

Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre

DAVID B. CAPES
HOUSTON BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

This article considers that the Gospel genre belongs to the category of ancient biography designed to provide the reader and hearer with a pattern to imitate. The literary and cultural ethos of the formative period of early Christianity prepared the first disciples to "imitate Christ" whenever the Gospels were liturgically read. In fact, the ethical instructions "walk as he walked," "imitate Christ," or even "follow me" required a narrative definition. So the imitatio Christi provided a significant impulse for the writing of the Gospels, and concomitantly, the Gospels provided the narrative definition for what it meant to follow Jesus.

Key Words: Gospel genre, imitation, discipleship, Gospel of Mark, martyrdom, worship

Substantial work over the last few decades has located the NT Gospels squarely in the genre of ancient biographies. Although Rudolph Bultmann argued that the Gospels had no parallels in Greco-Roman literature and were in fact the creation of the early church at the intersection of kerygma and myths about Jesus,¹ recent scholars have offered serious objections to Bultmann's conclusions. Helmut Koester, for example, concludes that Mark is the first to produce a "biography of Jesus" modeled on the biography of the prophet.² Like other OT prophetic narratives, Mark's Gospel collects earlier materials and begins with Jesus' call at his baptism and installation into his prophetic office ("you are my beloved Son," 1:11). He travels throughout Galilee

1. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (rev. ed.; trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 345-72.

2. Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM / Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 26-29, 289-92. Koester follows Klaus Baltzer, *Die Biographie der Propheten* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975).

speaking the message of God and finds ultimate vindication for his office beyond his passion and death.

Philip Schuler takes note in his book, *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew*,³ that the Greco-Roman world had a type of biography called encomium or laudatory biography. The aim of this genre was to elicit praise for the subjects of the works by underscoring their greatness and character. The NT Gospels, Schuler argues, fit this paradigm. They not only identify Jesus as the Son of God and elicit praise for him, but they also set him up as a model worthy of emulation.⁴

One of the most thorough attempts at demonstrating that the NT Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman βίοι has come from Richard Burridge's book *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*.⁵ Following a survey and evaluation of past attempts to deal with the genre question, Burridge proceeds to offer his own solution utilizing methodologies of literary theory. With his thorough knowledge of primary and secondary literature in the period, he compares the Gospels with other relevant texts and finds sufficient warrant to conclude that the NT Gospels belong to the category of ancient biography. Yet, because the term *biography* carries certain expectations for modern readers, Burridge prefers the Greek βίοι (= "Lives") to biography.⁶ Having established this, Burridge continues to press the question of interpretation. He writes: "If genre is the key to a work's interpretation, and the genre of the gospels is βίος, then the key to their interpretation must be the person of their subject, Jesus of Nazareth."⁷ To those who hold that the early church had little or no interest in the earthly Jesus, Burridge answers "nonsense"; the writing of the Gospels demonstrates that the early church had immense interest in what Jesus did and said.

In his book *What Is a Gospel?* Charles Talbert argues that the Gospels did belong to the category of ancient biography,⁸ and he proffers a classification system based on the functions of a biography within a social-intellectual-spiritual milieu. Recognizing that ancient biographers intended to instruct or propagandize, Talbert presents five categories of ancient biography. Although several purposes may be at

3. Philip Schuler, *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

4. *Ibid.*, 108-9.

5. Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

6. *Ibid.*, 240-41.

7. *Ibid.*, 256.

8. Charles Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 15-17.

work in any writing, the NT Gospels represent three of the five categories. Mark and John are written to defend Jesus from misunderstanding and to present an accurate assessment of him. Matthew is written to show that the life of Jesus legitimates his teaching and provides the essential tools necessary to interpret his legislations. Luke-Acts narrates the life of Jesus and the origins of the early church to demonstrate where the true apostolic tradition can be found.⁹ In addition to these functions, however, Talbert finds that all four Gospels belong to what he calls "Type B," that is, a biography designed "to dispel a false image of the teacher and to provide a true model to follow."¹⁰

In this article I want to build on these earlier insights and to further the consideration that the Gospel genre belongs to the category of ancient biography designed to provide the reader or hearer with a pattern to imitate. The argument will proceed along the following lines: First, there existed in Greco-Roman and Jewish culture a literary ethos in which writers, moralists, and theologians held notable figures as models to be imitated. Second, within the Christian tradition, outside the Gospels, leaders urged disciples to imitate the life of Christ, and they appear to have had specific actions and attitudes in mind. Third, explicit within the Gospels themselves is a clear call to follow Jesus and an intention to portray him as not only God's unique Son but as one whom God would have the faithful emulate. Fourth, in the period after the writing of the Gospels, Christians read these texts and urged that Jesus and the life he lived be imitated. These factors suggest that the Gospels should be understood as providing Christians with a script for imitation. When early Christians utilized the *imitatio* as a platform for moral exhortation, they presumed a narrative record of Jesus' life as recounted in the Gospels. In other words, the admonition "walk as he walked" or "imitate Christ" or even "follow me" requires a narrative definition. One cannot imitate Christ without a story of how he lived. Perhaps it would be too much to say the Gospels were written in order to provide this story; nevertheless, this appears to be a major way that the Gospels functioned in the early church.

