

Christian Identity in Pagan Thessalonica: The Imitation of Paul's Cruciform Life

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What does a Christian look like in a pagan world? How does a Christian maintain his identity as one who is in Christ and believes in the one true Triune God while living in an increasingly pluralistic world where many gods are worshipped?¹ Today we can point to centuries of church history for scores of examples of Christians who maintained their distinctive identity in a pagan world. What about, however, the earliest Christians? To whom would Paul point the earliest converts from Greco-Roman cultic life in order to help them understand what it is like to be a Christian? To whom would he point them in order to understand how a Christian faithfully maintains his or her identity in a polytheistic setting?

In 1-2 Thessalonians, which are probably the earliest letters of Paul, the apostle points newly-converted Christians not to Old Testament examples like Joseph in pagan Egypt or Daniel in pagan Babylon but to himself as a living, breathing example of one who faithfully worships and serves Christ while surrounded by pagan deities and cultic activities issuing their siren calls. This may, at first sight, make twenty-first century interpreters uncomfortable, since it sounds like self-promotion rather than gospel proclamation. After all, is not our purpose to lift up Jesus Christ as savior and also as the example to be imitated? This study will demonstrate that a significant element of Paul's effort to shape Christian identity among these first congregations is found in his understanding of baptism as crucifixion with Christ and the presentation of his resulting cruciform life in Christ as a personal example to be imitated.²

¹ For a brief discussion of the challenges of proclaiming Christ in a pluralistic world, see the statement of the Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, "Religious Pluralism and Knowledge of the True God: Fraternal Reflection and Discussion," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66 (2002): 295-305.

² This study is part of my ongoing work on 1-2 Thessalonians for the Concordia Commentary series. For the "cruciform" language (but not all the theology with which Gorman uses this term), see Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

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I. The Pagan Setting of Paul's Mission in Thessalonica

Since modern readers of Paul are often not sensitive to how much the pagan cults dominated life in a first-century Greco-Roman *polis* (city) like Thessalonica, we will introduce this subject first.³ In his seminal 1985 article on the cults of Thessalonica, Karl Donfried summarizes the challenges posed by the specific religious and civic cults found in Thessalonica and how these may be reflected in specific content of Paul's epistles to these Christians.⁴ Because the modern city of Thessaloniki is built over the ancient city, archaeological work on this city is limited. As those familiar with the layout of the *polis* know, temples in a high place to select gods were a fixture in the *polis*, along with an *agora* (marketplace), theatre, bathhouses, and a colonnaded *cardo maximus* (main street). The limited archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic (coinage) evidence that we have from Thessalonica points to the presence of a number of religious cults. There was reverence for several Roman gods: Zeus, Heracles, the Dioscuri, Apollo, and Aphrodite. The Egyptian gods Isis, Serapis, and Osiris were also worshipped; a temple to Serapis was discovered in 1917 after a fire in the ancient temple sector of the city. Elements of the cult of Dionysus were possibly being absorbed into the practice of these Egyptian mystery cults. Of special note was the presence of the cult of Cabirus, a cult whose god promoted fertility and protected sailors. These cults offered liturgical rites and a social calendar that ordered life in the *polis*. The high-density paraenetic language about sexual chastity (1 Thess 4:1-9), as well as Paul's later exhortations against works of darkness and drunkenness (1 Thess 5:5-8), should be interpreted against this pagan backdrop.⁵

Paul also encountered civic cults in this city. The charge by the civic authorities in Thessalonica against Paul, Jason, and others recorded in Acts

³ For the *polis* as the center of ethics, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 19-39. For the basic architectural plan of the *polis*, see John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 37-90.

⁴ Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 336-356; see also Holland L. Hendrix, "Thessalonica," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:523-527. The information on religious and civic cults presented here is summarized from these two sources.

⁵ This point is repeatedly made by Donfried, "Cults of Thessalonica"; see also Piotr J. Malysz, "Paul's Use of the Imagery of Sleep and His Understanding of the Christian Life: A Study in the Thessalonian Correspondence," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67 (2003): 65-78.

