the failings of the weak but standing in the place *of God* as the object of human scorn and rejection. The intermediate step is of course the way in which the story of Christ's passion overlaps and resembles the underlying story of the Psalm: he was there the bearer of insults—indeed the bearer of the whole world's hostility at God.

Though the hermeneutical note in verse 4 seems to be inserted as a cover for this inexactness of comparison, I don't think it is fair to accuse Paul of merely sloppy proof-texting at this point. Neither is he making some complex Christological point about the weakness of God. The verbal idea at the heart of the comparison is similar enough to make the point, despite the difference in status between the weak whose failings are borne by the strong and the God

who has Christ bearing insults directed against him. It is the action that is perhaps more interesting in any case: Christ 'bears with' in that he represents and identifies with the object of the insults. By analogy, the action of the 'strong' ought to be to represent and identify with the weak. This 'bearing' by representation and identification with is for a specific purpose: not pleasing one's self, but the good and edification of the other.

In 15:5-6 Paul thickens the focus of his appeal in a prayer for a common mind amongst the believers, to come from the same divine source as their endurance and encouragement. The language Paul uses—*to auto phronein en allelois*—refers to a common mindset or attitude that they are to share with one another. The NRSV, NIV and ESV all translate this expression without explicit reference to the mental or dispositional activity indicated by *phronein*. However, referring to oneness of mind makes better sense of the oneness of voice with which the church is to glorify the God and Father of Jesus (v. 6).

The harmonious ecclesial life is the gift of God, but it results in further exhortation to imitate the model of Christ (v. 7): *Dio*[13] *proslambanesthe allelous kathos kai ho Christos proselabeto hymas eis doxan tou Theou*. The key verbal idea here is present imperative *proslambanesthe*, for which the rendering 'accept' (NIV) is too inert: 'receive' or 'welcome' would be better alternatives because they imply something of the complete mutuality involved in the process of bringing one another into common mind and voice as per vv. 5-6. This activity of mutual hospitality is compared (*kathos kai*) to Christ's welcome of *hymas* ('you' pl.). By *hymas* Paul particularly means to indicate the Gentile Christians. This business of their acceptance or reception in Christ has been the gist of the letter thus far. For good measure, Paul restates his theme (vs. 8-9): Christ has enacted the promises of God to the Jews in order that the Gentiles may be welcomed in and may glorify God along with his people Israel. This then is the meaning of the unity/harmony commended in vv. 5 and 6—that the Jew-Gentile divide be overcome by mutual acceptance as it was in Christ himself.

'You attitude should be the same …': Philippians 2:1-11
The famous Christological hymn in 2:5-11 is used by Paul as an illustration of humility. As in Romans 15, Paul's goal is the common mindedness of the church one with another (2:2 *hina to auto phronete to en phronountes*). They

will complete Paul's joy by realizing their fellowship with Christ by their unity of attitude. Paul explains (vs. 3-4) the inner workings of this common purpose: 'humility' (*tei tapeinophrosynei*) is the virtue that will enable it, as the Philippians eschew 'vanity' (*kenodoxian*) and 'selfish ambition' (*eritheian*). The individual is to consider primarily the interests of others ahead of her own.

In introducing Christ as an exemplar of this humility, again Paul uses the word *phroneite*: it is in 'attitude' or 'mindset' that the resemblance is to be found, not in some specific behaviour. The analogy between the believers and Christ their model is possible because, though their situations are very different and so, of course, they carry out different actions, they are to have a common attitude in their own circumstances—most particularly as they share their common life together. They are not merely to mimic his actions mindlessly, but rather to apply thoughtfully the same virtues he displayed.

Without providing a full exegesis of the hymn, we may make a few points that relate to our focus on exemplarity. The Christological hymn exalts Christ as the supreme example of humility in his self-emptying (*heauton ekenosen*). It begins from an attitude: Christ did not consider (*oukh harpagmon*) his equality with God as something to be grasped at. Rather, he 'took the form of a slave' (*morphen doulou labon*). This emptying of the self and dedication to the service of others are clearly the kind of postures that relate directly to the humility to which the Philippians have been exhorted. That the obedient humility of Christ leads even to death underscores the lengths to which they are supposed to go for the sake of the other.

The hymn ends with the exaltation of Christ to glory (vs. 10-11). The implication for the Philippians is that their obedient humility will also result in their exaltation on a lesser scale. However, Christ's exaltation is also an encouragement to them because they understand themselves to be *en christo* (2:1), participating and sharing with him in his divine life. He is not merely their exemplar; but rather becomes their exemplar because he is their Lord.