IMITATION IN GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE

Moralists in the Greco-Roman era used a variety of literary and rhetorical conventions to exhort their followers to lives of virtue. Personal examples were a common device, considered more persuasive

9. *Ibid.*, 92-98, 133-35.

10. *Ibid.*, 94.

than other devices. The closer the example the more likely it would affect one to lead the right kind of life; yet models may also be found in literature.¹¹ Seneca notes that in the struggle to improve ourselves we must have substantial help. While this may come from the living, it may also come from the ancients because, after all, they have the time to assist us. Yet one should turn to people who teach by their lives and not just by their words. Those who practice what is right are to be preferred over those whose words do not match their lives (Seneca, *Epistle* 52:1-9).

Quintilian (*Inst. Orat.* 2.2.8) writes that the teacher of rhetoric must be of good character. Purity of character will preserve the tenderness of children, while strength of authority will keep the bolder boys in check. The teacher must set an example and govern them with discipline: "for however many models of imitation he may give them from the authors they are reading, it will still be found that fuller nourishment is provided by the living voice."

Dio Chrysostom (*Discourses* 55.4-5) argues with his interlocutor that Socrates acquired his skill as a teacher from Homer although the two never met. One could be a pupil (μαθητήν) and a follower (ζηλωτής) of Homer without ever associating with him. If one follows him—or any good teacher for that matter—then one knows what he is like (ὅποιος). By imitating his works and deeds (μιμούμενος τὰ ἔργα καὶ τοὺς λόγους), one tries to make himself like him (ἐπιχειρεῖ ὅμοιον αὐτὸν ἀποφάνειν). By imitating his/her teacher, one is able to acquire the art (τέχνην).

Isocrates (*Evagoras* 73-77), while eulogizing Evagoras, clearly prefers a written record of a man's life over other memorials. He writes:

For my part, Nicocles, I think that while effigies of the body are fine memorials, yet likenesses of deeds and of the character are of far greater value, and these are to be observed only in discourses composed according to the rules of art. These I prefer to statues because I know, in the first place, that honourable men pride themselves not so much on bodily beauty as they desire to be honoured for their deeds and their wisdom; in the second place, because I know that images must of necessity remain solely among those in whose cities they were set up, whereas portrayals in words may be published throughout Hellas, and having been spread abroad in the gatherings of enlightened men, are welcomed among those whose approval is more to be desired than that of all others; and finally, while no one can make the bodily nature resemble moulded statues and portraits in painting, yet for those who do not choose to be slothful,

11. Abraham Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 135.

but desire to be good men, it is easy to imitate the character of their fellow-men and their thoughts and purposes—those, I mean, that are embodied in the spoken word. For these reasons especially I have undertaken to write this discourse because I believed that for you, for your children, and for all the other descendants of Evagoras, it would be by far the best incentive, if someone should assemble his achievements, give them verbal adornment, and submit them to you for your contemplation and study. For we exhort young men to the study of philosophy by praising others in order that they, emulating those who are eulogized, may desire to adopt the same pursuits, but I appeal to you and yours, using as examples not aliens, but members of your own family, and I counsel you to devote your attention to this, that you may not be surpassed in either word or deed by any of the Hellenes.¹²

For Isocrates several notions emerge regarding written or spoken recollections of great men and the necessity to imitate them. First, he held that the finest memorial to any great man lay in discourses that recounted his character and deeds. Second, while a statue testifies to a man's greatness only in one city, the published account knew no geographic barriers. Third, it is easier to study and imitate the character, thoughts, and purposes of great men whose lives are recorded in the spoken or written word.

Plutarch is renowned for his biographies of famous Greek and Roman statesmen. Plutarch's "Lives," written about AD 100 to 125, remain some of the best biographical and historical sources for 44 individuals, whom he honored in his writings. In one of his "Lives," he expressed his purpose (Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 1-2):

I began the writing of my "Lives" for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavoring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted. For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully "how large he was and of what mien," and select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know. "And oh! what greater joy than this canst thou obtain," and more efficacious for moral improvement?¹³

12. *Isocrates* (vol. 3, LCL; trans. Larue van Hook; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), 45-49.

13. This "introduction" is found at the beginning of Timoleon in *Plutarch's Lives* (vol. 6; LCL; trans. Bernadotte Perrin; London: Heinemann / New York: Putnam's, 1918), 260-61.

Plutarch found that in the pursuit of moral excellence there was no greater tool than studying the "Lives" of the large men of history and seeking to "fashion and adorn" one's life to the virtues they exhibited. Elsewhere Plutarch comments that just as color suits and stimulates the vision so an excellent life invites one to attain the proper good. The virtuous deeds of worthy subjects "implant in those who search them out a great and zealous eagerness which leads to imitation" (Plutarch, *Pericles* 1.3-4). Virtuous acts, he writes, "disposes a man that he no sooner admires the works of virtue than he strives to emulate those who wrought them" (Plutarch, *Pericles* 2.2).¹⁴

Lucian (*Demonax* 1-2; second century AD) recounts the life of Demonax, a Cynic philosopher whom he greatly admires and hopes the young may emulate. Having studied for a while under Demonax, he commends him to his readers.