17:7 indicates that Christians were supposedly acting against the “decrees of Caesar” (τῶν δογμάτων Καίσαρος). It is quite probable that citizens had to take an oath of loyalty to Caesar such as this one noted by Donfried:

I swear . . . that I will support Caesar Augustus, his children and descendents, throughout my life, in word, deed, and thought . . . that in whatsoever concerns them I will spare neither body nor soul nor life nor children . . . that whenever I see or hear of anything being said, planned, or done against them I will report it . . . and whomsoever they regard as enemies I will attack and pursue with arms and the sword by land and by sea.⁶

In addition to reverence offered to prior Roman benefactors who granted Thessalonica its “free city” status and to the goddess Roma, a temple of Caesar was built there during the reign of Augustus (27 BC-AD 14). The divine status of Augustus is visible not only from the presence of this temple but also from the fact that his head soon displaced that of Zeus on local coinage of this period.

Although one can see evidence of this pagan setting in various places of Paul’s two letters to this congregation, the most explicit evidence comes in the opening thanksgiving of 1 Thessalonians 1:8–10:

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, with the result that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report concerning what kind of a reception [εἰσοδον] we had with you, namely, how you turned to God from idols [τῶν εἰδώλων] in order to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.⁷

Paul’s Jewish background shows through here; he labels all the numerous gods of this *polis* as “idols” – as non-living and false gods – in distinction to the single “living and true God” who is known in his risen and *living* Son. More could obviously be said, but the conclusion from this brief survey is clear: Paul sought to cultivate Christian identity in a thoroughly pagan setting.

⁶ Donfried, “Cults of Thessalonica,” 343.

⁷ All translations of the Pauline Epistles are mine.

II. Christian Identity through Imitation of Paul's Example

Paul introduces the theme of imitation early in the thanksgiving portion of 1 Thessalonians.⁸ Although the end of the thanksgiving was cited above, the opening verses of the thanksgiving, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-7, are given here:

We give thanks to God always concerning all of you, as we make mention of you in our prayers, your work of faith, your labor of love, and always remembering your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, because we know, brothers beloved by God, your election; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord [καὶ ὑμεῖς μιμηταὶ ἡμῶν ἐγενήθητε καὶ τοῦ κυρίου], when you received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, with the result that you became an example [τύπον] to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

The aorist verb ἐγενήθητε shows that Paul is not exhorting the congregation to imitate him *in the future*, but is confessing that they *have already become* imitators (μιμηταί) of him and the Lord in how they received the gospel with joy amidst suffering. These Christians, in turn, became an example or pattern (τύπον) for the rest of the church in Macedonia and Achaia. This text introduces two terms, μιμητής and τύπος, that will resurface repeatedly in the Pauline Letters as an important theme.

Abraham Malherbe points to the social background for Paul's emphasis on imitation (μιμέσις) in both of these letters as well as in 1 Corinthians and Philippians. Malherbe states:

In attempting to discover how Paul shaped the Thessalonians into a community we must begin with his claim, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord" (1 Thess. 1:6). Paul usually calls his readers to imitation (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:16; cf. 2 Thess. 3:7, 9). This description of the Thessalonian church's origin, however, is the only place where Paul refers to converts who had already modeled themselves after him. In short, Paul's method of shaping a community was to gather converts around himself and by his own behavior to demonstrate what he taught. In doing this, he followed a widely practiced method of his day, particularly by oral philosophers.⁹

⁸ For this theme, see further Willis Peter de Boer, *The Imitation of Paul: An Exegetical Study* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1962).

⁹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 52.

An example that Malherbe uses to illustrate this method among Roman stoic philosophers is from Seneca, a contemporary of Paul. Seneca asserts the importance of the personal example of the teacher—even above teaching—in the shaping of followers. Seneca wrote:

Of course, however, the living voice and the intimacy of a common life will help you more than the written word. You must go to the scene of the action, first, because men put more faith in their eyes than in their ears, and second, because the way is long if one follows precepts, but short and helpful, if one follows patterns. Cleanthes could not have been the express image of Zeno, if he had merely heard his lectures; he shared in his life, saw into his hidden purposes, and watched him to see whether he lived according to his own rules. Plato, Aristotle, and the whole throng of sages who were destined to go each his different way, derived more benefit from the character than from the words of Socrates. It was not the classroom of Epicurus, but living together under the same roof, that made great men out of Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and Polyaeus. Therefore I summon you, not merely that you may derive benefit, but that you may confer benefit; for we can assist each other greatly.¹⁰

Seneca illustrates the understanding that a teacher's life lent a tangible example to his teaching, which, in turn, had a significant impact on shaping the identity of the student, certainly more than the teaching alone.