'Forgive one another …': Colossians 3:13
In one of his richest descriptions of new life in Christ, Paul appeals to the life that the Colossians have 'hid with Christ in God' (3:3) as a result of their death to the world. This life waits to be fully revealed at the coming of Christ (3:4).

The following list of practices with which they are to 'clothe' (*endysasthe*) themselves are oriented to the life of the community of believers.

In 3:13 this mutuality is to be exercised in the practice of 'gracious forgiveness' (*charizomenoi*). Whereas in Romans 15 the bearing of one with the other relates to 'weakness', here it relates to tolerance of *momphen*, or 'grievances'. These are not matters of one's conscience over and against another's; rather this involves personal hurts which would ordinarily result in the keeping of scores. The pivotal coordinating conjunctions (*kathos kai*) introduce the imitative aspect: this practice of forgiveness and bearing of the sins with other is just like the action of 'the Lord' in forgiving them (*hymin*). Already in Colossians 1:14 and 2:13-14 Paul has discussed the forgiveness of sins. Explicitly in 2:13-14 he links this with the death of Jesus on the cross. The sin-bearing aspect of Christ's action which results in forgiveness (here also *charizomenos*) informs the imitative practice demanded of the Colossians in 3:13. The event which is constitutive of the church's life is also to be the model of the church's mutual relationships. There is then, a christological vision at the heart of Paul's call to imitate Christ; which explains how it is indeed possible to imitate a model who is also held to be unique. The relationship between the imitators and the model are in Paul more complex than Wyschogrod allows.

I.ii Imitating Paul and friends (Imitating Christ)

In a second set of texts Paul deploys imitation with reference to his own model. Behind this appeal (with one exception) lies his own practice of imitating Christ, so that his life becomes a way of mediating the imitation of Christ to his readers.

'Become imitators of me …': 1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1 (with reference to 12:1ff)

In 1 Corinthains 4:6, Paul enjoins the Corinthians to imitate him, as children to a father (1 Cor. 4:15-16): *parakalo oun hymas, mimetai mou ginesthe* Timothy is charged with the task of reminding the Corinthians of Paul's manner of life for the purpose of their imitation of him (1 Cor. 4:17). Paul's own version of imitation takes a rather different path. As he says: *parakalo oun hymas, mimetai mou ginesthe*. What he would rather is that the apostles be thought of only as auxiliary to Christ (3:5, 4:1). He inverts the idea of 'belonging' in 3:22, where, contrary to the sophist-style claim ego Paulos, he has the teachers belonging to the disciples: *panta hymon*. His depiction of the

apostolic ministry in 4:8-13 is designed as to contrast with the overweening pride of the Corinthians in their spiritual success. Paul suggests that the suffering of the apostles is intentionally a piece of divine theatre (4:9), staged by God in order once again to undermine the human discourses of wisdom, power and status. Though Paul does not make this link explicitly, in their becoming *peripsema* ('the dregs' 4:13) they are demonstrating their cruciformity, in keeping with their message.

It is not that Paul completely eschews any pattern of relationship with the Corinthians that recognizes his authoritative role as Christ's appointed servant. He is happy to be labelled a *oikonomos* ('steward' or 'manager' 4:1) of his message, required to be trustworthy in his task. He admits that it was with some expertise that he laid the foundation of the church in Corinth (3:10). Paul also makes appeal to his special paternal relationship with the Corinthians (4:14-21), because of his bond of love for them. He is not merely the *paidagogos* ('guardian' 4:15) who deploys the stick of discipline (4:21), but the father who admonishes his children (*en agapei pneumati te praytetoi*)'in gentleness', that they might mature. Thus, when Paul makes a direct appeal to the Corinthians to imitate *hodous mou tas en Christoi* ('my ways in Christ') in 4:16-7, he has already turned aside his own status. To imitate him is to imitate one who regards himself as lowly, even nothing: but to imitate one who is committed in love for the good of the other.

It is in 1 Corinthians 11:1 that he most explicitly points to his own imitation of Christ as that which the Christian should imitate. Paul urges the Corinthians *to mimetai mou ginesthe kathos ka'go Christou*: 'Be imitators of me, just as I am of Christ'. Paul's invitation to imitate him is an invitation to imitate Christ in him. This second call to imitation is the climax of his discussion of the way in which freedom and rights are to be exercised in the Christian community. Paul describes his own example: he refused the payment that was his due for the sake of preaching the gospel (9:1-27). Again, a pattern emerges which is consciously cruciform. Christ is the supreme model of laying down one's rights *for the other*. The cross is an object of shame, no doubt. But Paul displays this horrifying mark of the gospel with pride as an antidote to the Corinthian theology of glory.

