

IN WHAT WAY CAN JESUS BE A MORAL EXAMPLE FOR CHRISTIANS?

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Novelist Dorothy L. Sayers is perhaps best known as the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey, a distinguished aristocratic amateur detective. She was also no mean amateur theologian, who was thoroughly impatient with those who declared that doctrine was “hopelessly irrelevant” to the life and thought of the ordinary Christian believer. “Ministers of the Christian religion often assert that it is, present it for consideration as though it were, and, in fact, by their faulty exposition of it make it so.” She was especially—and rightly—scornful of those who argue that it is principles, not doctrines, that distinguish Christianity from paganism. Writing in the depths of the second world war she declared:

That you cannot have Christian principles without Christ is becoming increasingly clear, because their validity depends upon Christ's authority; and, as we have seen, the totalitarian states, having ceased to believe in Christ's authority, are logically quite justified in repudiating Christian principles. If “the average man” is required to “believe in Christ” and accept his authority for “Christian principles,” it is surely relevant to inquire who or what Christ is, and why his authority should be accepted. . . . It is quite useless to say that it doesn't matter particularly who or what Christ was or by what authority he did those things, and that even if he was only a man, he was a very nice man and we ought to live by his principles: for that is merely Humanism, and if the “average man” in Germany chooses to think that Hitler is a nicer sort of man with still more attractive principles, the Christian Humanist has no answer to make.¹

Why do Christians take the teachings of Jesus Christ so seriously? Why do they attribute such authority to him? Underlying the authority of Jesus is the Christian understanding of who he is. Christians regard Christ as authoritative because, in the end, they recognize him to be none other than God himself, coming among us as one of us. The authority of Christ rests in his being God incarnate. His teaching is lent dignity, weight and authority by his identity. And that identity can only be spelled out fully by the doctrine of the person of Christ. Christian principles thus rest on Christian doctrine.

The question that I propose to address in this paper concerns the manner in which Jesus Christ can be regarded as normative in relation to Christian

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¹ D. L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen, 1947) 32.

ethics. In what way may the contours of the history of Jesus be allowed to shape our own moral existences? In what way is it authoritative? According to some (such as Bultmann and Kant), Christianity enunciates no distinctive moral insights. Christians are free to (and expected to) echo prevailing secular ethical standards. A similar devaluation of the moral example of Jesus is the effect, if not necessarily the intention, of liberal Christianity. Jesus' example is approached through a filter of antecedent values and principles, derived from other sources (such as prevailing liberal middle-class values). It is these antecedent values and principles that are finally normative for liberal Anglicanism, with the example of Jesus being marginalized where he appears to contradict them and appropriated where he appears to endorse them. It is not the moral example of Jesus that is important but those preselected contemporary moral values that appeal to his liberal interpreters.

Let us take this point a little further. Many liberal writers have suggested that the authority of Christ rests upon the excellence of his moral and religious teaching. This position initially sounds attractive, but on closer inspection it turns out actually to undermine that very authority. By what standards do we judge his teaching? The argument rests on knowing in advance what moral or religious teachings are to be regarded as outstanding. Jesus is then regarded as authoritative to the extent that he echoes these already existing standards. He is judged by a higher authority: what these writers regard as morally and religiously acceptable. For classical Christian thought it is existing human religious and moral ideas that are to be challenged and judged by Jesus Christ; for these modern writers it is existing notions of morality and religion that are to judge Jesus Christ. Christ is thus placed firmly under human authority, denied any role of challenging and overturning accepted human ideas and values.

It may seem very attractive to see Jesus as some sort of projection or validation of our own standards and aspirations. Yet if we allow that Jesus has authority simply because he echoes what we happen to believe to be right, we are setting ourselves above him in judgment. It is our own concepts of morality, our own standards (wherever they come from), that are judging him. And all too often those standards are little more than the prejudices of our own culture. By judging Jesus in this way we lock ourselves into our own situation. We are prisoners of our culture, unable to see its limitations. We are unwilling to accept criticism from outside it. If Jesus echoes our own values and aspirations, we gladly accept his support; if Jesus should happen to challenge them, we dismiss him or choose to ignore the challenge. Jesus is thus denied any possibility of transforming us by challenging our presuppositions. We are reluctant to hear him where he does not echo our own voices. If Jesus has any authority in this way, it is simply as a passive echo of our own ideas and values. "I happen to buy most of what Jesus said, but not because it's in the Bible or because he said it, but rather because I find it existentially valid. And I have to be candid enough to say that there are a few things Jesus said that I can't buy" (Thomas Maurer).

It is for this reason that doctrine is of central importance. Christianity does not assert that Christ has authority on account of the excellence or ac-

ceptability of his teaching. Rather, the teaching of Christ has authority and validity on account of who he is: God incarnate. The NT provides ample justification of this point. Throughout his writings Paul begins by making doctrinal affirmations and then proceeds to draw moral conclusions. Doctrine comes first, moral and religious principles follow. For example, the doctrine of the resurrection leads to an attitude of hope in the face of adversity; the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ leads to an attitude of humility on the part of believers; the doctrine of the reconciliation of believers to God through Christ leads to a plea that believers should be reconciled among themselves.

Doctrine about Christ arises from the need to tell the truth about Christ, to explain who he is and his significance for the human situation. To fail to develop doctrines about Jesus Christ is to reveal a dangerously shallow commitment to him and to the unremitting human quest for truth. Doctrine reflects a commitment to truth on the one hand and to the centrality of Jesus to the Christian faith on the other. It is no good to mumble vague generalities about Jesus being "the moral educator of mankind" or "a good man who deserves to be imitated." It is necessary to spell out, as precisely as possible, what it is that Christians have found, and continue to find, so profoundly attractive, authoritative and challenging about him.

To being with, then, let us consider the liberal approach to the ethical significance of Jesus, the origins of which may be traced back to the enlightenment. Jesus is a moral example who we may and ought to imitate. The enlightenment suggested that Jesus of Nazareth was to be imitated as a supreme example of humanity. His authority resided in the force of his moral personality, which earlier generations had needlessly extrapolated into his divinity. The superiority of Jesus over other religious teachers and moral examples, such as Socrates, proved difficult to maintain. The rationalist dismantling of the orthodox framework of incarnation and resurrection was found to leave the moral authority of Jesus of Nazareth suspended in midair, without visible or credible means of support. In fact it seemed to be maintained as an axiom or dogma ill-suited to the critical spirit of the age. Jesus might be permitted to endorse the insights of culture and reason, but to suggest that he established them in the first place or added to them was to compromise the autonomy of human reason.

The argument goes like this: Christianity is rational. Its credentials can be checked out by human reason. This basic idea was then taken a step further. Therefore, the rationalists argued, the basic ideas of Christianity could be got at by plain reason. You did not need revelation. Reason had made Jesus redundant. This argument was then taken a step further. If Jesus happened to say or do anything that was contrary to reason, he was obviously wrong. Reason is able to establish a universal system of moral values. Where Jesus endorses them, all is well. But he is not allowed to establish them in the first place; he can only say "Amen" to them. And where Jesus happened to be out of line with this universal rational morality, it was Jesus who was wrong. Reason was all-competent in matters of morality.

This line of argumentation is now widely regarded as clearly wrong. The sociology of knowledge has dispelled the idea of a "universal rationality."

People think in different ways at different times and in different places. To pretend that there is some kind of universal reason that underlies them all is seriously out of line with the facts. In 1952 R. M. Hare could begin *The Language of Morals* by declaring that "ethics is the logical study of the language of morals." There are few nowadays who would be happy with that. *The language of morals?* It is difficult to find anyone who believes that there is a universal moral framework that is valid at all times and in all places. This is the basic premise of most of the best recent studies of ethics, such as Jeffrey Stout's *Ethics After Babel*. Rather, there are recognized to be many different ways of thinking about ethics and moral values. Religious ethics are among them. As Stout has shown with great skill, the sort of arguments brought by people like Kai Nielsen against religious ethics are seriously deficient. The time is ripe for Christian ethics to reassert itself in the ethical marketplace.² The time is right for a new confidence in the traditional values of the Christian faith as the intellectual foundations of rationalist morality crumble around us.