This is not to say that Paul learned this imitation tradition from philosophers and employed it without modification. Malherbe also stresses Paul's recasting of this philosophic imitation tradition in two ways in 1 Thessalonians.¹¹ First, Paul does not point to his own personal words and accomplishments but focuses on the gospel proclamation and what that gospel has accomplished. Second, Paul uses the theme of the "harsh treatment" he received (ὀβρισηθέντες in 2:2) not as justification for harsh "frankness" in making demands (ἐπαρρησιασάμεθα in 2:2), as would Cynic philosophers, but as authentication that—in spite of the way he had been treated in Philippi—God gave him boldness to speak the gospel and give gently of himself to the Thessalonians.

Paul, however, as an apostle, also carefully distances himself from the problematic practices of charlatan philosophers who took advantage of

¹⁰ Seneca *Epistle* 6.5–6, quoted in Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 52–53; see also Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), especially 134–163.

¹¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 56–60.

their hosts through deceitful and flattering speech. Notice his language in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12.

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain, but even though we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. For our appeal does not come from error, impurity, or deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so also we speak, not so that we please men but God, who discerns our hearts. For we neither came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek honor from men, from either you or others, even though as apostles of Christ we are able to demand support. But we were gentle ones among you, as a nursing mother nourishes her own children. So because we had a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labor and hardship, because we worked night and day in order not to overburden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and righteously and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father with his own children, in order that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Paul gives us much insight here into his personal example that he calls upon the Thessalonians to imitate. Once again, it is Malherbe who has illuminated this description of Paul's ministry in light of the writings of philosophers who defended their vocation against imposters. Dio Chrysostom, a younger contemporary of Paul, speaks of the abundance of such imposters:

But to find a man who in plain terms [*katharōs*] and without guile [*adolōs*] speaks his mind with frankness [*parrēsiazomenon*], and *neither* for the sake of reputation [*doxēs*] nor for gain, *but*, out of good will and concern for his fellow men stands ready, if need be, to submit to ridicule and to the disorder and uproar of the mob—to find such a man as that is *not easy*, *but* rather the good fortune of a very lucky city, so great is the death of noble, independent souls and such the abundance of toadies [*kolakōn*], mountebanks, and sophists. In my own case, for instance, I feel that I have chosen that role, *not* of my own volition, *but* by the will of some deity. For when divine providence is at work for men, the gods provide, *not* only

good counselors who need no urging, *but* also words that are appropriate and profitable to the listener.¹²

Paul's call to imitation of his personal example was probably not only influenced by this pattern found in the philosophical tradition of the Greco-Roman world but also from his experience within Judaism. The pattern of setting forward examples to be imitated is found within Second Temple Jewish literature.¹³ Philo, an Alexandrian Jew who was a contemporary of Paul, was himself influenced strongly by the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition and writes about how the virtuous man imitates God to his neighbors who, in turn, can imitate him:

And in another place also the lawgiver [Moses] gives this precept, which is most becoming and suitable to a rational nature, that men should imitate God to the best of their power, omitting nothing which can possibly contribute to such a similarity as the case admits of. Since then you have received strength from a being who is more powerful than you, give others a share of that strength, distributing among them the benefits which you have received yourself, in order that you may imitate God by bestowing gifts like his; for all the gifts of the Supreme Ruler are of common advantage to all men; and he gives them to some individuals, not in order that they when they have received them may hide them out of sight, or employ them to the injury of others, but in order that they may bring them into common stock, and invite all those whom they can find to use and enjoy them with them.¹⁴

Philo's call to imitate God shows that Paul's imitation of Christ (1 Cor 11:1) is taught within a literary and theological context where it could be understood.

Later rabbinic literature also evinces this theme of imitation. Rabbis were not merely to impart knowledge of *Torah* with words, but they were to live a *life of Torah* that is an example for disciples. *Aboth* 1.17 states: "Simeon, his son, used to say: All my days I grew up among the sages and I have found nothing better for a person than silence. Study is not the most

¹² Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 32.11-12, quoted in Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 154 (italics in the original).