It is now fitting to tell of Demonax for two reasons—that he may be retained in memory by men of culture as far as I can bring it about, and that young men of good instincts who aspire to philosophy may not have to shape themselves by ancient precedents alone, but may be able to set themselves a pattern from our modern world and copy that man, the best of all philosophers whom I know about.

From this brief survey several conclusions can be drawn.¹⁵ First, moralists in the Greco-Roman period considered the virtuous lives of certain great men a significant factor in the training of moral character. Second, while there was clearly a preference for living models, great benefit could be derived from the study of the "Lives" of people chronologically and geographically removed. Third, the deeds and characters of these great men may be kept in memory through both spoken and published accounts. In fact, the desire to maintain the memory of such great figures gave rise to a variety of compositions

14. *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 3 (LCL; trans. Bernadotte Perrin; London: Heinemann / New York: Putnam's, 1916), 5-7.

15. Other relevant texts include Isocrates, *To Demonicus* 36; "Imitate the character of kings, and follow their ways closely. . . . Obey the laws which have been laid down by kings, but consider their manner of life your highest law"; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.3; 4.1.1, wrote that there was nothing more beneficial than spending time with Socrates, and even remembering him brought great profit; Pliny, *Letters* 8.13, expresses the value of having a living model such as one's father that one can emulate; Seneca, *Epistles* 11.9-10, writing in the first century AD, advises Lucilius to avoid misdeeds by finding a good man, keeping him constantly in mind, and living as if he were always watching; also Seneca counsels to find a good man and keep him in mind because recollections of him will cause one to adjust and shape his/her personality in light of his own; the good man then becomes a guardian and model; Seneca, *Epistles* 6.5-6, prefers daily, personal contact to books or lectures because (1) people believe their eyes before their ears, and (2) the way to transformation through personal example is shorter than the way via precepts.

that celebrate their lives. Fourth, these narratives of great men do more than inspire those who read or hear them; they assist in the study and imitation of virtuous acts, thoughts, and character. Fifth, moralists instructed their students to find examples whose practice matched their teaching. Inconsistent lives were not worthy of imitation. Finally, one could become a "disciple" or "follower" without personal association with a great teacher. Through the study and imitation of their words and deeds contained in writings about them (particularly those that are well composed), one can know what kind of teachers they are and ultimately become like them.

IMITATION IN JEWISH LITERATURE

Jewish literature from the Hellenistic age exhibits similar notions about imitation. According to Philo (*Vit. Mos.* 1.158), Moses set himself up as an example to be imitated. In the wisdom tradition the virtuous life is held up as the path to immortality, and the godly imitate it (*Wis* 4:2). In the face of persecution, Jews were to remember and imitate the example of those who endured torture and death, rather than assimilate to Hellenistic ways. In one account Antiochus IV arrested seven brothers and their mother for not eating swine's flesh and threatened them with torture. The oldest son is held up as an example to follow. In the face of the tyrant, the youth says he is ready to die rather than transgress the law delivered by Moses. The account of his death is rather graphic (*4 Macc.* 9:19-25):

They spread fire under him, and while fanning the flames they tightened the wheel further. The wheel was completely smeared with blood, and the heap of coals was being quenched by the drippings of gore, and pieces of flesh were falling off the axles of the machine. Although the ligaments joining his bones were already severed, the courageous youth, worthy of Abraham, did not groan, but as though transformed by fire into immortality, he nobly endured the rackings. "Imitate me, brothers," he said. "Do not leave your post in my struggle or renounce our courageous family ties. Fight the sacred and noble battle for religion. Thereby the just Providence of our ancestors may become merciful to our nation and take vengeance on the accursed tyrant." When he had said this, the saintly youth broke the thread of life.

Despite the horrible tortures, the brothers banded together and encouraged each other to stay the course. The account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their faithfulness in the face of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (*Dan* 3) provided them an example (*4 Macc.* 13:8-10):

For they constituted a holy chorus of religion and encouraged one another, saying, "Brothers, let us die like brothers for the sake of the law; let us imitate the three youths in Assyria who despised the same ordeal of the furnace. Let us not be cowardly in the demonstration of our piety."

In admonishing the righteous to endure suffering rather than assimilate to Greek ways, examples worthy of imitation may be found not only among more recent martyrs but also in the sacred texts of Israel.

In the *Testament of Benjamin*, Joseph becomes the example to follow. Although many planned evil against him, he still experienced God's blessing by living a righteous life.