While the influence of the enlightenment continues to diminish, one part of its intellectual heritage remains remarkably forceful within western Christianity: the concept of Jesus as a human moral example, commonly designated "exemplarism." Jesus is seen as a moral example, someone who we can and should imitate. This idea resonates throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is commonly stated in the maxim "Christianity consists in the imitation of Jesus." It is this assertion that I wish to consider in this paper. In one sense it is profoundly correct, but in another it is profoundly and dangerously wrong.

There are two fundamental theological difficulties associated with such an ethic of the imitation of Christ. It is deficient in two crucial areas. It is seriously inadequate in its Christological foundations, and it rests upon a soteriological assumption that is close to Pelagianism. Let me illustrate the sort of difficulties I have in mind.

First, let us look at its soteriological aspects. This form of exemplarism invites us to believe in Jesus Christ as an example who shows us, as one who is outside us and historically distant from us, what ought to be done. But he is unable to transform the tragic situation of humanity in order that it can be done.

The effect if not the intention of such an exemplarist approach to the human situation is to portray it as suffering from ignorance, from a sad lack of understanding of its moral obligations—which, once remedied, leads to true morality and the common good. Yet it must be asked, seriously and persistently: Is this not the most appallingly inadequate view of the tragedy of the human situation? Perhaps our Victorian forebears could be excused for adopting such an attitude, but for the modern period—steeped in the dreadful knowledge of Auschwitz (to name but one shocking but hopefully morally illuminating episode in recent history)—such an approach to human nature must

² J. Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Language of Morals and Their Discontents* (Cambridge: Clarke, 1988) 109–123.

be reckoned as belonging to the dreams of a past and gone age. In a world come of age we must learn of the sheer tragedy of the human predicament.

In his Bampton Lectures of 1915, Hastings Rashdall developed with force and conviction a strongly exemplarist view of the moral and soteriological relevance of Jesus Christ as educating and extending the moral vision of humanity. Yet he seemed almost unaware that the most dreadful war yet known was raging in Europe, reducing both the number of students available to hear his lectures and perhaps their receptivity toward their content. How, it must be asked, could two Christian nations, steeped in centuries of Christian culture and values, initiate and propagate such a war? Had they not learned from the example of Christ, in the manner in which Rashdall suggests? If Christ's mission was to educate humanity, how could he have so signally failed within cultures so allegedly receptive to his instruction? And, to raise a slightly awkward point that nevertheless demands attention, the history of the Christian Church itself suggests that it shares the frailty of its common stock of human nature. Christ may indeed be the great moral educator of mankind, but the human capacity for moral education gives every indication of being sadly limited, conditioned and restricted by forces over which we have little control (Rom 7:15–24).

This exemplarist view of Christ as a moral example is inextricably linked with a deficient view of human nature that does not or will not come to terms with the sheer intractability of the fact of human sin and the strange and tragic history of humanity in general and of the Church in particular. As Charles Gore pointed out incisively a century ago:

Inadequate conceptions of Christ's person go hand in hand with inadequate conceptions of what human nature wants. The Nestorian conception of Christ . . . qualifies Christ for being an example of what man can do, and into what wonderful union with God he can be assumed if he is holy enough; but Christ remains one man among many, shut in within the limits of a single human personality, and influencing man only from outside. He can be a Redeemer of man if man can be saved from outside by bright example, but not otherwise. The Nestorian Christ is logically associated with the Pelagian man. . . . The Nestorian Christ is the fitting Saviour of the Pelagian man.³

An exemplarist soteriology, with its associated understanding of the nature and role of the moral example of Jesus Christ, is ultimately the correlative of a Pelagian view of the situation and abilities of humanity. The ontological gap between Christ and ourselves is contracted in order to minimize the discontinuity between his moral personality and ours. Christ is the supreme human example, who evinces an authentically human lifestyle that we are alleged to be capable of imitating.

