

"ON BEING IMITATORS"

"Therefore" said Paul in his letter to the
Ephesians, "be imitators of God"
(Ephesians 5: 1)

INTRODUCTION There is in most human beings a strong impulse to copy the best that they know. Master pieces have a way of casting a spell over people. We often find ourselves torn to see how the "great ones" have done it. We try to catch their style; we try to copy their form. Writers do it; athletes do it; actors and singers do it. Even preachers do it.

We're told that Beethoven, in his early days, lived under the spell of Mozart. And Perry Como admits that in his early days as a singer he lived under the spell of Bing Crosby. The spellbound person is tempted to copy the work or imitate the style he admires so extravagantly. Beethoven, for instance, copied Mozart; his first two symphonies reflect it. Perry Como copied Bing Crosby. In so doing, they lost neither their independence nor their integrity. They were practicing the art of imitation.

Few people, however, are content to remain imitators. As they mature, as their own creative powers develop, they catch the spirit of their master and they go on to re-create it in some new form of their own. Beethoven, for instance, caught the spirit of Mozart and recreated it in symphonies of his own never before dreamed of. Como caught the easy, graceful style of Crosby and created it in new forms of his own.

DEVELOPMENT In something of the same fashion, there have been people who have had an irresistible desire to imitate Jesus of Nazareth. Limited as their own human proportions are, high above them as He is in holiness, they instinctively reach out to Him with all of their powers of imitation. Quite literally, He casts a spell over them.

His words have a strange music which they find difficult to forget. His movement has a gracefulness that they cannot cease to admire. His spirit has a comprehension that they cannot easily dismiss. No matter how often they may fail Him, His spell never quite loses its power over them. "What would He do in this situation?" is a question that sometimes comes into their lives.

We need not be surprised then to find ourselves at times consciously, deliberately and clumsily - to be sure - trying to copy Jesus. Indeed, we might be surprised that we do not copy Him more continually.

He prayed, so we pray. He cared for the common man, so we try to care for the common man. He was calm, confident and courageous in the storms of life, so we try to be calm, confident and courageous when caught up in the storms of life. He made a foreigner - a Samaritan - a model of good will, so we let down the barriers to people from other lands and other backgrounds, remembering that human need, as He saw it, knew no limits, no boundaries. He forgave people. We try to follow Him more and more in that same spirit of forgiveness. He had a love and deep regard for all sorts of people and we try to follow Him in that example. He had a deep reverence for life. He try to copy Him in that regard.

We're never proud because we fall short, but neither are we discouraged

because the more our hearts copy Him, the more our habits of thought and action are controlled by Him. Like all "imitators", there are times when we get only His mannerism, but there are other times when it seems - perhaps only for a moment - Christ's spirit is truly alive within us.

NOT ENOUGH TO COPY To simply copy is not enough - for two brief reasons: one, it doesn't allow the creative spirit of a person enough room. And two, it doesn't provide for that time when the circumstances are different that no exact copying is possible.

For instance, Jesus did not work in a coal mine, but Vincent Van Gogh did. Van Gogh could not copy Jesus, but he could catch His spirit and re-create it in the hopeless lives of the miners. Jesus never lived in a slum, but that great Christian spirit of Japan, Kagawa, did. Kagawa could not copy Jesus line for line, but he could catch the spirit of Christ's love and re-create it in terms of tenement houses and families of faith.

Jesus never lived in an African jungle, but Albert Schweitzer did for over fifty years. He could not copy Jesus line for line, but He was able to catch His spirit and reproduce it in remedies for healing. Jesus never organized a bus boycott or helped to organize the garbage collectors of a city, but Martin Luther King did. He, too, couldn't copy Jesus for the situations he faced in helping to lift the level of life for black people in this land were quite unlike any that Jesus knew in first century Palestine. But King caught something of the Christ-spirit and lived and worked, talked and walked in ways so as to move the people of this country and by moving them, take away some of the deep-seated racial antagonism and hostility and violence.

CLIMAX The world in which Jesus lived was different from our own. He never had to contend with the stress and tensions of city life, of office routine, or riding a crowded rush hour subway. He never had to deal with the responsibilities of rearing children...sickness in the middle of the night and a trip to the Emergency Ward of NY Hospital. He knew nothing about standing in line at the supermarket, or of the competitive ways of the business world. He never had to face the pressures of a technological, urban society. He never had to deal with the issues of global war, or the complexities of peace. There's no "blue Print" in the New Testament for handling the details of such concerns.

But what we can do is to catch the spirit of love - of goodwill, of trust that was His and try to build on it - to recreate it in the forms that our time and our situations demand.

HEART OF IT It was a love so strong that it made strong men good. It was a love embracing compassion, trust and understanding - a love capable of transforming lives and difficult situations. It was a love built on a deep reverence for life, for the respect of the dignity and rights of others. It was a love that could redeem people and alter situations for good. And that spirit of love, I believe, is reproduceable. First: self-consciously and deliberately by imitators. Then, creatively and spontaneously, and to the degree that it is reproduced in us and through us to the world around us - to that same degree it can be said of us - he is "in Christ" and Christ is in him.

In his early years, Francis of Assisi - one of the great Christians of the middle ages - made a conscious effort to imitate Jesus - to copy His style and

mannerism. We also know that Francis went on from there and in his own way and in his own time caught in a wonderful way the spirit of Christ and reproduced that measure of love in different ways. A prayer he once wrote catches that Christ spirit beautifully and help us to reppare now for the breaking of the bread and taking of the cup. Let us be in prayer and let these words be in your hearts as we go forth from this moment and this place back into the world.

"Lord - make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injry, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is ~~sadness~~, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be sonsoled as to console; t be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen."