

# APE ME ?!

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**Therefore, I urge you, imitate me (1 Cor. 4: 16).**

**Wow** factor here! What a bold invitation from the apostle Paul: “Copy me! Follow me! Do what I do! Say what I say! Imitate my example! Ape me!”

And, be it noted, the apostle doesn't just say it once, or twice, or even three times. He repeats the call elsewhere at least another four times (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3: 17; 4:9; 1 Thess. 1: 6). He is either a deluded fool who doesn't see himself as others do, oblivious to any personal failings and foibles, or he is speaking the sober truth.

I don't know about you, but I ask myself whether I, as a committed follower of Christ Jesus, would ever be daring enough, bold enough, confident enough, to say to friends and family, **imitate me!** I certainly hesitate big time. I am very well aware of my sins, faults and failings. I know that others know my feet are made of clay. And have you ever heard your minister, pastor, Bible teacher, father or mother say such a thing — **imitate me!** — ?

Of course, the apostle explains himself and elaborates his “mandate” further. It is a certain kind of imitation Paul urges ... **Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 11: 1)**. So, let's see exactly how closely the apostle imitated his Lord.

## IMITATING CHRIST DID NOT MAKE PAUL VERY POPULAR!

Do you remember the occasion when the apostle Paul was on his way up to Jerusalem (Acts 21)? He wanted to get there ASAP to take some gifts to the Jewish Christians and to preach to his fellow-Jews who would be gathered there in great numbers for Pentecost.

Till now, nothing had been allowed to distract him from arriving on time in Jerusalem. Having made better time than expected with favourable sailing conditions, after arriving in Samaria, Paul was able to relax for a few 'bonus' days. He stayed in the house of none other than Philip the evangelist. We read that, whilst there,

**A certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, “Thus says the holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”**

**And when we heard these things, both we (Paul's travelling companions) and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem (Acts 21: 10-12)**. This must have been quite an emotional scene. Surrounded by his friends who were all devoted disciples of Christ, and all with genuine affection **pleading** for Paul not to deliberately put himself in harm's way: **“Please, Paul, don't go up to Jerusalem!”**

What would Paul say and do in response to the well-intentioned pleading from these good people? Would he say, “Of course you are right. You can’t all be wrong. The Book of Proverbs does say, after all, that in a multitude of counsellors there is safety! Perhaps I really should stop and think about the big picture here. I mean, imagine if I, Paul, was to be killed in Jerusalem. What would then happen to God’s work? Who would go and preach to the nations?” No such considerations for self-preservation entered Paul’s head.

Paul answered, “What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (vs. 12-13).

Now I want you to notice how Paul’s entire visit to Jerusalem, and the certain dangers he would encounter there, are an exact parallel with the experience of his Lord Jesus on his way up to Jerusalem for his last fateful visit ...

When Jesus had announced to his disciples that in Jerusalem he would be handed over to the Jewish authorities and to the Gentiles (the Romans) to be killed, the apostle Peter, acting as spokesman for the band of followers, took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to you!” (Matt. 16: 22). You know how that encounter ended, right? Jesus told Peter that his suggestion was inspired by none other than the Devil himself, so Peter, out of the way — “You are an offence to me”!

“Stop weeping and breaking my heart!” was the way Paul put it. See how he follows his Lord’s example; So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, “The will of the Lord be done” (v. 14).

Have you ever had to face a similar scene? Close friends, beloved family members, sincere Christian believers who love you, and whom you admire, pleading with you to change course? All trying to keep you from doing what you know in your heart the Spirit of God has been leading you to do?

Many a loyal follower of Christ believing they have been called to enter Christian ministry or mission work have had their hearts assailed by intense pleading, even tears, from family and friends urging them not to make such a sacrifice. “That place is way too dangerous!”

Many a believing wife or husband is weekly, sometimes daily subject to the incessant pleading and tears of their spouse to stop being so one-eyed in their Christian living and service, or church attendance. Oh, it’s enough to tear one’s own heart out. It’s certainly enough to make a believer question their own motives and sense of God’s guidance (a good thing in itself to prayerfully examine, surely!).

So, after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem (v. 15). Is this what it means to imitate Christ? It can be a very lonely place indeed. On his way up to a prophesied death in Jerusalem, Jesus’ face was set with steely resolve ... Now it came to pass, when the time had come for him to be received up, that he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9: 51). And, sending in advance a message to a village in Samaria to prepare for his arrival, we read that; they did not receive him, because his face was resolutely set to go up to

Jerusalem (Lk. 9: 52). There was a far-away look in Jesus' eyes. He was blazing a trail for his followers.

Isn't Paul taking this a little too literally in his quest to imitate Christ? Isn't he being a little fanatical in copying his Master to go up to Jerusalem to certain trouble?

### IN JERUSALEM THEY ALSO SHOUT AT PAUL, "AWAY WITH HIM!"

But that's not all to the story. Further on in Acts 21 we discover that the apostle has arrived in Jerusalem and that no small stir has erupted. Some Jews from Asia, seeing Paul in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting ... and they dragged him out of the Temple, and immediately the gates [doors] were shut ...and the whole city was disturbed (v. 27).

Crowd violence gathers a life of its own. When a mob is incited the animals come out! Things were now out of control, for the mob was seeking to kill him (v. 31).

Thankfully the report of this uproar reached the Roman garrison in the Fort of Antonia (which was right next to and overlooking the Temple precincts) just in the nick of time. The commander of the Roman army, and his centurions, and the soldiers ran down the stairs to rescue Paul from the violent beating he was receiving (v. 32).

Because of the violent uproar the commander ordered his soldiers to chain Paul and carry him up to the barracks so he could determine what to do. But the unruly mob kept following and kept yelling out, "Away with him!" ( <sup>1</sup> ) Does this remind you of any other scene when a mob was yelling, "Away with him! Away with him!"? Of course it does.

Some minutes later in the next chapter (Acts 22) the commanding officer allows Paul to stand on the steps before the crazed mob to give his defence. Half way through his speech the crowd again erupts, "Away with this fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!". As they were screaming this out, they tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air (v.22-23).

Some scene this! But wait, there's more.

### PAUL SOUNDS LIKE JESUS!

Over the next two years Paul is arraigned before various Jewish and Roman courts to give his defence. His accusers claim they have found this man to be a troublemaker ( literally, a plague) stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world (Acts 24: 5).

One of the more 'colourful' characters who interrogates Paul during his two years of incarceration is the Roman governor of Judea, Antonius Felix. Born a slave, but freed by Antonia the mother of the emperor Claudius, Felix was notorious for his brutal methods of stamping out insurrections and riots to regain control.

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek verbs follow and cry out are in the imperfect tense which carry the idea of persistent and on-going action.

The Roman historian Tacitus described Felix as a master of cruelty and lust who exercised the powers of a king with the spirit of a slave (*Hist. 5.9*). However, despite his lowly birth, Felix had a succession of three highborn wives. When Paul stood on trial for his very life before Felix, his third wife was Drusilla, a Jewess and the youngest daughter of Agrippa 1, was present.

Drusilla had been first unhappily married as a teenager to the king of Emesa, Azizus. However, because of her beauty Felix desired her and she fell for his charms (i.e. his ruthlessness and power). Because of her unhappy marriage she hooked up with Felix.

When Paul spoke before Felix and Drusilla you would imagine he might be rather diplomatic and not stir the possum's nest. But Paul is following in the footsteps of his Lord and Master who was no respecter of persons and so he has one message for king, governor, Jewish Council and ordinary man alike. He testifies before Felix and Drusilla concerning the faith in (towards) Jesus Christ (*Acts 24: 24*). And what was the specific content of the faith in (towards) Jesus Christ which Paul hammered home?

Ah, don't forget he is following in the footsteps of his Lord Jesus. Paul reasoned about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come (v.25). Where have we read about these three specifics before? Yes! These were the subjects of Jesus' message and which he had promised would continue once he had physically left this world;

And when the Helper (the Spirit of Truth) has come, he will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father (i.e. as resurrected and therefore vindicated as God's king before the world) and you see me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged (therefore God's promised Kingdom is assured and coming) (*John 16: 8-11*).

Paul is mirroring the message of his Lord. He sounds like Jesus! Nobody can claim to be a loyal follower of Christ except they also mimic his teaching, his words. Truly, the Spirit of the risen Lord was speaking in and through Paul to Felix and Drusilla. It was not a message designed to comfort the guilty pair in their sin! And no wonder we read that hearing the uncompromising word of God Felix trembled with fear and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you" (v. 25).

Someone told me recently that a godly man will be a "nice" man. A man who gets on well with folks, a gentleman who is pleasant and gets on well with everybody, a person who doesn't cut across the grain, isn't awkward or angular. Well, on that score Paul was not a godly man, nor was he following a popular gentle Jesus who supposedly excused sin!

Don't get me wrong. A godly man is indeed a winsome man. But he is not up for sale. And if following his Lord and speaking the word of his Lord doesn't win him a popularity contest, he is content to know he is following in the example of the steps of the Lord Jesus and of his apostles and prophets. He is a man who cannot be bribed, bought or bent to the whims of popular opinion. He imitates the Jesus of the Bible.

A godly man or woman is one who will sometimes have to shut his ears to even the pleas of his closest friends and family so that God's call can be accomplished. He is, after all, copying Christ and following Paul's example. "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?" he may sometimes have to ask.