Such a view is not merely inadequate as an exposition of the significance of Jesus but also unrealistic in its estimation of the capacities and inclinations of human nature. It is an ethic addressed to an idealized humanity, which does not correspond to humanity as we empirically know it and as we

³ C. Gore, "Our Lord's Human Example," *CQR* 16 (1883) 298.

have been taught to view it by the Christian tradition: trapped in its predicament. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of sin is self-deception, a reluctance to accept the tragedy of our situation. Perhaps the first step in the reconstruction of an authentically Christian ethic must be the elimination of the "perfectionist illusions" (to use one of Niebuhr's characteristic phrases) that have so hindered liberal Christian ethical reflections during the present century. An inability to lodge the moral life in the realities of historical human existence results in utopianism.

Furthermore this approach treats the imitation of Christ as a human activity, as something we do. But where does God come into this? Is not God somehow involved in this process?

C. S. Lewis' words summarize the dilemma of many liberal ethicists: "We never have followed the advice of great teachers. Why are we likely to begin now? Why are we more likely to follow Christ than any of the others? Because he's the best moral teacher? But that makes it even less likely that we shall follow him. If we can't take the elementary lessons, is it likely that we're going to take the more advanced one? If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There's been no lack of good advice over the last four thousand years. A bit more makes no difference."⁴ Human nature does not merely require education; it requires transformation.

This "moral example" theory, then, rests upon a totally unrealistic and un-Christian view of human nature. It also appears to rest upon a deficient view of the person of Christ. The view of his significance we have just outlined ultimately grounds his continuing ethical relevance in his exemplification of allegedly universal moral values. And, as I argued earlier, this notion is now regarded as highly questionable. The death of Socrates in 399 B.C. directs our attention to virtues, such as courage and integrity, that are not limited to one particular time and place. In that the story of Socrates' death exemplifies these virtues it may be said to be charged with moral authority. Socrates is of moral importance in that he witnesses to these virtues. They are prior to his existence and were not established through his death. They are conveyed through it, not established by it. In principle these and other virtues could be conveyed through other human beings. The moral authority of such a narrative is interchangeable in that it can be predicated of other subjects—such as, in the view of exemplarism, Jesus Christ. Exemplarism locates the moral authority of the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth in its reflection of previously recognized universal moral values, the validity of which is independent of him. Other witnesses, preferably more recent, might function considerably better in this respect. Jesus appears as a moral teacher, a moral example. Yet there is no real attempt to spell out the fact that there is a radical difference between Jesus and ourselves.

On this view the moral authority of Jesus rests in his pointing to the moral order as a mediator, only to retreat into obscurity as the observer's

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God* (London: Bles, 1944) 11.

attention is held by that universal moral order rather than the contingent historical means by which it was disclosed. If the idea of incarnation is taken seriously, however, the adequacy of this understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus must be called into question. Latent within the very idea of incarnation, perhaps as one of its most precious treasures, is the suggestion that the history of Jesus Christ may shape and transform our understanding of the moral order in a qualitatively distinct manner that demands and deserves attention.

Jesus has moral authority on account of who he is. To put this bluntly: We pay attention to Jesus because of who we recognize him to be. And if Jesus is indeed God incarnate, then his teaching is indeed to be taken with the greatest seriousness. But precisely because he is the Son of God, it is not his teaching that is of the utmost importance.

Let me develop this point by asking a question that helps focus the point at issue. Why is Jesus of such importance to the Christian faith here and now, some twenty centuries after his death? The traditional answer, which I would wish to defend forcefully, is that his significance lies in his being God incarnate, that in his specific historical existence God assumed human nature. All else is secondary to this central insight deriving from reflection upon the significance of his resurrection. The fact that Jesus was male, the fact that he was a Jew, the precise nature of his teaching—all these are secondary to the fact that God took upon himself human nature, thereby lending it new dignity and meaning.