In his imitation of Christ, Paul has in mind the purpose that many (*ton pollon*) might be saved—he acts, as he says, (*hina sothosin*) (10:33). It is not just

suffering *per se* that is to be imitated, but the giving up of one's rights for this particular purpose and for another's sake. His laying down of his rights as an apostle are analogous to Jesus' sacrificial self-offering, though Paul does not see what he does as the source of the Corinthians' salvation. Likewise, they are to act so as to ensure the salvation of others—not imagining that they resemble Christ in actually procuring their salvation. Christ's death builds the church by being for the good of the other—Paul goes on to speak of how the Corinthians ought to 'build up' (*oikodomeo*) the body of Christ by acting for the other's good (chs. 12-14).

In chapter 12 the 'body' metaphor provides a rejoinder to the accusation that there is a suppression of difference in the Pauline vision of the church. While aberrant sexual conduct is rebuked on the grounds that it is unholy (5:1-13; 6:9-20), comparatively more space is spent by Paul addressing behaviour that directly threatens the social cohesiveness of the group. However, he does not do so on behalf of the powerful over the weak. On the contrary, he upholds the mutual interdependence of the genders (11:11-12) and of the congregation members, one with another (12:12ff). The comical picture of various body parts issuing declarations of independence (12:15) radically undercuts the suggestion made by Elizabeth Castelli that Paul's call to follow Christ is about conformity and/or control. So the imitation of Christ in 1 Corinthians takes place in echo of his work on their behalf on the cross. Their imitation of Paul, and Jesus in Paul, takes place in the context of their new identity as Christ's body/the temple of the Holy Spirit. Their proposed imitation of Jesus is to occur on the basis of their identity with him and their incorporation into him.

It is worth noting that in one further matter Paul wishes that the Corinthians would imitate him: singleness. He writes, while addressing marriage: *thelo pantas anthropous einai hos kai hemauton* ('I wish that everyone were as I am myself' 7:7), that is to say, unmarried. The reason he gives is the urgency of the times (7:26f). Yet despite his personal wish, he holds back from this and concedes that it is not wise for all to be under this command. He does not make an appeal to the example of Christ in this.

'You became imitators': 1 Thessalonians 1:6
In 1 Thessalonians, Paul uses imitation-language and concepts to describe *what is already the case* among the Thessalonians—as a point of encourage-

ment rather than as an exhortatory strategy. In chapter 1:5 he cites his (and Silas's and Timothy's) manner of life among them as a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit *for them*. In verse 6, then, Paul describes the way in which the Thessalonians picked up his pattern of life and, with it, that of Christ (*Hymeis mimetai hemon egenesthe kai tou Kyriou*). They 'became imitators'. Not ever having encountered the pre-resurrection Jesus, the *kai* implies a relationship of result:[24] in imitating Paul and his friends, the Thessalonians were able to discern the pattern of life that was Christ's and so to effectively imitate Christ *via* this apostolic mediation.

What was the content of this imitation? The proximate verses refer to their reception of the word (*ton logon*) with joy in the midst of the accompanying affliction (*en thlipsei*).[25] Suffering is a key link, of course, to Christ (for Paul); and so it is here. They copied Paul in their faithful response to the gospel. This reading is further established by what follows: the Thessalonians in their turn became a 'model' or 'example' (*typon*) for all the believers in the wider region. Report of their 'faith in God' is what has become known (1:8). This faith in God is further expounded in 1:9-10 as Paul describes their hospitality, their renunciation of idols and their eschatological hope. This pattern of behaviour and attitudes, this manner of life, is only related to the model of Christ through the single aspect of faithful response to the word of God amidst affliction. The mediation of the example via the apostolic band narrows the possibilities in which this imitation is envisaged.

'We were not idle …': 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

In 2 Thessalonians we find again the authorial 'we'—the letter is addressed from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy (1:1). His appeal to copy the model of the apostolic band this time centres on the issue of diligence. In 3:6 he commands the Thessalonians to eschew the company of idle (*ataktos*) fellow-believers. By contrast, the behaviour that the Thessalonians ought to imitate is represented by Paul and his friends (vs. 7), who were not a burden to anyone. They did not demand their right (*exousian*) to support. In fact, this is the heart of the imitative paradigm in this instance: Paul and his friends worked hard without claiming their rights for the very purpose of providing a model for the Thessalonians to imitate (*hina heautos typon domen hymin eis to mimesthai hemas*, 3:9). Clearly the 'work' referred to is not some special use of work in the sense of Paul's ministry, but secular labour. The call to imitation is

accompanied by a stern command here: the community is to deal harshly with those who are not paying their own way. Though there is an underlying principle of free grace in his gospel, Paul seems anxious lest this lead to inertia and irresponsibility. That was not his way with them; so it was not to be their way with each other either. He worked hard, so as to preserve the integrity of his mission. Notably in this instance there is no explicit christological reference. However, the traces of Paul's logic in Romans 15 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 are here; in those passages he *does* apply his christology to the matter of rights and exercise of freedom.