¹³ The practice of using patriarchs, prophets, priests, and kings from Israelite history as exemplars grew in the Second Temple Period. For example, Jews are called to imitate Joseph frequently in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*; see *Testament of Benjamin* 3:1-4:2, cf. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 825-826. See also Michael F. Stone and Theodore A. Bergen, *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

¹⁴ Philo *On the Virtues* 168-169; cf. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 657.

important thing, but deed; whoever indulges in too many words brings about sin.”¹⁵ Being able to live as one’s teacher is valued even above being able to teach as one’s teacher, as can also be seen in *Aboth* 4.5: “R. Ishmael said: He who learns in order to teach, they afford him adequate means to learn and to teach; and he who learns in order to practice, they afford him adequate means to learn and to teach and to practice.”¹⁶ In light of the importance of disciples imitating their rabbi’s example of life, Jacob Neusner concludes:

If the master is a living Torah, source of revelation of the oral tradition given at Sinai and embodied now in the master himself, then the disciple had best humbly imitate each and every gesture of that living Torah and so prepare himself as the nexus of the transmission of his same oral tradition to the coming generations.¹⁷

Paul notes in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 that he was not a burden to them but provided for his own sustenance through his trade. It is very possible that Paul shared the gospel with the networks of families who were in business or trade at the marketplace where he did business. It is his work ethic and his giving of himself to this congregation that he calls the Thessalonians to imitate, especially in light of the confused eschatology in the congregation which involved some rejection of vocational responsibilities.¹⁸ Notice how he addressed this problem sternly in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you avoid any brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how it is necessary to imitate us [οἴδατε πῶς δεῖ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς], because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day in order that we not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as an example for you, with the result that you imitate us [ἵνα ἑαυτοὺς τύπον δώμεν ὑμῖν εἰς τὸ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς]. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but being busybodies. Now such persons we command

¹⁵ *Aboth* 1.17, in *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 21, *Tractates Abodah Zarah, Horayoth, Eduyyoth, Aboth*, ed. I Epstein (London: Soncino, 1988), 6a-6b.

¹⁶ *Aboth* 4.5, in *Babylonian Talmud: Aboth* 21:10b-11a.

¹⁷ Jacob Neusner, “The Phenomenon of the Rabbi in Late Antiquity,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 17 (1970): 13.

¹⁸ M. J. J. Menken, “Paradise Regained or Still Lost? Eschatology and Disorderly Behavior in 2 Thessalonians,” *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 271-289.

and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brothers, do not grow weary of doing good.

Here Paul puts himself, Silas, and Timothy forward as “an example” (τύπον) and twice calls upon these Christians to “imitate us” (μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς). This text is especially noteworthy because “the example” that Paul’s life provides is neither his ability to argue before the Athenian Areopagus nor the number of his congregational mission starts but the example of his bi-vocational labor, probably the combination of his tent-making and mission work of preaching and teaching.¹⁹

As one examines the imitation theme in Paul beyond the Thessalonian correspondence, it becomes clear that Paul had a fairly broad and inclusive understanding of what was to be imitated in his life—it certainly went beyond his work ethic or missionary zeal—and included his wider moral life as a witness in the midst of pagan indulgence. For example, he writes to the church at Philippi—which was just down the road from Thessalonica—in Philippians 3:15–19:

Let us therefore, as many as are complete, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. Become fellow imitators of me, brothers, and observe those who walk according to the example you have in us [συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί, καὶ σκοπεῖτε τοὺς οὕτω περιπατοῦντας καθὼς ἔχετε τύπον ἡμᾶς]. For many walk [περιπατοῦσιν], of whom I often told you, and now tell you while weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

This text confirms Paul’s earlier teaching because he commands the Philippians to become “fellow imitators” (συμμιμηταί) of him, observing not only him but also those who already are walking according to the example of Paul. The participle τοὺς περιπατοῦντας reminds us of Paul’s Jewish heritage, since װלך (“walk”) is a common Hebrew metaphor for daily living.²⁰

¹⁹ Todd D. Still, “Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle’s Tentmaking and Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 781–795. See also Bruce Winter, “‘If a man does not wish to work . . .’ A Cultural and Historical Setting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6–16,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989): 303–315.