But if Jesus is not God incarnate, his significance must be evaluated in terms of those parameters that traditional Christianity has treated as secondary or accidental (in the Aristotelian sense of the term). Immediately we are confronted with the problem of historical conditioning: What conceivable relevance may the teachings and lifestyle of a first-century male Jew have for us today, in a totally different cultural situation? Why should modern western humanity pay any attention to the culturally-conditioned teaching of such an individual, given the seemingly insuperable cultural chasm dividing first-century Palestine and the twentieth-century west? And even the concept of the "religious personality" of Jesus has been seriously eroded, as much by NT scholarship as by shifts in cultural expectations.

For reasons such as these, a nonincarnational or exemplarist Christology is unable to convincingly anchor the person of Jesus Christ as the center of the Christian faith.⁵ He may be the historical point of departure for that faith, but its subsequent development involves the leaving behind of the historical particularity of his existence in order to confront the expectations of each social milieu in which Christianity may subsequently find itself. Jesus says this, but we say that. This may be acceptable in a first-century Palestinian context, but that is acceptable in a modern western culture in which we live and move and have our being. Jesus is thus both relativized and marginalized—and all this because of a thoroughly inadequate and totally unjustifiable Christology.

⁵ See A. E. McGrath, "Resurrection and Incarnation: The Foundations of the Christian Faith," in *Different Gospels* (ed. A. Walker; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988) 79–96.

Thus far I have suggested that there is a danger that speaking of Jesus as an example may lead some astray into the shallow waters of Pelagianism and an unacceptably low Christology. But suppose we remedy this deficiency. Suppose we make it clear that we believe passionately that humanity needs redemption, not just education, and that Jesus Christ is indeed "true God and true man." How then do we go about locating his moral authority for Christians?

First, let us notice an important principle that Christian ethics can draw from the doctrine of the incarnation. The very idea of God assuming human nature carries with it the suggestion that Christian ethics is concerned with the perfection of humanity. In that God entered the world in the form of a man, Christian ethics must be oriented toward the fulfillment of humanity. Christian ethics does not abrogate the created order but fulfills it. The very fact that Christian ethics is oriented toward this world, engaging creatively with it, is grounded in the belief that the incarnation itself legitimates this engagement. In that God lodged himself firmly in human history, Christian ethics may address itself to that same history and question those who suggest it ought to be other-worldly, purely spiritual in character.

But let us now turn to the question of the moral example of Jesus. I would like to suggest that Martin Luther's idea of "being conformed to Christ" or John Calvin's notion of "being incorporated into Christ"—both of which, of course, have very Pauline foundations—hold the key to this question. As Luther remarked: "The real and true work of the passion of Christ is to conform man to Christ." We do not imitate Christ in an external manner, as if it were through recapitulating and imitating his existence that we are saved. The Christian Church must re-echo the emphasis of the NT that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has intervened in—has altered or transformed—the human dilemma. The doctrine of justification by faith declares that God makes available as a gift a new mode of existence, a new lifestyle, and enables believers to act in such a way that their actions correspond to those of Jesus. In no way, it must be emphasized, does this suggestion compromise the ontological distinction between Christ and the believer. The significance of Jesus in this respect is ultimately dependent on a high profile of identification between Jesus and God such as that articulated by the doctrine of the incarnation.

Through faith the believer is conformed to Christ—or, more accurately, the process of conformation to Christ begins. Clear statements of this process of establishing the conformity of the structure of existence of the believer to that of Jesus are already evident in the NT itself. Particularly in the Pauline writings, participation in Christ points to a conformity of one's existence to his. Through faith, the believer is caught up in a new outlook on life, a new structure of existence, embodied paradigmatically in Jesus Christ. And both in their proclamation and person, believers reveal this story of Jesus.

When Paul urges his readers to be imitators of Christ, as he is (1 Cor 11:1), his words seem to suggest the following: To be a Christian is to enter into so close and deep a relationship with him that we in some way begin to imitate him. Imitation is the fruit of faith. It is the natural consequence of

true faith. To become a Christian is to begin the process—not so much of conforming as of being conformed to Christ. It is not so much we who are active as God who is active in this process.

