

# The Christian Life a Participation Not an Imitation

by F.J. Huegel

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*The Christian life is not an imitation of Christ, but a participation of Christ, requiring a mystical union with Him.*

**Scripture:** John 15:5, Romans 7:24, Hebrews 3:14

**Topics:** "Spiritual Transformation", "Participation in Christ"

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## Description

F.J. Huegel emphasizes that the Christian life is not merely an imitation of Christ but a participation in His divine nature. He contrasts the ideal Christian life as presented in the New Testament with the often disappointing reality of modern Christianity, urging believers to recognize their spiritual poverty and the need for a deeper connection with Christ. Huegel points out that true Christian living requires a supernatural transformation that can only come from abiding in Christ, rather than striving to imitate Him. He encourages those who feel overwhelmed by their shortcomings to seek the abundant life that flows from a genuine relationship with Jesus. Ultimately, he asserts that understanding this distinction between imitation and participation is crucial for experiencing the fullness of the Christian life.

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## Transcript

ONE cannot make a study of the New Testament without experiencing something of the nature of a shock, in view of the glaring difference between the Christian life as we are wont to live it, and the ideal of the Master. The disheartening incongruities, and the grievous contradictions are so painfully evident, that even those who have only a superficial knowledge of the Saviour's Word-yea, one dare say, even those who have never looked into the pages of the New Testament-are shocked. What little faith they may have, is shaken.

When one holds up before the picture of the Christian life as set forth by the Apostles, that which today goes under the name, one staggers. The emaciated body of a dying friend-not to say his corpse-could not stand in more violent contrast with him who in the days of health and vigour walked at our side.

It is not my object to pick to pieces the modern Christian. I have no quarrel with the Church. I am not pretending to play the role of an iconoclast. I have been for ten years a missionary of the Cross, and have no thought of deserting the ranks. My only purpose in calling attention to our failure as Christians, is to point the way to the victorious life in Christ for those who are conscious of their spiritual poverty, and

"hunger and thirst after righteousness."

It is for the Christian who finds himself at the brink of despair, because of the gruesome picture he presents when all the while he longs to faithfully reflect the Master's image, that I feel that I have a message. It is for the one whose thirst for the water of life, far from being quenched, consumes him, and leaves him sick with yearnings, that I fain would unfold the secret of the abundant life—the life of which Jesus spoke when He said that "rivers of living water" would flow from the innermost being of those who believed. It is to the one who is wearied of hollow mockeries, sick of shams, who has become the victim of a secret self-loathing,—one who feels that as Christian he should be free from the power of sin, and who, in spite of all his struggles is crushed by a sense of failure—that I long to bring the message of the Cross. It is to those who pant for power,—that power which is from on High—those who long to have their life and service ministry, and preaching, charged with the Spirit of the living God that I feel that I have a word which will not fail to usher in a new day.

But we must briefly summarize the requisites of the Christian life before we enter upon a statement of my thesis. We are to walk as Jesus walked (1 John ii. 6). We are to love our enemies (Matt. v. 44). We are to forgive as Jesus forgave—even as He who in the shame and anguish of the Cross looked down upon those who blasphemed Him, while they murdered Him, and forgave (Col. iii. 13). We are to be aggressively kind towards those who hate us, yea, we are actually to pray for those who spitefully use us (Matt. v. 44). We are to be overcomers—more than conquerors (Rom. viii. 37). We are to give thanks in all things believing that all things, even those which blast our fondest hopes, work together for our good (Rom. viii. 28; Eph. v. 20).

We are to be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to let our requests be made known unto God, so that the peace of God which passeth all understanding may guard our hearts and minds (Phil. iv. 6). We are to rejoice in the Lord alway (Phil. iv. 4). We are to think on whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise (Phil. iv. 8). We are to be holy, for God is holy (1 Pet. i. 16). The Saviour said that if we believed in Him, rivers of waters of life would flow from our innermost being (John vii. 38). We are to stand out in bold, unmistakable contrast from the crooked, perverse world, blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, shining as lights (Phil. ii. 15). We are positively to hate ourselves not to pamper, nor to caress, nor to seek, nor to love ourselves, but literally to hate and to renounce our own selves, and that daily (Matt. xvi. 24). We are told that we cannot be Christ's disciples if we do not renounce ourselves utterly and absolutely in all things, and at all times (Luke xiv. 26). Paul tells us that our affections are to be set on things above (Col. iii. 1).