Now, my children, love the Lord God of heaven and earth, keep his commandments; pattern your life after the good and pious man Joseph. Let your thoughts incline to the good, as you know to be so with me, because he who has the right set of mind sees everything rightly. (*T. Benj.* 3.1-2)

See then, my children, what is the goal of the good man. Be imitators of him in his goodness because of his compassion, in order that you may wear crowns of glory. For a good man does not have a blind eye, but he is merciful to all, even though they may be sinners. And even if persons plot against him for evil ends, by doing good this man conquers evil, being watched over by God. (*T. Benj.* 4.1-3)

The admonition to imitate the man Joseph depends on the narrative of Gen 37-50. It must be remembered that his brothers sold him into slavery, and Potiphar's wife tried unsuccessfully to seduce him. It must further be recalled how God used those events to bring about great good for Israel. In this case, the exhortation is given a narrative definition. One cannot imitate Joseph and his piety without some knowledge of how he lived.

In some ways the virtuous are enjoined to imitate God. Philo (*Virt.* 168) writes that the virtuous man bestows benefits on his neighbors to do good to them. As best they can, people should imitate God and thereby pass on the divine powers and gifts to others. When the virtuous bestow God's gifts, they imitate him. According to Philo, there is no greater good than humans imitating the everlasting God (*Spec. Leg.* 4.73). In the procreative act, parents imitate God and thereby participate in the divine nature (*Spec. Leg.* 2.225). Hama bar Hanina (*Sota* 14a) admonishes the reader to walk after God by clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, and burying the dead.¹⁶ No doubt the core idea of imitating God originated in the Hebrew Bible. Therein God commands Israel to be holy as he is

16. Sidney Steiman, "Imitation of God (Imitatio Dei)," *EncJud* 8.1292-93.

holy (Lev 19:2), to love and care for the stranger as he does (Deut 10:18-19) and to rest on the Sabbath in imitation of God's rest on the seventh day of creation (Exod 20:10-11).

In the *Letter of Aristeas*, the king seeks wisdom from the scholars who have arrived to translate the scripture. Over several days, as a grand banquet is prepared, he questions the sages, and their responses often appeal to the concept of imitating God or wise men. When the king asks, "Whom ought one appoint as chief ministers?" the scribe answers: "Men who hate wickedness, and in imitation of his way of life do justice, so as to earn themselves good repute continually—just as you, O mighty King achieve this aim, God having granted you a crown of righteousness" (280). The king asks another, "Whom must one appoint as commanders of his forces?" The guest responds, "Men of outstanding bravery and justice, who prefer saving men's lives to victory at the reckless risk of lives. As God showers blessings upon all, you too in imitation of him are a benefactor to your subjects" (281). To another scholar the king asks, "What is the essence of godliness?" To which the answer is given: "The realization that God is continually at work in everything and is omniscient, and that man cannot hide from him an unjust deed or an evil action. For, as God does good to the whole world, so you by imitating him would be without offense" (210). The king poses another question to one of his esteemed guests: "How can one keep his kingdom without offense to the end?" Following a brief pause, the sage says, "You would administer it best by imitating the eternal goodness of God. By using longsuffering and treatment of those who merit (punishment) more leniently than they deserve, you will convert them from evil and bring them to repentance" (187-88). To another guest the king inquires, "How can one make his friends like himself?" He replied, "If your friends saw that you showed intense concern for the people whom you rule. This you will do by observing how God blesses the human race, giving them health and food and all other gifts in their season" (190).

To sum up, Jewish wisdom and moral discourse during the Greco-Roman era utilized the language of imitation to spur readers and hearers on to virtuous, pious lives in much the same way as non-Jewish writers. Examples could be found in contemporaries or in the record of outstanding men of the past, such as Moses or Joseph. Scripture then served as a way of keeping alive the memory of these outstanding persons. In particular the language of imitation served to encourage the faithful during periods of persecution. Those threatened with imprisonment, suffering, or death could appeal to the lives of martyrs who, despite terrible physical torture, nevertheless remained faithful and refused assimilation. In some texts the virtuous

are enjoined to imitate God especially through acts of generosity, observing the commandments, doing justice, and showing goodness and mercy. These were the ways of God clearly observable in the world and in the sacred record of God's dealings with Israel. The "acts" of God were never merely abstractions; they received concrete expression in the narrative of the Old Testament.

Clearly then, a cultural and literary environment existed in the period in which the lives of virtuous and righteous individuals served as examples for imitation. Authors composed texts to keep alive the memory of these noble people and to encourage their readers and hearers to follow their examples. We now turn our attention to the NT texts outside the Gospels that call the faithful to imitation.

IMITATION IN THE NT, OUTSIDE THE GOSPELS

The authors of the NT books inherit a culture in which imitation and example are part of the moral discourse. In many ways they simply receive and hand on this tradition. On the negative side, there are warnings not to imitate evil. Just as Israel was not to imitate the detestable practices of the Canaanites (Deut 18:9), so Christians are not to imitate evil in any form (3 John 11). Scripture teaches that God had dealt severely with Sodom and Gomorrah for their transgressions to provide an example of how not to live in immorality and ungodliness (2 Pet 2:6; Jude 1:7).