A godly man or woman is one who will sometimes be accused of being a one-eyed fanatic for Christ. "Away with this fellow!" will be the call. Even the disciples of Jesus were mystified when their Lord said "I have food to eat that you know nothing about". The guiding principle, the mainspring of Jesus' own example, was, "I always do those things that please my Father".

## THE PIONEER

This is why Scripture calls Jesus **the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith**. That word **pioneer** (*archēgos*) is the Greek word which means, founder, source, leader, author. The idea is that of a trailblazer, one who goes before others. One who cuts through the jungle and clears a path for other steps. *It is only ever used of Jesus in the NT.*

A godly man or woman will bravely testify **concerning the faith in (towards) Jesus Christ** that it is a faith **about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come**. And sometimes people in the hearing will, like Festus, react with fear, procrastination and rejection.

So then, to **imitate me, as I also imitate Christ** involves a certain death to self so that God's will be done in my life. The spiritual rule is that death always precedes life; crucifixion before resurrection. It means I will look like Jesus and sound like Jesus — the Jesus who lived entirely to please his God and Father so as to promote the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

## BUT I COULD NEVER SAY "IMITATE ME"!

Does this mean that the one who claims, like Paul, to be imitating Christ will be without fault, perfect? Well, if that's the case, then Paul was making a misguided claim. Take for instance, the time when he stood before the Jewish Council (**Acts 23: 1ff**) and opened his mouth to say he had **"lived in all good conscience before God until this day"**. The words had no sooner escaped his mouth than the high priest ordered those who stood next to Paul **to strike him on the mouth**.

Imagine that. In a court room you open your mouth to officially defend yourself against false charges. You say you have a clean conscience before God, and *whammo!* You get a "knuckle sandwich"! You cop a punch in the mouth for your trouble.

What would you do? Well, the apostle, who did not know the instruction had come from the high priest snapped back, **"God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!** (a Hebrew idiom

for “you imposter!”). For you who sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?” ( <sup>2</sup> )

Here is one time when Paul seems not to have imitated Christ. For when they struck Jesus (multiple times!) and when they spat on him, insulted and abused the Lord, **he did not return abuse and when he suffered he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly (I Pet. 2: 23).**

Yes, there is only one perfect man who never sinned whom we are to ape. And that’s the perfect man whom Paul was endeavouring to imitate. So, the fact we all of us imperfectly follow Jesus, is still no reason to quit, nor ever aspire to say, **imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.** Whew. What a relief. Confess your faults and sins, and get back to walking in the footsteps of your Lord! Imperfection and failure is not a cop out nor an excuse to give up striving to walk like Jesus and sound like Jesus.

### **A LETTER TO MY OWN GODLY GRANDFATHER**

When my grandfather died, a Bible which my wife and I had given him back in 1984 was returned to my possession. It sat on the shelf for years until I wished to refer to a verse in the particular translation of that Bible. I used that Bible for years without noticing two hand-written notes inside the front cover. Both were letters of deep appreciation to my grandfather for his godly service and example.

One of those letters reads,

Dear Mr Winter, You may not know me. I have been going to Margaret Street Church of Christ a few years now ... and I would like you to know I have admired you ever since the Sunday, some months back, when I heard you speak when you presided at Communion.

And I read something in Psalms recently that reminded me of you: The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, They will grow like a cedar in Lebanon; Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green (Psalm 92: 12-14).

Jesus is my chief model , but you are a living example to me of one who walks with Him, and I want to be like that when I grow old. Happy Birthday & Thankyou. (Name signed).

Now, I know my grandfather was not without his faults and foibles, indeed his sins. But I will testify that I know he tried with all his might and mein to follow and live for his Saviour Jesus Christ. So do I.

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<sup>2</sup> As an historical matter of interest, the violent death of **Ananias the high priest** in A.D. 66 during the last great Jewish revolt probably ended up being a fulfilment of Paul’s imprecation. For **Ananias** (NOT the Ananias before whom Jesus was tried, but the son of **Nebedaeus**) was dragged from a sewer in which he had hidden and was murdered by the weapons of the assassiins whom in his own corrupt period of power he had not scrupled to employ!

Whoever, therefore, walks in all clear conscience before our heavenly Father, should be able to say, “Copy me! Follow me! Do what I do! Imitate my example! Say what I say. Ape me because I am walking in the footsteps of my Lord and Master Jesus!”

That’s my prayer, my earnest desire, my aim, no matter how imperfectly I do and how often I fall short. I pray it’s yours too! And like Paul the apostle, we can say,

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me ... one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus ... Therefore I urge you, imitate me (Phil. 3: 12-13; I Cor. 4: 16)!

Will you ape Me?!