In inviting others to imitate his own example Paul is allowing for the practice of mediating the example of Christ. He also shows the diversity of applications that this imitation may have in the life of the church.

l.iii Imitating the Church (Imitating Paul/Imitating Christ)

The third set of texts offer a more diffuse conception of imitation. Paul invites imitation of the behaviour of one church or group of Christians by another as Christ's example or his own are refracted to them.

'I want to test the earnestness of your love …': 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

2 Corinthians is one of Paul's most complex pieces of argument and certainly his most pained epistle. In the eighth chapter Paul attempts to encourage and shame the Corinthians into a more generous contribution to the churches in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:31). The context, then, is a test of Paul's mission to the Gentiles in displaying concretely their concern for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.[27] Though this concern is not at the forefront here, it does lend a certain urgency to Paul's rhetoric. His first point of comparison is the outstanding generosity of the Macedonian churches (8:1-4). Their generosity is described in excessive terms. The point of the comparison comes in 8:8, where Paul says that 'through the sincerity of others' (*dia tes heteron spoudes*), in other words, by comparison with theirs, he is making a test of the Corinthians' love. The Macedonians are certainly making their contribution from their joyful understanding of the evangelical message: can the Corinthians display the fruit of their understanding? This is the point of a further call to imitation, this time based on the model of Christ, in 8:9. They are to consider something they know: the 'kind generosity' or 'grace' of the Lord Jesus Christ (*ten charin tou Kyriou hemon Iesou Christou*). Is Christ the gift or the giver?[28] As the

following clauses explain, in a sense he was both: it was his act of becoming poor 'for your sakes' (*di' hymas*) that enacted the gift described. The chiasm (i.e. 'rich'…'poor'/'poverty'…'rich') has as its hinge *hina*: the second part of the chiasm is the purpose of the first. The rich Christ becomes poor with the purpose of making the poor Corinthians rich. There is a free use of 'rich/poor', literally and as a metaphor, here. On the one hand, Paul is urging the Corinthians to a generosity with literal money and possessions. On the other, he is explaining that the Corinthians are now 'rich' in a spiritual sense, in that they have heard the 'treasure' (4:7) of Paul's gospel, and have received the benefits of the Spirit (1:22; 5:5) as a heavenly bond; in his becoming human, by contrast, Christ became 'poor'. The analogy between Christ and the Corinthians, certainly inexact, is possible because the verbal idea of giving generously is the same, and because it is done *for the sake of* the other. The link between the two acts of giving is seen at work in the Macedonians: they have understood their *spiritual* indebtedness to Christ; and this results in a free generosity with their *worldly* possessions.

'Join together in imitating me': Philippians 3:1-21

In Philippians 3:1-21 Paul tells his own story as a model for the believers. It is his entire identity that he puts on display here for emulation. There is a structural resemblance here to the Christological hymn (2:5-11): Paul could by rights have confidence in the flesh on account of his birth and his rigorous observance of *torah*. However, he is determined to consider these things worthless next to knowing Christ; he considers himself rather to have a righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ. He expresses the desire that he himself might become 'like Christ in his death' (*symmorphizomenoi toi thanatoi autou*), so that he might experience the power of his resurrection. Perseverance is then the theme of verses 13-14.

When Paul comes to appeal to his own example in 3:17, he is able to point also to the example of others who are already doing so. This is in order to overcome the difficulty of his physical absence from them—he cannot 'perform' before them the model he wants them to perform in their turn. They are collectively to imitate him (*symmimetai mou ginesthe*), observing also (*skopeite*) those who already 'walking' (*peripatountas*) according to his 'example' (*typon*). Paul's eschatological hope especially looms large in his exhortation. In this way the particulars of Paul's own performance of following Christ are dissipated

somewhat and read instead in terms of attitudes and cast of mind—his particular longings and also his self-description come into play here.