On the positive side, the author of Hebrews admonishes his readers to remember their leaders and imitate their faith (Heb 13:7). Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to imitate the Judean churches in their patient endurance during persecution (1 Thess 2:14). Earlier in the same letter the apostle praised them for becoming "imitators of us and of the Lord" (1 Thess 1:6). Despite great affliction they had received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit, and they in turn became an example (τύπον) for churches in Macedonia and Achaia. With great boldness Paul never hesitates to appeal to his own example.¹⁷ He instructs the Philippians to "become fellow-imitators of me" and watch the lives of those who walk according to the pattern they found in him and his co-workers (Phil 3:17; cf. 4:9). The apostle reminds the slothful in Thessalonica to recall their valiant labor and imitate their example of hard work. They had not been idle. They had paid for what they ate. They worked hard not to be a burden in order to make themselves an example (τύπον) to imitate (2 Thess 3:7-9).

17. Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox, 1991), argues that mimesis functions in Paul's letters as a strategy for power, establishing and legitimating the power structures inherent in the early Christian communities.

Without any sense of apology, Paul says to the Corinthians, "become imitators of me" (1 Cor 4:16). Though they have many guides (v. 15), they have only one spiritual father, namely, Paul. Soon the apostle would send Timothy to remind (ἀναμνήσει) them of his ways in Christ. It is important to note that this admonition comes after a list of Paul's afflictions (4:9-13). Throughout these first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul argues that true power and authority are located in the cross. Indeed the entire Christian life is lived under the shadow of the cross. His own practices, he holds, embody the cruciform life. That God's power and salvation are revealed through weakness subverts all conventional wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 1:13).¹⁸ Paradoxically, Paul knows that his weaknesses and afflictions enable the power of the cross to become manifest. Therefore, imitating Paul and remembering his ways in Christ ultimately point away from Paul, not toward him.

These texts evidence the tendency suggested above, that moral discourse proceeds best on the strength of personal examples. Moreover, there is a clear preference and appeal made to the living voice and consistent practice of contemporary examples. This accords well with what we find in Greco-Roman literature. But appeals to personal example in the NT never overshadow the appeal to imitate Christ.

In 1 Cor 11:1 Paul writes: "Become imitators of me as I am of Christ." This verse concludes the instruction of 10:23-33. If the Corinthians imitate Paul, they ultimately find themselves imitating Christ, because the apostle himself imitates Christ. In particular he has in mind how Christ denied himself in sacrifice on the cross. Hans Conzelmann opines that imitation here does not take its bearings from the life of Jesus or his teachings,¹⁹ yet others disagree.²⁰ Clearly the cross is central for Paul, but lying behind Christ's saving work is a life lived in obedience to God, a life for others, a teacher of divine wisdom. One cannot say these aspects of Jesus' life are not assumed. Fee remarks that it may well be that Jesus' teaching on food laws—particularly the conclusion that he declared all foods clean (Mark 7:1-19)—informed Paul's remarks on eating idol meat.²¹

In Phil 2:5 Paul prefaces the so-called Philippian hymn with the admonition "Have this mind in you which is also in Christ Jesus." The apostle finds in the crucified one the example par excellence of one who did nothing from selfishness but in humility sought to serve

18. S. E. Fowl, "Imitation of Paul/ of Christ," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 428-31.

19. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 180.

20. E.g., Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 490-91.

21. *Ibid.*

others first (2:1-4). Although some object that it was not Paul's intent to set before the church an example to be followed,²² still others believe that the apostle does establish Jesus as the lordly example whose life and thinking can help the faithful fashion their lives into conformity with God's purpose.²³ The hymn itself provides a narrative definition for the self-abasement and emptying of the one who existed "in the form of God," and appears to assume a more comprehensive narrative such as is later distilled in the Gospels. Elsewhere, for example, Paul is clearly aware of the tradition surrounding the Lord's Supper, including the night setting, the betrayal, the bread and the cup, and the words spoken by Jesus on that occasion as a foreshadowing of his death (1 Cor 11:23-26). The words "Do this in remembrance of me" (11: 24, 25) presuppose a community that imitates these faithful words of Jesus as a part of its liturgy.²⁴

In the NT the imitation of Christ is never far removed from the imitation of God. In Eph 4:32 the author urges his readers to "forgive each other, as God in Christ has also forgiven you." In the next verses he writes, "therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for us, . . ." (Eph 5:1-2). The admonitions to forgive and to walk in love are established through the example God has provided in Christ.

In 1 Pet 2 the writer says that the one who does what is right and suffers for it finds approval (χάρις) with God. Ultimately submission to injustice is the Christian thing to do. Witness the life of Jesus. The writer states (1 Pet 2:21-23):

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example (ὑπογράμμον), so that you might follow in his steps.

"He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

22. E.g., Ralph Martin, *A Hymn to Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 290-91. Originally published in 1967 under the title *Carmen Christi*.

23. Larry Hurtado, "Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11," in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare* (ed. J. C. Hurd and P. Richardson; Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1984), 113-26; see also Gerald Hawthorne, "The Imitation of Christ: Discipleship in Philippians," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (ed. Richard Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 168-78.