²⁰ See Andrew E. Steinmann and Michael Eschelbach, “Walk This Way: A Theme from Proverbs Reflected and Extended in Paul’s Letters,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70 (2006): 52–53.

Perhaps the most revealing of Paul's discussions of imitation is found in 1 Corinthians 4:9-17. There Paul speaks of being fools for Christ's sake, weak, without honor, hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, homeless, working long hours; it is this life of service and sacrifice that Paul calls upon the Corinthians to imitate. Paul writes:

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you, therefore, become imitators of me [παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε]. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

Paul's reference to "my ways which are *in Christ*" is baptismal language (1 Cor 4:17). These are the "ways" manifest in Paul because Paul has been crucified with Christ and remains in Christ (Gal 2:20). Willis Peter de Boer states, "There is a certain accent that keeps recurring in the passages on imitation. It is the accent on humility, self-denial, self-giving/self-sacrifice for the sake of Christ and the salvation of others."²¹ It is this cruciform life, which is Paul's through his baptismal union with Christ, that he calls Christians to imitate because they, too, have been crucified with Christ in baptism and remain in him and he in them.

III. Paul's Imitation of Christ's Cruciform Life

An absolutely vital aspect of Paul's focus on imitation of his example is the understanding that imitation of Paul is really *not* imitation of his own person but is imitation of the new baptismal reality: Christ as the one who speaks and lives in Paul.²² This is brought out already in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, the first imitation text noted at the start of this study: "You also became

²¹ De Boer, *Imitation of Paul*, 207.

²² Paul describes the new anthropology resulting from baptism as being "in Christ" but also as Christ being in the believer. The latter is what he also calls "the inner man" (Rom 6:22; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 3:16; cf. Gal 2:20).

imitators of us and *of the Lord.*” Important here is that Paul puts the apostles forward to be imitated because in them the congregation sees the reality of Christ who lives and speaks in the apostles. Jonathan Grothe, in his excellent book *Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry*, explains this chain of examples:

Paul recognized that his apostleship held a special place in a chain of models for behavior and imitation. With Jesus as Savior and example and with Jesus’ Spirit as the transforming power at work in the church, Christians are “saints” who are being made new according to the pattern of Christ. The ministry of the apostle plays a key mediating role also in this area of sanctification, both broadly and as regards specific situations. If Jesus is example, then His apostolic representative and imitator is also an example of the “Christ-like way of life” and also of what this means for Christian conduct in specific situations.²³

William Weinrich makes a similar point about how the office of the apostolic minister is shaped by the life of Christ:

The narrative of the story of the Christ from his Baptism to his death is, to be sure, the narrative of every Christian who is the disciple of Jesus from Baptism to faithful death. But the narrative of Jesus is also the narrative of the office of Christ, by no means separated from the reality of Baptism common to all, but yet given to some who are called and chosen to be in the midst of the disciples as the representative of him who is “gone away” but who is present in them for all.²⁴

The text where the explicit connection is made between imitating Paul because one will be imitating Christ is 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he states: “Become imitators of me, just as also I am of Christ [μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε καθὼς κἀγὼ Χριστοῦ]. Here Paul claims to be an imitator of Christ. There is a divergence of opinion among scholars, however, about how we are to understand Paul as an imitator of Christ.²⁵ The debate centers around exactly how much Paul could imitate Christ since he was neither an eyewitness to his earthly ministry nor had a gospel account among his scrolls. Wilhelm Michaelis, in his *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* article on “μιμέομαι,” even states that imitation in Paul is primarily about

²³ Jonathan F. Grothe, *Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry: Jesus and Paul* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 78.

²⁴ William Weinrich, “Called and Ordained: Reflections on the New Testament View of the Office of the Ministry,” *Logia* 2, no. 1 (1993): 24–25.