Enough. We dare go no further. It would only increase our shame, and our pain. We stand indicted. We are not "What Christ would have us to be. If this is the measure of the Christian life, if this is the basis upon which we are to be judged, if this is what God requires of us as Christians, like Isaiah we cry: "Woe is me, for I am undone."

Why does not the Saviour, so tender and so understanding, so loving and so wise, not make requirements more in keeping with human nature? Why does He seem to be so unreasonable? Why does He not demand of us what we might reasonably attain? He bids us soar, yet we have no wings. Talk about the super-man; it is not so much a mere overabundance of man that is required. It seems to be rather man-deified, if I may so speak, which the New Testament pronounces as the true type of Christian. Why

does the Saviour go so far beyond the merely natural, and put Christian living on the basis of the supernatural? I protest, it is not natural to love our enemies; it is not natural to rejoice always; it is not natural to be thankful for the things that hurt; it is not natural to hate ourselves; it is not natural to walk as Jesus walked. Have we honestly faced this dilemma? Have we had the courage to face the implications of Christ's Word? Is anything gained by subterfuges, by pretending that the gulf between the humanly possible, and the law of Christ (i.e. what we can attain by nature and what God requires in His Word) is after all not so great?

If no satisfactory answer can be given (my contention as stated in the following chapters is that there can) the Christian system merits the aspersions of its enemies. It must face the grave charge of over-emphasis,-exaggeration-fanaticism-or whatever we may call this want of adjustment between the law of Christ and human nature.

This is no new dilemma. The great Apostle to the Gentiles, makes no bones about his conviction that human nature, as such, can never attain the ideal of Christ. He does not minimize the overwhelming incongruity. He lets the glaring fact of Christ's law as an utterly unattainable ideal, as something to which human nature, as such, can never adapt itself, stand out in all its naked reality.

Romans vii is witness to that fact. Here we have the Apostle's confession of failure, his cry of despair, his bitter regret, upon finding the Christian ideal unattainable, his groanings over what he found to be a heart-rending dilemma, his honest admission that he actually believes that the requirements of Christ's law, are something to which human nature, as such, struggle as you will, agonize as you will, can never adjust itself. Lest I be misunderstood-lest my readers be shocked by something apparently so unorthodox-I quote Paul's own words: "The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do... I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but, I see another law in my members (aye, there's the rub) warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. vii). Paul struggles. He agonizes. He weeps. He strives as only this moral giant, one of the greatest of all time, could strive. All to no avail. The law of sin, he confesses, like the onrush of a mighty stream, sweeps everything before it.

We do well to face squarely all the shocking aspects of this dilemma. Paul did. He did not throw up any smoke screen over either his own incapacity on the one hand, or the unattainable character of Christ's law on the other. He is astonishingly frank over the fact that in himself (that is, in his flesh, Rom. vii. 18) he can find no good thing. He candidly acknowledges that he delights in God's law, loves' it, but finds it something to which human nature cannot attain. If we will be honest about these things, we will find ourselves led all unconsciously to take certain steps which will most assuredly usher us into a glorious new day. It led Paul to a great discovery. It will lead us.

It was not that Paul, when he wrote Romans vii, was still wilfully disobedient, as in the days prior to the Damascus road crisis. He did love Jesus. He was a soldier of the Cross. He was a consecrated Christian. It was only that he was now seeing himself in a new light-in the blinding light of the Cross of Christ. What before, as a strict disciple of Moses, would have been excusable, now overwhelms him with its magnitude. Innocent little things, attitudes comparatively harmless, insignificant little sins which under the Mosaic law would pass unnoticed if they did not appear to be actual virtues, now break his heart. They are repulsive. They are unbearable. They seem to burn with the fire of hell. They sting like the bite of a scorpion. They stink like a decaying carcass in some slimy pool.