24. John Laurance, "The Eucharist as the Imitation of Christ," *Theological Studies* 47 (1986): 286-96.

This section (21b-25) may well have its origin in liturgical tradition. Christians are called to entrust themselves to God, recognizing that suffering may be part of their destiny. To "follow in his footsteps" implies a common journey and a shared destiny. As J. N. D. Kelly notes: "Submissive acceptance of treatment that is patently unfair is a fine and Christian thing precisely because the Lord himself believed in that way and the Christian's vocation is to imitate Him."²⁵ The use of Isa 53:9 indicates that Jesus' innocent suffering finds prior reference in the prophecies. Moreover, recollections of how he suffered—that is, without threatening and returning abuse—imply a developed account of how he endured suffering. In other words, the suffering of Jesus here moves beyond the abstract statement to presume a sequence of events in which he was abused without retaliation. Again, the example he leaves and the steps believers should follow require a narrative definition. Without that, the passage lacks persuasive power.

Throughout the NT outside the Gospels, we find numerous admonitions to imitate Christ. Although the word *imitate* does not always occur in these passages, the concept of Jesus as model and example is clearly implied in the texts we have discussed. Furthermore, it is very unlikely that these writers operated without a coherent story of Jesus. This does not mean, of course, that they had read the NT Gospels; it means only that a narrative of Jesus' life, whether oral or written, was available for them to draw upon. What is unknown, however, is to what degree a reader or hearer of any particular letter would have had knowledge of the particulars of Jesus' life. In other words, there was a growing need for a biography of Jesus to provide a script for imitation.

IMITATION IN THE GOSPELS

The stories of Jesus eventually distilled into the NT Gospels. These along with the consistent invitation to follow Jesus give evidence that the *imitatio* originated in the ministry of Jesus. Space does not permit a full discussion of all the relevant passages, but it is clear that this aspect is found in all the Gospels. In John 13, for example, Jesus washes the disciples' feet and instructs them: "For I have given you an example (ὑποδείγμα), that you also should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

Again and again Jesus calls disciples with the invitation "Follow me" (e.g., Mark 1:16-20 and par.; John 1:43). Any who want to follow must be willing to take up a cross (Mark 8:31-33). So "following

25. J. N. D. Kelly, *Commentary on the Epistle to Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 118.

Jesus" means more here than "falling in line." Ernest Best concludes that Mark's primary objective is to build up believers and show them what true discipleship is. Discipleship begins in relation to Jesus. It is the answer to the call, "Follow me." The second evangelist's understanding of discipleship does not originate in Jesus' instruction—as with Matthew—but in who Jesus is and what he did. It is central therefore to Mark's purpose to describe the Messiah's journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem as "the way" (8:27; 9:33-34; 10:32).²⁶ Yet, from the first, the Gospel characterizes Jesus' life as "the way" in its quotations of Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3 (Mark 1:1-3):

See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

In his discussion of Christian discipleship in Mark, Philip Davis underscores the correlation between Christology and soteriology.²⁷ Discipleship, he writes, is the individual's total response to God's offer of salvation through Jesus and includes more than faith; it entails the desire to leave all behind and follow Jesus. Christocentricity therefore characterizes Mark's presentation of Jesus as the Son of God and of the disciples as those who model their lives on his.²⁸ In a similar move Paul Achtemeier notes that, although Mark frequently refers to Jesus as "teacher," his teaching comprises mainly what he does, not what he says.²⁹ Davis finds it telling that "the most notable Markan 'omissions' involve matters that are not susceptible of imitation, including the virginal conception and the preeschatological resurrection."³⁰

Furthermore, the first appearance of Jesus is for baptism, the beginning of "the way," which corresponds to believers' initiation into the Christian life. According to Davis, Mark's story of Jesus "can be read as a blueprint for the Christian life: it begins with baptism, proceeds with the vigorous pursuit of ministry in the face of temptation and opposition, and culminates in suffering and death oriented toward an as-yet unseen vindication."³¹ Yet Davis is quick to point out

26. Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNTSup 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 10-15.

27. Philip Davis, "Christology, Discipleship, and Self-Understanding in the Gospel of Mark," in *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in Early Christianity: A Study in Changing Horizons—Essays in Appreciation of Ben F. Meyer from Former Students* (ed. David J. Hawkin and Tom Robinson; Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 101-9.

28. *Ibid.*, 106-9. Otherwise, see Best (*Following Jesus*, 39, 127), who minimizes the *imitatio* theme to discipleship except in the most obvious texts (e.g., Mark 10:43-45).

29. Paul Achtemeier, *Mark* (Proclamation Commentaries; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 63-64.

30. Davis, "Christology," 109.

31. *Ibid.*

that following Jesus in Mark is not about mimicry but transformation. Individuals cannot "save themselves"; the human predicament is too dire. Ultimately, discipleship and following Jesus involve a divine transaction whereby the merely human is infused with the truly divine and is thus transformed into his image and likeness. For this reason Davis supports Thomas Soding's preference for "participation" language over "imitation" in describing the relationship between Christ and the Christian life.³² As Eduard Schweizer puts it, "the term 'follow' is used as elsewhere in the pregnant sense of participation in Jesus' vocation to suffering and death" (see Luke 9:57-62; Mark 8:34).³³

Larry Hurtado offers a similar perspective on discipleship in Mark. The second Gospel contains no resurrection appearances, not because the author did not know them but because his focus was on Jesus' life as example, and no resurrection story should eclipse that. The curt ending to Mark's passion story encourages disciples to follow Jesus despite fear and uncertainty, to be faithful even though they cannot see him, and ultimately summons them to join in the mission that lies beyond the story.³⁴ Mark views Jesus' entire life as the beginning of the gospel (Mark 1:1). His ministry inaugurates the Kingdom of God and serves as its "mustard seed stage."³⁵ Let the readers understand that they are the next stage in God's Kingdom work in the world.