²⁵ Seyoon Kim, “*Imitatio Christi* (1 Corinthians 11:1): How Paul Imitates Jesus Christ in Dealing with Idol Food (1 Corinthians 8–10),” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13 (2003): 193–226; see also David B. Capes, “*Imitatio Christi* and the Gospel Genre,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13 (2003): 1–19.

obedience of apostolic authority; Paul's call to imitate him then is reduced to a call to obey him.²⁶ While the call to imitate him in 2 Thessalonians 3 has an edge to it, there is more to this theme than a covert way of exercising apostolic muscle. Although Paul probably knew many details about that life of Jesus through the oral gospel traditions and his personal contact with "the pillars" of the church, it appears that it is primarily Jesus' sacrificial servanthood that Paul has in mind when he speaks of imitating Christ, and not a list of specific behaviors of Jesus. Others have aptly titled this the "cruciform life" of Paul.²⁷ In 2 Corinthians 4:11, Paul describes how the life of Jesus is manifested in his own being given up to death: "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake in order that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

This cruciform life of sacrificial servanthood is not a detached life to be imitated from afar; it is a life Paul imitates because it is already his life through being joined to Christ's crucifixion in baptism: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself up for me" (Gal 2:20; cf. Rom 6:1-6). Paul's exhortations to imitation are due to the fact that Christians are both sinner and saint; because of the ongoing condition of sin waging war within Christians, it is important to remind them who they are and how they show that new identity in Christ.²⁸ This cruciform life is not a spiritual abstraction; over time it manifested itself even in Paul's own physical appearance: "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus [τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ]" (Gal 6:17).

Some interpreters may think that baptismal theology is being read *into* (rather than *out of*) the teaching of imitation in the Thessalonian epistles. The foundational nature of baptism for the cruciform life of which Paul writes is implicit at the end of the thanksgiving in 2 Thessalonians in his mention of "the name of our Lord Jesus Christ being glorified in you": "To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power; in order that the name of our Lord Jesus be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus

²⁶ Michaelis, "μιμέομαι," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 4:671-673.

²⁷ See Gorman, *Cruciformity*, and especially Weinrich, "Called and Ordained," 26.

²⁸ For Paul's understanding of sin as an ongoing condition, see Charles A. Gieschen, "Original Sin in the New Testament," *Concordia Journal* 31 (2005): 365-372.

Christ" (2 Thess 1:11-12). I have shown elsewhere that "the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . in you" is the Divine Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit given in baptism.²⁹ It is not just any word of God used in baptism, but the Name of God is given, dwells in the believer, and shows forth a new creation from this divine reality. Paul is more explicit in connecting name and baptism in 1 Corinthians 6:11: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* and in the Spirit of our God."

In light of Paul's assertion that he imitates Christ, one may surmise that Paul's imitation could not have been too convincing since no one thought Paul to be Jesus. Yet, in spite of his weaknesses and apparent physical challenges, Paul states that the Galatians received him as "Christ Jesus" in their midst. He writes in Galatians 4:12-14:

I beg of you, brethren, become as I am [γίνεσθε ὡς ἐγώ], for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as God's Angel, namely Christ Jesus.

Hans Dieter Betz downplays the assertion Paul is making by understanding it as a hypothetical exaggeration; the Galatians received Paul *as if* he were an angel, even *as if* he were Jesus Christ.³⁰ J. Louis Martyn offers a more balanced explanation to this startling reception:

As God's messenger, Paul preached Christ (1:16); and that preaching included the conviction that, as he had himself suffered crucifixion with Christ, so in his present life he bears in his body physical scars—and illnesses—that are marks of his association with Jesus (6:17; cf. 2 Cor 4:5, 10). It was then the crucified Jesus Christ who lived in him, paradoxically transforming his weakness into strength without removing it (3:1; 2:19-20). The odiously sick, apparently demonic figure [Paul] was seen, then, to be in fact an angel sent from God, just as the legally executed criminal was seen, then, to be in fact God's own Son.³¹

I have argued extensively elsewhere that, in light of Paul's emphasis on apostolic authority and direct revelation earlier in this epistle, the

²⁹ Charles A. Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003): 131.

³⁰ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 226.

³¹ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 421

Galatians did not receive him merely as an envoy of Jesus or as an angel from among the myriads of angels (note Gal 1:8), but they received him as the most authoritative angel/messenger who not only sent him (Gal 1:1), but also lives in him (Gal 2:20) and speaks in him (2 Cor 13:3): God's Angel, Christ Jesus.³² It is this union with Christ through both baptism and the apostolic office that led Paul to confess "as I imitate Christ."