'You … became imitators of God's churches …': 1 Thessalonians 2:13-15

Paul commends the Thessalonians for their following of an example (2:13-15). Once again, Paul's theme is the reception of his gospel as the powerful word of God. They became, he says, 'imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea'. There is a collective imitation at work here: one *group* resembles another *group*. It is clearly an honour to be so described: the church in Judea is clearly 'nearer the source', so to speak. The analogy consists in the fierce rejection that both groups experienced from their fellow countrymen (vs. 14). Both groups can claim that their faith has been tested under trial. By citing others individually and collectively as imitators of Christ Paul shows that the notion is not restricted merely to his own manner of life. Further, as he conceives it, true *imitatio* may be enacted by one group to another

II

Having shaken these textual trees, what ethical fruit can be gathered? The texts I have examined are by nature occasional and do not provide a systematic ethical theory. However, seven themes or leitmotifs are discernible in Paul's writings around the idea of ethical mimesis. In outlining these themes I shall enlist the help of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar, from within the Catholic tradition that has been so fascinated with the *imitatio Christi*, offers a very positive account of this theme while allowing no purchase at all for Protestant critics (like Barth)[29] who complain that the traditional Catholic account overlooks the priority of divine action in sanctification or internalizes it in a mystical direction in the manner of Thomas á Kempis. For this reason his compressed piece 'Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics' (to which we have already referred) makes a useful point of reference in the current discussion.

First: *imitation necessitates a mediation of the original. Mimetes* is a theatrical image; it involves viewing the life of an exemplar as performed and performable. I use the word 'viewing' quite deliberately, because the idea of imitation involves *observation* of the exemplar. In Paul's usage we see him exhorting others to perform the pattern of Christ's life in their own lives. However, Paul's readers had never seen Jesus of Nazareth performing—indeed, possibly neither had Paul himself (at least, not from a disciple's point of

view).[30] His appeal in several cases is to follow the example of Christ as it is has been observed in his own manner of life and that of others (e.g. 1 Thess. 1). He very rarely uses his own example of performing Christ in isolation from that of others.[31] More often than not he points to the way in which others (his colleagues, or other churches, or other individuals) also imitate Christ. For Paul, the lines of imitation are mediated in multiple and complex ways as they radiate out from Christ. The would-be imitator had any number of visible performances of Christ to observe. Indeed, the imitator may in turn become a model for someone else; and the members of the church may perform Christ to one another. A whole church may be a commendable example of Christ-like behaviour worthy of imitation in their turn (as in 2 Cor. 8, 1 Thess. 2).

The problem that needs to be overcome is the absence of Christ in the first instance and secondly of Paul himself. The letters themselves serve to mediate the patterns of life and attitudes that Paul wants replicated. They attempt this substitution of presence either by recalling the examples of the apostolic band or by describing briefly an aspect or an outline of the christological drama.[32] At the one time Paul and his colleagues must embody Christ to the churches; but at the same time deny that they have imitated him such that his uniqueness becomes dubious (which of course is Wyschogrod's concern). This is achieved by the delineation of multiple means of mediating Christ, which point to a reality greater than the individual mediations. Paul's use of *kathos* in several of our texts (e.g. 1 Cor. 4:17, 11:1, Phil. 3:17 etc), if taken to mean 'in so far as', may suggest that he is aware that not everything in him is imitative of Christ, which calls for an exercise of discrimination on the part of his readers.

However (our second point): *imitation involves a pattern of authority deriving from the model (via mediation) to the imitator/s*. Christ is not just any example, of course: he is 'Lord', the one who Paul repeatedly exalts as incomparable in power and authority. Paul's use of mimesis occurs in the context of his authoritative apostolic address to the churches (e.g. 1 Cor. 4).[33] He passes on an imitation of Christ that is refracted through the lens of the gospel which he claims he was authoritatively commissioned to preach: he only has authority (as he sees it) as it derives from this source. The Christ that Paul calls the churches to imitate is the Christ he preached: the incarnate Son of God, the crucified Messiah and the risen and ascendant Lord (see Rom 1:1-5). This was the Christ he felt that he *lived* and wanted others also to live. There

is, then, an interpretative process in Paul's imitative ethic to which a claim for authority adheres. Notably, he focuses on the suffering Christ of the cross (Rom. 15; 1 Cor. 4, 11; Col.. 3; 1 Thess. 1, 2) and to a lesser extent on the incarnation (2 Cor. 8, Phil. 2).[34] Paul exercises his authoritative interpretation of Christ by means of a selective focus on the death of Jesus. This was the event above all—this aspect of Jesus' life more than any other—that was the catalyst for his mission to the Gentiles. His appeal to emulate Christ in the manner of his death is entirely commensurate with his call to respond to the gospel of which Christ's death was the substantial core.