Let us now suggest some other ways in which Mark's portrait of Jesus serves as a model for disciples to follow. First, Jesus' own efforts in making disciples (e.g., Mark 3:13-19) exemplifies one goal of discipleship, namely, to make other disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Second, Jesus' habits of prayer and preaching (e.g., Mark 1:35-39) serve as a model for similar practices among his followers. Third, Jesus' responses to the controversies that swirled around him function to show disciples how they should meet the charges their opponents will raise. Fourth, when Jesus revises the family outside of the traditional lines (Mark 3:31-35), it is understood that his followers will find true family within the faith and not necessarily within lines of

32. Ibid., 110-11. Davis finds Paul a good illustration of Mark's perspective. He uses both imitation (1 Cor 11:1) and participationist (Rom 6:3-4) language. Moreover, Paul early on links the transformation of the inner man with an outward conformity to Jesus' life. See Thomas Soding, "Die Nachfolgeforderung Jesu im Markusevangelium," *TTZ* 94 (1985): 306-9.

33. Eduard Schweizer, *Lordship and Discipleship* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1960), 15.

34. Larry Hurtado, "Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—and Beyond," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (ed. Richard Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 26-27.

35. Ibid.

heredity. Faith and obedience constitute the true family.³⁶ Fifth, since Jesus expected his followers to suffer persecution (e.g., Mark 13:9-13; Matt 5:10-12), he becomes the example of how one should stand before governors and officials, offering no defense, only a confession (Mark 14:62; 15:1-5). Sixth, Jesus' agony in Gethsemane and pleading with God three times to "remove this cup from me" (Mark 14:32-42 and par.) appear to provide those who suffer with a way of prayer and trusting God. In fact Paul may have been imitating Christ when he implored God three times to remove his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7-10). In these and other ways the Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus as the only adequate model of discipleship and provides a script that believers can imitate. As Hurtado says regarding the second Gospel, "Jesus is both the basis for and the pattern of discipleship."³⁷

IMITATION AND GOSPELS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Mark's Gospel of course did not exist in a vacuum, and soon other evangelists employed it in their own accounts of Jesus' life (e.g., Luke 1:1-4). The Acts of the Apostles begins with a reference to Luke's Gospel, characterizing it as "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (1:1). As a sequel, Acts should itself be understood as what Jesus *continued to do and teach* through the men called apostles. When his followers heal, baptize, or preach in his name, they continue the work he began and see themselves as extending his work in the world (e.g., Acts 3:6; 10:48). The story of Stephen provides an account of a martyr whose trial, suffering, and death parallel the passion of Jesus. One has only to recall that during the crucifixion Jesus prayed to the Father to forgive those who murdered him (Luke 23:34).³⁸ Stephen died with a similar prayer on his lips directed to the Lord Jesus (Acts 7:59). Jesus' martyrdom became that which the persecuted should follow. Similarly, the author of Hebrews urged his readers to look to Jesus and consider how he endured as they faced their own season of ostracism and persecution (Heb 12:1-11).

Ignatius writes to the Ephesians (Ig. *Eph.* 10.1-3) to pray for those who blaspheme and treat them cruelly, proving themselves to be "imitators of the Lord" (μιμητὰὶ δε τοῦ κυρίου). To the Romans (Ig. *Rom.* 6.3) he confesses that he earnestly desired to become an imitator

36. See John R. Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983), 31-51.

37. Hurtado, 25.

38. Important witnesses such as P⁷⁵, **Ν**¹, and B do not contain this verse and suggest that the reading may not be original. However, the presence of this verse in other early manuscripts along with the other evidence cited above indicates that at least by the second century Jesus' martyrdom provided the pattern for the persecuted to follow.

of the sufferings of "my God" (μιμητὴν εἶναι τοῦ πάθους τοῦ θεοῦ μου), by whom he meant Jesus. Earlier in the same letter he admits how greatly he desires his martyrdom because now he is beginning to be a disciple, and he wants nothing to impede his attaining Jesus (Ig. *Rom.* 5:2-3).