The NT itself clearly presupposes that ethical exhortations are grounded in Christological insights in that Christology provides both the presuppositions of the Christian's existential situation and the pattern for his conduct. This is especially true of Paul's writings, which frequently suggest (1) that Paul's personal existence is a recapitulation of the life-pattern embodied in Jesus Christ and (2) that Paul's experience is paradigmatic for Christian experience in general. Paul's narration of his personal history, interpreted in the light of that of Jesus, is understood as sketching the contours of a model Christian existence. For the Christian to live *ek pisteōs* is to live in accordance with the structure of existence established and defined by the history of Christ and reflected in that of Paul.⁶

I think that this approach is helpful in that it gets rid of much of the unsatisfactory theology that often accompanies ethics of the imitation of Christ while retaining the NT emphasis upon the believer's being somehow conformed to Christ. Not merely intellectual assent, faith is about being united to Christ in order that the whole process of becoming more like Christ may begin. Faith is like a wedding ring (Luther), a bond that unites us to the risen Christ. For Luther faith is *fides apprehensiva*, a "grasping faith" that takes hold of and receives Christ, effecting the real and transforming presence of Christ within the believer.

Whereas the idea of the "imitation of Christ" suggests that we imitate him externally, the idea of "being conformed to Christ" speaks of an internal process of transformation by which the real presence of Christ within us gradually changes us as we are conformed to him. To use the traditional language of evangelical dogmatics: In justification we are incorporated into Christ, and in sanctification we see the process of outworking this change in our status as we become what we are. Sanctification is the outworking of our being in Christ in our existence. It is about becoming Christlike, not by imitating Christ but by being changed by the grace of God. And sanctification, I should stress, is not a human activity, a human work. Rather, it is God's work within us as he seeks to conform us to the person of Christ.

Christ is thus firmly established as a moral example for Christians, but not in the enlightenment sense of the idea. Christ discloses to us the pattern of obedience to God that will be the end result of our sanctification as we become more and more like him through the God-worked process of conformation to Christ. It is a natural process, one that follows on from the nature of justifying faith. It is like a seed being planted, eventually to grow to maturity.

So is this just splitting hairs? Is this merely a disagreement about words? Are not the ideas of "imitation" and "being conformed" virtually indistinguishable? I think not. Imitation brings in its wake a whole range of ideas and attitudes that are profoundly hostile to the gospel of grace. It hints of an

⁶ I have developed such ideas with full documentation; cf. "Christian Ethics" in *The Religion of the Incarnation* (ed. R. Morgan; Bristol: Bristol Classical, 1989) 189–204.

external relationship with Christ, of a human ability to imitate an external example (such as the Platonic notion of *mimēsis*), of a salvation dependent on our efforts. It invites us to think of grace in external terms (the parallel with Pelagius is obvious): God provides us with an example and then leaves us to get on with it unaided. The idea of "being conformed to Christ" speaks not of our activity but of the gracious activity of God within us, through which God works to achieve something that otherwise lies completely beyond our grasp. The process of becoming Christlike is a gift of God, as is our justification in the first place. Becoming like Christ is God's achievement within us rather than our achievement independent of God. Grace is firmly understood as God's gracious assistance, by which he enables and empowers us to achieve what we could never attain if left to our own resources and devices. There is a world of difference between these two approaches.

My basic theme has been that good doctrine makes for good ethics. If we cannot grasp the relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ for us we shall have little option except to act in the ways that the fashions of this world legitimate and dictate. And doctrine seeks to preserve Christian distinctiveness, to prevent Christianity from submerging in the swamp of liberal American culture.

We must not be afraid to be distinct. As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, we must shine out as stars in the darkness of the night sky. We are indeed distinct, but that is no bad thing. As the gospel prepares to enter the third millennium we need to recover our sense of identity, regain our confidence, and prepare for the great new opportunities that lie ahead. It needs to be done. With God's grace, it can be done. And, given our commitment, it will be done.