Balthasar makes the further, essentially christological point that in the Christian ethic for which Jesus Christ is the 'concrete categorical imperative', the tension between heteronomy and autonomy is surmounted.[35] As the divine Son, Christ responds autonomously to the Father; and yet as man he affirms the divine will. Philippians 2:5-11 narrates the autonomous submission of Christ to the heteronomy of the Father's will, and his resulting exaltation. In this he is the supreme and universal example for human life with God and other people. For Balthasar, Christ's divinity is the hinge around which this turns—

> where Christ's divinity is not recognized, he necessarily appears as a human exemplar, and Christ's ethic becomes either heteronomous, where Christ becomes simply an obligatory norm for my conduct, or autonomous, to the extent that his actions are interpreted merely as the achieved self-perfection of the human ethical subject.[36]

That is, Christ as imitative norm empowers a free action in the imitator that really belongs to her as her own action. This in turn means that, third, *identification precedes imitation*. In calling believers to imitate the crucified Messiah, Paul is making appeal to that which is constitutive of their identity, corporately and individually. In his use of imitation, Paul does not merely appeal to a noble exemplar from the antique past. He does not even make appeal to Old Testament examples in this imitative mode.[37] Rather, he directs the attention of his readers to that event in salvation–history that brought them into mutual relationship with one another. This is not an identity that they are seen as having self-selected, but rather an identity that has come to them from without, as a gift. For example, forgiveness of sins—that act of Christ's which admitted them into fellowship with God and with one another—is now

something to be replicated in an ongoing way between them (Col.. 3:13). The same could be said of Christ's laying down of his rights and his 'riches' (1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Cor. 8). Christ's death as the means by which Jew and Gentile come to be reconciled to one another is a particular theme (Rom. 15 *et al*): the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God in the death of Christ results in the necessity of a new practice of mutual forbearance and acceptance. Paul's call to his example (1 Cor.) is to be grasped in the context of his identification of the church as Christ's body. The imitative practice of Paul's churches is not to be a following of a model that is incidental to who they are, nor even in an action that is incidental to who they are. It is to echo him in the very attitude (namely Christ's) and the very action that made it possible for them to be addressed as 'in Christ'. Balthasar makes this point emphatically by speaking of the way in which 'both Christ's Person and work are at all times present and operative in us, and we too are continually made present in Christ'.[38]

Fourth, *imitation of a model calls for mental activity, a* phronesis[39] *of analogy and imaginative performance*. Paul's ethic of imitation is not a call to ape either himself or Christ, as if an unforeseen circumstance or new situation would bring an end to Christ-like action. Rather, Paul both calls for and models the process of analogous reflection on Christ's example. He does this by focusing on attitudes or casts-of-mind which are applicable in new contexts. The imitation he enjoins is part of a whole orientation of the mind in a Christ-ward direction.[40] Paul interprets his own behaviour and that of others as representative of the desired attitudes, which involves reflection on the new situation and the application of attitudes to it. An example of such a situation might be the decision whether to eat foods linked to idolatrous worship as in 1 Corinthians 8–10 (which climaxes in a call to imitation in 11:1) or not. Paul does not make reference when he might have to Jesus' practices of eating (certainly a major feature of Luke's gospel). Rather he takes as his point of reference Jesus' use of his freedom for the good of others manifest in the story of his submitting to death.[41] There is need for a deliberative process on the part of the reader to work out what actions result from the attitude invoked.

This call to *phronesis* is evidence of the liberty and dignity in which the believer now stands (in Paul's mind). There is of course an element of risk in this appeal because of the fraught distance between attitude and action. A return to cult and law would have been the safer route. Yet this precisely what Paul avoids

(see Col.. 2:1-23). Rather, as Christ freely joined his will to the will of the Father, so also the disciple is to have the freedom to confirm in her being the divine will.[42] The potential performer of Christ needs to be schooled in the mind and attitudes of Christ if he is to enact him faithfully. This explains the emphasis that Paul gives throughout his letters to the business of acquiring the knowledge of Christ.[43] Not that knowledge alone is enough: the Corinthians are severely castigated for their arrogant display of knowledge without love (1 Cor. 8:11). Neither is this the acquisition of a 'special knowledge' or the initiation into some further mystery: Paul's use of *phroneo* corresponds in part to the willing and intending part of the 'mind'—its capacity for practical, rather than merely abstract, reasoning. The responsibility to deliberate—not over right and wrong as such but as to which right is to be done—is the corollary of an evangelical liberty.