IV. Imitation of Christ as Example to the Church in a Pagan World

What, therefore, does all this mean for twenty-first century Lutheran pastors? These Pauline texts are certainly neither a manual for the spiritual life, such as that developed by Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), nor are they primarily calling upon us to imitate *Paul*. These texts are calling upon pastors to imitate *Christ* by living in their baptismal reality as pastors who through union with Christ and placement in the apostolic ministry have his mind and show him forth, not only in their proclamation but also in their very lives.³³ These Pauline texts are not calling pastors merely to be moral examples; they are calling upon pastors to be living icons of Christ to their flocks and to this fallen world, to be tangible, embodied examples of the new cruciform life that Christ lives out through his body, the church. These Pauline texts are calling pastors to an apostolic ministry that is not characterized by worldly markers of success, but one that is characterized by the marks of Christ: service, suffering, and sacrifice. Paul is not mimicking someone he cannot be; he is imitating who he *already truly is* in Christ.

Does this mean pastors are to be more of an example in the world and congregation than other Christians? Jonathan Grothe addresses this question:

Does this mean operating with a "double standard," a different set of criteria to which pastors must "measure up"? Yes and no. The same Christ is example to all, and the same paradigm of holiness and love is the goal for all. Nor is it really a matter of a "standard" that one must "live up to," but rather a "pattern" that one will "grow in to." Nevertheless, in human eyes the answer may have to be "yes." For we must make, as well as we are able, evaluation of human conduct *because*, in God's economy, the conduct of the pastor is paradigmatic of the life of Christ. Also, the

³² Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 315–325.

³³ See also the comments of Jacob A. O. Preus III, "Jesus: To Be or Not to Be, That Is the Question," *Concordia Journal* 23 (1997): 172–174.

consequences of the behavior of these men—whether they succeed or fail—are so far-reaching for the spiritual lives of others.³⁴

The purpose of this walk through these texts was to demonstrate that a significant element of Paul's effort to shape Christian identity among his early congregations in pagan settings is found in his understanding of baptism as crucifixion with Christ and the presentation of his resulting cruciform life as a personal example to be imitated. Because the gifts of God delivered in the proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments are not dependent upon the personal sanctification of the pastor, there may be a tendency within our Lutheran circles to downplay the significance of the personal example of the pastor in carrying out the mission of the church. The imitation of the apostolic minister as the one who imitates Christ, however, is biblical teaching reflected in the ordination vows of pastors³⁵ because it is important for the mission of the church. This is especially true in a pagan setting where people are ignorant of the biblical narrative or where the church, in its compromise with the world, is losing its cruciform shape. Here the reality of Christ is read not only off the pages of the Scriptures but off "the living epistles"—the apostolic ministers—who show the world and their flocks the life of Christ in faithful service, suffering, and sacrifice (2 Cor 3:2). A pastor cannot say, "Do what I say, not what I do." His example is shown not only at the pulpit, altar, and narthex but also during the rest of the week as the pastor lives out the cruciform life in his congregation, community, marriage, and family.

Paul's purpose in calling others to imitate him was for the church as a whole to reflect the cruciform life of Christ in the world. Michael Gorman expresses Paul's ecclesial focus: "For Paul, the experience of dying with Christ, though intensely personal, can never be private. Fundamentally, cruciformity means community, and community means cruciformity. . . . The Church is a living icon of the cross, of the crucified Messiah."³⁶ In like manner, the cruciform life of the pastor is not an end in itself, but

³⁴ Grothe, *Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry*, 82 (italics in the original).

³⁵ The final set of questions asked of the candidate prior to the laying on of hands is: "Finally, will you adorn the Office of the Holy Ministry with a holy life? Will you be diligent in the study of Holy Scripture and the Confessions? And will you be constant in prayer for those under your pastoral care?" To this he responds: "I will, the Lord helping me through the power and grace of His Holy Spirit." The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 166.

³⁶ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 366–367.

something that Christ uses to shape his church like unto himself, in order that the church might be “a living icon” of him to the world.

How can pastors help converts from false religions understand the life in Christ? How can pastors help their flocks shape their Christian identity in today’s pagan and pluralistic world? With their apostolic predecessor they can say, “Become imitators of me, just as also I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).



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