Paul wants to be like Jesus. It is no longer a question of mere ethics. It is no longer a question of right or wrong. Is it Christ-like? That is the burning question. Paul wants to be free. Self-love even in its secret forms, its harmless gestures, nauseates him. He would be like Jesus in all the loveliness of his humility, and of his compassion. He would love God with a pure love and serve Him with that utter singleness of eye which characterized the "only-begotten of the Father." In a paroxysm of self-loathing, and in the anguish of self-despair, the Apostle cries out for deliverance (Rom. vii. 24).

Is there a way out? Yes, there is. Paul found it—we can all find it,

Now my thesis is this: we have been proceeding upon a false basis. We have conceived of the Christian life as an Imitation of Christ. It is not an Imitation of Christ. It is a Participation of Christ. "For we are made partakers of Christ" (Heb. iii. 14). There are good things in Thomas A. Kempis' Imitation of Christ, but the basic idea is false to the principles that underlie the Christian life. To proceed on the basis of Imitation, will plunge us in just the sort of slough of despond Paul found himself in when he wrote Romans vii.

We are not what Christ would have us to be; the Sermon on the Mount does not find expression in our attitudes; sin as a principle is still rampant in our lives; we are not free from envy, pride, self-love, and lust of pleasure; the mountain of secret selfishness still crushes us and in spite of all our efforts remains immovable; there is little joy, so little freedom of spirit, none of that rapture which so characterized the primitive Christians; we agonize, and bleed, and struggle,—but failure dogs our footsteps. What is the matter? We are proceeding upon a false basis. We are attempting to do what the Saviour Himself never expected us to do. The Christian life is not an Imitation.

The great dilemma of which we have been speaking resolves itself into most simple terms when we grasp this distinction between Imitation and Participation.

For, what is impossible to me as an imitator of Christ, comes perfectly natural as a participant of Christ. It is Only when Christ nullifies the force of my inherent "self" life," and communicates to me a Divine life, that Christian Fellowship in its true sense, is at all possible for me. I must be born again. "The flesh profiteth nothing." Without Jesus I can do nothing. I must live in Him and, renouncing my own life, find in Him a "new life."

Now to this "new life," the Christian requirements, so incomprehensible and unattainable while we move in the realm of the "flesh-life," are all simple. They are nothing more nor less than statements regarding its modus operandi. The Sermon on the Mount so far from cramping in any way this new life, is simply a statement of the way it operates.

The trouble is, we have not listened to Jesus. He tells us that we must abide in Him as a branch in the Vine. Matthew v, vi, vii, without John xv, would be like so many freight cars without an engine, or like a whale without water, or a bird without air.

In that upper-room interview, the Master, knowing that it was His last opportunity to impress fundamentals upon His disciples, places the supreme emphasis upon this mystical union, this spiritual oneness with Himself of all believers—this sublime fact of participation. "Abide in Me and I in you." Our failures only confirm the Saviour's Word, for He said: "Without Me ye can do nothing."

No, we are not called upon to imitate Christ. The truth of the matter is, there would be little virtue after all in that sort of thing. Paul said so, in effect, in the oft-quoted 1 Corinthians xiii—the love chapter. It could only

be a wooden, artificial thing. Even here Jesus would say: "The flesh profiteth nothing." Some years ago in the country where I was doing missionary work, this sort of thing was carried to its nth degree, when a zealous devotee had himself crucified, literally nailed to a cross where his parents found him dead, when they came to his rescue. The Church rightly does not acclaim that sort of thing, and yet theoretically she proceeds, in the case of vast multitudes of her children, upon this false basis of Imitation.

The 'Christian is not called upon to strain over a role as an actor would agonize over lines poorly learned. The

Christian life in the thought of God is infinitely more blessed and compelling. "We are made partakers of Christ" (Heb. iii. 14) . Exceeding great and precious promises are given us, "that by these we might be partakers of the Divine Nature" (ii Pet. i. 4). The Believer is grafted into the Trunk of the Eternal Godhead. "I am the Vine, Ye are the Branches."

"The riches of the glory of this mystery-Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col. i. 27).

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