Fifth, *Paul's focus is on 'passive' virtues: humility, generosity, patient endurance, forgiveness, forbearance, suffering with joy*. If there is a common thread to be picked out from this collection of virtues it is their 'passivity'. They describe a *vita passiva*, rather than a *vita activa*. There is in common between the passages we have examined an attitude to suffering: to bear with the conditions of life and so to overcome. There is an element of cost to the agent in each of the virtues listed. This is largely because of the eschatological horizon in view. These are attitudes borne of hope; they are a bearing-with made tolerable in the light of the eschatological vindication that is already the possession of those 'in Christ' (e. g. 'forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you'). Paul speaks purely of *how* the Thessalonians responded to suffering (in 1 Thess. 1, 2). The Christian imitating Christ waits patiently *for God* to act.[44]

Sixth, *the direction of imitative practice is towards the good of the other*. The point of imitating Christ is to seek the good of the other, as Christ did. This may mean a kind of 'vicarious representative action',[45] or a willingness to bear something on someone else's behalf. This 'bearing' is broadly defined—it may as unremarkable as the giving of a financial gift. What one may have to suffer may even be as a result of the behaviour of the one for whom one suffers it. It is not merely a case of protecting another from malevolent consequences, but rather seeks the *edification* of the other. The other's burden is to be eased in order that her endurance may be easier and her performance of Christ might be enhanced. Hostility and enmity are to be absorbed rather than returned.

Seventh, the *goal of imitating Christ is the edification of the church*. 'We are given a personal awareness of being a "we".'[46] The orientation of Paul's call to imitation is towards the Christian community and for its collective benefit. There is, as Balthasar puts it, 'an explicitly ecclesial dimension for the believer' in being brought into the fellowship of God himself.[47] The common-mindedness that the Christians are to find is so as to enhance their mutual life. It has no outward orientation in the first instance; but first of all is to be a feature of the gathered people of God, both Jew and Gentile.[48] This is true also of the way in which one church may model Christ to another in its acts of generosity or in its endurance of trials. However, as Balthasar argues, the fact that the Christ's transcends and embraces all the differences between human beings and 'unites all persons … in his own Person'[49] means that he is 'universally normative'.[50] That is to say: the horizon of the building up the church in its replication of Christ extends to the world.

Conclusion

We noted from the start that imitation of others is inescapable; though it puts a question mark against our human ability to self-describe and assert our own individuality. The tendency in public discourse simultaneously to construct and deconstruct exemplars is evidence of the way in which imitation has become a problematic mode of the ethical discourse. The casting of social outsiders as human ideals seems likewise evidence of a deep confusion about human virtue.

As we have seen, the Pauline *imitatio Christi* (mediated via an *imitatio Pauli* or an *imitatio ecclesiae*) offers a very different account of how imitation might work. The object of imitation (Jesus Christ) is, for Paul, unsurpassable, even unimitateable. But he becomes the empowering source for those who are 'in him' by means of his death. The cross becomes the symbolic and actual centre of Paul's call to imitate Christ—it provides both the means and the form for such a human life. Imitation of Christ is not then about finding an identity, but rather about enacting it. However, as evidenced by what I have identified as the need for *phronesis*—which Paul himself displays in his mediation of Christ's example—the imitation of Christ does not reduce all identities to the one same identity, but rather liberates the individual to be herself.

The content of this imitative practice consists, not in acts of self-assertion (as in the secular account), nor in a retreat into contemplation (as in the mystical

tradition), but rather in a willingness to *bear with* a variety of negative possibilities for the sake of the other and the edification of the church community in an attitude of patient endurance. The imitation of Christ (as Paul reads it) turns the believer toward the other believer, for his or her sake, whatever the cost. It is, in the true sense, *the passionate life*.

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ENDNOTES
1. For George Herbert Mead 'the individual develops a self by first becoming an object to himself and he does this by adopting the 'attitudes' of the individual members of the group to which he belongs'. See Ruth Leys, "Mead's Voices: Imitation as Foundation, or, the Struggle against Mimesis," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (1993).
2. Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
5. Though Yoder has shown it has developed in some curious directions. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 112-32.
6. Hans Urs von Balthasar describes Jesus as the 'fulfilled concrete norm' of Christian ethics, in that Jesus first carries out the entire will of God in 'deed and cult'. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," in *Principles of Christian Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 79.
7. See for the same thought using *bastazein* Galatians 6:2.
8. Paul here does not make the full ecclesiological use of the language of edification that he does in 1 Corinthians 12-14.
9. The Psalmist even endures scorn 'for your sake', i.e. for Yhwh's—Ps 69:7.
10. Paul teaches this *theologia crucis* more explicitly in passages like Colossians 2:1f.
11. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans,* NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 868.
12. The emphasis on *phroneo* as an activity or disposition of mind is confirmed by Liddell & Scott: fronew, Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and H. Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, New [9th] ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940).
13. a strong co-coordinating conjunction—'therefore'.
14. The references in vs. 8-13 to the Gentiles glorifying God suggest that this is who Paul has in mind with his *hymas* in vs 7.