In his letter to the Philippians (8:1-2), Polycarp demonstrates a similar understanding of endurance when he exhorts them to remember how Jesus died and become imitators (μιμηταί) of his endurance. The account of the bishop of Smyrna's martyrdom is introduced with the following words (*Mart. Poly.* 1.1-2):

For one might also say that all that had gone before happened in order that the Lord might show to us from above a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel (τὸ κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον μαρτύριον). For he [Polycarp] waited to be betrayed as also the Lord had done, that we too might become his imitators (μιμηταί), "not thinking of ourselves alone, but also of our neighbors."³⁹

Since this document was written in the last half of the second century, the "Gospel" may well refer to a written Gospel or one of the canonical Gospels. Regardless, Polycarp's patient waiting for his betrayal clearly mirrors Jesus' own and appears to stand as a corrective to those Christians who were voluntary martyrs.⁴⁰ Later in the account, the writer underscores that members of the bishop's own house betrayed him into the hands of a police captain, who remarkably was named Herod (6.1-2). He quickly transported the accused to the arena where he would become a "partaker of Christ" (Χριστοῦ κοινωνός), while those who handed him over would no doubt suffer the same fate as Judas. In his final prayers Polycarp blesses God the Father that he too is privileged to share the cup of Christ. The language implies that martyrdom fulfills God's plan and that God receives the blood and suffering of the martyrs as rich and acceptable sacrifices. More importantly, martyrdom becomes the seal and means by which one is able to attain or partake in Christ. In the closing chapters, Polycarp is commended as both a famous teacher and a noble martyr, "whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, for it followed the Gospel of Christ" (19.1).

What is evident in all these early Christian texts is the notion that discipleship is perfected through martyrdom, particularly as it was accomplished in imitation of Christ's patient suffering. Those who do not perfect their discipleship through suffering do bring it to completion

39. *The Apostolic Fathers* (LCL; trans. Kirsopp Lake; vol. 2; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 313.

40. Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 129-58.

through participation in liturgy as it rehearses again and again the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed a good deal of early Christian liturgy has to do with the desire to commemorate and imitate the life of Jesus.⁴¹ For example, in the Syrian tradition, Christian baptism was understood as being modeled on Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan.⁴² In many locales Christian eucharistic practice consciously saw itself as *mimesis* of Jesus' last supper with his disciples.⁴³ When Christians elevated their hands in prayer, they did so in conscious imitation of the cross of Jesus (Odes Sol. 27.1-3; 42.1-2; Tertullian, *De Oratione* 14).⁴⁴ These and other practices indicate that early Christians liturgized aspects of Jesus' life, particularly those that could not be imitated.

One of the most intriguing intersections of liturgy, Gospels, and imitation comes from Justin's *First Apology*. As he describes early Christian worship, these elements clearly merge (*1 Apol.* 67):

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

There are two features of this text that we should notice. First, on the day of the sun, rural and urban Christians gathered and read the memoirs of the apostles and writings of the prophets. The phrase "memoirs of the apostles" (ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων) no doubt refers to written Gospels, for elsewhere Justin uses the term in reference to quotations from Matthew, Luke, and in one case Mark.⁴⁵ Second, Justin describes the essence of the homily as an exhortation to imitate the good things that they have heard. Regarding the Gospels, this could only refer to imitating the example of Jesus, the principle subject of the Gospels. Yet even the writings of the prophets are publicly read and become the basis for imitation. This is consistent

41. David B. Capes, "Imitatio Christi and the Early Worship of Jesus," in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (ed. Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys Lewis; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 293-307.

42. E. C. Ratcliff, "The Old Syrian Baptismal Tradition and Its Resettlement under the Influence of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century," *Liturgical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1976), 135-54. Gabriele Winkler, "The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications," *Worship* 52 (1978): 24-45.

43. John D. Laurance, "The Eucharist as the Imitation of Christ," *Theological Studies* 47 (1986): 286-96.

44. Capes, "Imitatio," 301-4.

45. Koester, Gospels, 36-43. Justin also refers to the "memoirs" as Gospels (see *1 Apol.* 66.3).

with the author's injunction in *I Clem.* 17.1-6 to imitate the prophets because they heralded the coming of the Christ. What is fundamental here is how the Gospels functioned within the liturgy. They were read aloud, and the president urged that they be imitated. Given the diversity within early Christianity, one cannot say that the practices Justin describes are universal. Early Christianity was not monolithic. Yet the centrality and enduring quality of Justin's work indicates that a sizable Christian population practiced their Christian faith in just this way. For them the Gospels provided a script for imitation and offered a narrative definition for what it meant to follow Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Early Christians composed and used the Gospels in an environment where it was commonplace to read biographies of remarkable lives and to seek to imitate their virtues. This literary ethos would have prepared them to expect the admonition to imitation whenever the Gospels were read. Although there were likely many factors at work in the move from oral tradition to written Gospels, the *imitatio Christi* provided a significant impulse toward Gospel composition. Indeed as Christian missionaries spread the message and urged their disciples to "imitate Christ" and "walk as he walked," there was a growing need for a story of how he lived in order to provide a script for imitation. As we have seen, Mark's Gospel invites the faithful to follow Jesus and establishes him as "the basis for and the pattern of discipleship."⁴⁶ In other words, the second Gospel—and by extension the other canonical Gospels as well—provided early Christians with the narrative definition necessary for fleshing out the *imitatio Christi*.

46. Hurtado, "Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark," 25.

