



*The IMITATION of CHRIST*  
*in the*  
*GOSPEL of LUKE*



Growing in Christlike Love  
for God and Neighbor

C.D. “JIMMY” AGAN III

*“Some books are eloquent, some are passionate, and some are wise.  
This book is all three.” —Robert W. Yarbrough*



“Jimmy Agan’s *The Imitation of Christ in the Gospel of Luke* is about more than imitation. This book explores how devotion to Christ is a consequence of his grace toward us, and the whole work resonates with the sweetness and clarity of one who himself serves Christ in the grateful radiance of the gospel profoundly grasped.”

—**Bryan Chapell**, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Peoria, Illinois

“Imitation of Christ—a topic that is of profound importance, but has nonetheless been besieged by theological questions among well-intentioned scholars, is here presented in a way that is both deeply rooted in the pages of the New Testament and yet also eminently accessible to the contemporary reader. This is the work of a scholar who is also a convinced and gifted communicator.”

—**Andrew Clarke**, Senior Lecturer, Divinity and Religious Studies, King’s College, University of Aberdeen

“Is it appropriate for Christians to imitate Christ, or does this undermine the uniqueness of Christ’s work? Dr. Agan addresses this important question from the Gospel of Luke by providing biblical rationale and interpretive guidelines for imitating Christ in four key respects. Here is a work of applied theology that will encourage you to follow more closely in the footsteps of our Lord, while continually relying on his grace in the gospel.”

—**Brandon D. Crowe**, Assistant Professor of New Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

“As Christians, we are called to imitate Jesus, which we cannot do in our own strength—yet Jesus is not only a model, but also the source that enables us to be like him. C. D. ‘Jimmy’ Agan has written an excellent work on the Gospel according to Luke that

is suffused with the challenge to imitate Jesus, but not in the manner of those who see Jesus only as a role model or of those who try to see everything as being all of grace to an extreme. Agan has placed this topic of ‘servant example’ around Luke 6:40: the disciple is to be like his teacher. In the historically redemptive context, it becomes clear by Jesus’ saving work on our behalf that he enables us to be like him. Agan has given us a great resource for preaching and teaching, and the layperson will also benefit from his writing. I was personally humbled and challenged as I read the manuscript. I challenge each preacher to consider reading this volume and then committing to using it to teach the Gospel according to Luke. This book will be a tremendous alternative to so much superficiality and triviality associated with being a kingdom disciple. But if you do the above, be forewarned. This is a ‘dangerous’ commentary because it reminds us from beginning to end that to be a Christian requires being like Jesus.”

—**Charles Dunahoo**, Chairman of the Board, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Mention the call to be more like Christ, and questions instantly abound. All serious believers instinctively think the task is impossible, and many evangelicals wonder whether it is even something that we’re supposed to do. Yet at the same time, we also sense that somehow the imitation of Christ is part and parcel of what it means to be a faithful Christian. How do we handle these questions, these competing attitudes? Even more important, how do we go about a task as enormous as being like Christ? In this wonderful little book, Jimmy Agan unpacks these questions and others like them through a careful, patient reading of Luke’s gospel. He clearly shows us in what ways Jesus is unique as the Divine Son—and thus *not* a pattern for us to imitate. And the author tells us in what ways Jesus is fully human—and

thus our perfect example of human life as God meant it to be. Agan's pastoral wisdom, sympathy for the struggles we face as Christians, and conversational writing style bring the fruit of his scholarship on Luke to a level that any serious Christian can understand. I recommend this book most highly!"

—**Donald Fairbairn**, Robert E. Cooley Professor of Early Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"This book is a gift to me as a pastor, father, husband, professor, communitarian, and friend! Jimmy's work is a manual for training Christians to imitate Christ with a gospel-centered focus and a spiritually joyful heart. No one can read this book and fail to conclude that Christ's sacrifice is the motivation for following him and that the Father's love is the power to do it. With the gospel so clearly unveiled in every chapter, one who follows this guide will inevitably conclude that because the yoke belongs to Jesus, it is easy and his burden is light."

—**George W. Robertson**, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church (PCA), Augusta, Georgia

"Some books are eloquent, some are passionate, and some are wise. This book is all three. It makes a convincing case for deep reflection on Jesus' example, leading to sustained effort to be like him. Agan flags the dangers of the imitation-of-Christ project. But he maps us past the risks, with Scripture as GPS and conformity to Christ as destination. Engrossing and stirring, this is the finest succinct statement on the subject in recent times."

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C.D. "JIMMY" AGAN III



P U B L I S H I N G

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For Tricia  
Beloved bride, faithful friend, and true model of Christlike  
hospitality



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## PREFACE

CHRISTIANS INTUITIVELY UNDERSTAND that their lives should reflect the character and conduct of Jesus. This makes sense, not only because we believe Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience and love, but because God is at work conforming us “to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). So if you ask any Christian—and perhaps many non-Christians—to summarize their vision for spiritual maturity, they will likely include something along these lines:

“I want to reflect the image of Christ in my daily life.”

“I want to grow in likeness to Christ.”