15. *Eis doxan tou Theou* in v. 7 is a purpose phrase with the mutual reception of the believers the antecedent rather than Christ's acceptance of them—at least at first reading. However, as the argument develops we can see that both are true: the reception of the (Gentile) believers by Christ was for the glory of God just as their welcome of one another is.

16. A similar thought is expressed in Eph. 2:11-22.

17. The word is not the usual one for forgiveness (*aphiemi*, used in Col. 1:14) but has a more general sense of 'dealing graciously with'. Though there are echoes of the Lord's Prayer in English translations, the vocabulary in Matt. 6:11 is quite different.

18. There is no reason to think that Paul differs here from his usual practice of using the term term *ho Kyrios* to refer to Christ (as opposed to his Father).

19. See Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists*, Monograph Series (Society for New Testament Studies); 96. (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 195.

20. 'in love and a gentle spirit'.

21. Heb. 12:7 mentions paternal discipline in this way—with the divine Father in view.

22. E.A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: WJKP, 1991).

23. For the same point, see Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, p. 130.

24. i.e. 'you became imitators of us *and so* of the Lord'.

25. *dexamenoi* is an aorist participle which here likely expresses a causal relationship. The NRSV adds 'for' in order to articulate this more solidly. It explains in what exactly the Thessalonians became imitators.

26. Perhaps the work of tent-making referred to in Acts 18:3? Notably, Paul did not speak of Jesus' work as a carpenter in this connection, as Yoder points out in *The Politics of Jesus*.

27. Paul probably understood this gift of the Gentile churches in salvation-historical terms as a fulfillment of the ancient promise of the treasures of the nations being brought into Jerusalem.

28. i.e. is *ten charin tou Theou* a subjective or objective genitive?

29. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 2nd edn., vol. IV.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), IV.1, p. 629ff.

30. Wenham argues that Paul had observed Jesus's ministry. David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995).

31. In Rom. 15, because he had not yet himself been to Rome, there is no possible appeal even to his own example.

32. Philippians 2:1-11 is, after all, scarcely a Leben Jesu.

33, Only two examples do not have an explicitly Christological reference: 2 Thess. 3 and Phil. 3. That is, in these cases only does Paul point to himself as a model

without pointing further to Christ (explicitly).

34. As has already been noted, when Paul *could* have turned to the example of Jesus in the matter of celibacy (i.e. an aspect of Jesus' life that is not directly related to his messianic gospel), he refrained from doing so.

35. Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," p. 80.

36. *Ibid*.

37. He refers variously to Abraham, Adam and Moses but to make salvation-historical rather than ethical points. The people of Israel are invoked as a negative example in 1 Cor. 10:1ff.

38. Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," p. 84.

39. For Aristotle, the noun fronesij indicates a virtue of intellect that enables the practice of wise deliberation: namely 'prudence'. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), VI. 5-6.

40. The verb *phroneo* ('I think') and derivatives occur in (of the passages that are our present focus) Rom. 15:5, Phil. 2:2 (twice), 5, 3:15, 19-20, and Co.l 3:2. See also 2 Cor. 4:18 'so we fix our eyes …'

41. A less trivial example is available: Paul argued vehemently before Peter that the Gentile believers did not have to undergo circumcision or in other ways identify as Israelites in order to be members of the people of God (Gal. 2:11f). As a counter-argument, this would be to imitate Jesus. To this Paul says a firm 'No'. However, for the good of the other, 'in order to save some', Paul would become like Jew.

42. See Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," p. 81.

43. References to 'mind' (*nous*) and 'knowledge' (*epignosis*) include: Rom. 12:2, 15:4 1 Cor 1:10, 2:16, 14:14; 2 Cor 4:6, 10:5 Col. 1:9-10, 3:10.

44. Balthasar's expression is 'faith's waiting attitude'. Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," p. 92.

45. Bonhoeffer's word is *Stellevertretung* which more nearly captures the idea than any single English term. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. R. Krauss, C. West, and D. Stott, vol. 6, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 259.

46. Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," p. 84.

47. *Ibid*.

48. A point missing from his otherwise thorough account. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*.

49. Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," p. 82.

50. *Ibid*., p. 83.