“I want to be more like Jesus.”

Most people who have such goals know that Jesus is more than an example, and that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not merely collections of “be like Jesus” stories. Still, we have a deep longing to be “imitators . . . of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1) and to base our imitation on biblical accounts of his life. And so we turn to the Gospels, believing that as we read we can identify patterns in Jesus’ life that we should mirror in our own.

If the previous paragraph describes you at all, I have good news—and bad. The good news is that this book aims to help you grow as an imitator of Christ by enabling you to see and respond to Jesus’ example as it is presented in Luke’s Gospel. The bad news is that this is not as simple as it might seem, for two reasons. First, the Gospels themselves don’t give us much

explicit instruction on how to pattern our lives after Jesus' example. Jesus' words in John 13:14–15 illustrate the point: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." Clearly, Jesus has provided an example to be imitated. But who should imitate him—the apostles? Later church leaders? All Christians? And how should they imitate him—by literally washing one another's feet? Or by loving and serving one another in ways that are symbolized by this action? While we can look to the broader context of John's Gospel for clues, the text never gives definitive answers to these questions. Nor does it offer guidelines for separating those aspects of Jesus' life that are unique to his role as "Lord and Teacher" from those that are to be imitated. Since the Gospels don't spell out such things for us, careful reflection is required if we are to grasp what they have to teach us about imitating Christ.

Second, the kind of careful reflection required for reading the Gospels as imitators of Christ is rarely encouraged by our churches. For reasons discussed in chapter 1, this is especially true in traditions that maintain the theological commitments of the Protestant Reformation. In such circles, the topic of the imitation of Christ is often neglected, as though the message of the Gospels were, "Jesus is Savior—so there's no example to see here!" (Such neglect probably explains why one student, when he learned that I was working on a book on this topic, asked, "Are you allowed to do that?") So, while Reformation commitments have inspired generations of scholars and pastors to think carefully about interpreting and applying Scripture, this care has not always extended to the matter of reading the Gospels in order to grow in likeness to Christ. As a result, the door is opened to abuse, as believers turn to resources that emphasize being like Jesus, but lack careful grounding in Scripture. Well-

known examples include Charles Sheldon's best-selling book *In His Steps* and the WWJD movement it inspired; both are based on a partial picture of Christ's person and work, and encourage speculation about what Jesus *would* do rather than thoughtful reflection on what Jesus *did* do.

Ultimately, then, this book hopes to guard against *abuse* of the imitation of Christ by correcting the *neglect* of the imitation of Christ. In order to allow for more in-depth study, I have chosen to focus on the Gospel according to Luke. The main reason for this choice is familiarity, as I have been studying, teaching, and preaching from Luke's Gospel for more than fifteen years. This means that some readers will be disappointed because their favorite Gospel account from Matthew, Mark, or John is not discussed. Others will be disappointed because I have not used language associated with Paul's letters (e.g., "conformity with Christ"), or have not discussed the imitation of Christ as it relates to the categories of systematic theology (e.g., "union with Christ"). These omissions result from my desire to focus on Luke, not from any hostility toward other biblical writers, terms, or doctrines. Still, the hope is that the principles applied here to Luke's Gospel could be applied to other Gospels. To the extent that the conclusions I reach reflect Luke's intended meaning, they will certainly be compatible with the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

But what if the opening paragraph of this preface *doesn't* describe you? What if you don't want to be like Jesus? Perhaps this book can still be of help to you. If you aren't convinced that the imitation of Christ should be a central feature of the Christian life, I hope the discussion in chapters 1 and 2 will increase your appreciation for this biblical theme. If imitating Christ sounds to you like an impossible or impractical ideal—or worse, like a burden that would threaten to crush your soul—you may want to turn directly to chapters 13 and 14 for

## PREFACE

a reminder of the resources God has provided to make growth in Christlikeness possible. And if you are not a Christian, or if you are a Christian whose zeal for spiritual growth has grown cold over time, I hope that this book will help you to see Jesus in all his splendor, so that an overwhelming desire to belong to him, to trust in him, and even to imitate him is created in you. As 1 John 3:2 suggests, we need to see Jesus if we want to be like him. May this book help us to do both.

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# I

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Augustinian Argument: Imitation Denies Human Need of Divine Grace**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Heart's Cry: Imitation Demands the Impossible**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Conclusion**

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

CHRISTIANS INSTINCTIVELY desire to be like Jesus. Yet evangelical and Reformed thinkers have done little to wed this desire to sound theology and responsible biblical interpretation. With careful attention to Luke's gospel, Jimmy Agan demonstrates that we can—and must—follow Christ's example precisely because we embrace him as Savior.

"Jimmy Agan makes a convincing case for deep reflection on Jesus' example, leading to sustained effort to be like him. Agan flags the dangers of the imitation-of-Christ project. But he maps us past the risks, with Scripture as GPS and conformity to Christ as destination. Engrossing and stirring, this is the finest succinct statement on the subject in recent times."

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—ANDREW CLARKE, Senior Lecturer, Divinity and Religious Studies, King's College, University of Aberdeen

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