

is the DJ playing the song, opening the space for the person to dwell with the music by tapping the foot, mouthing the words, and strumming the non-existent guitar. It becomes necessary on the part of the person to actually commit to performing, to participating. It is the commitment that attunes one to God, opening the place where we can dwell with God in a continued movement to love God more.

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**JOHN WESLEY AND
“IMITATING” CHRIST**

by
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William George Anthony Van Reyk has recently argued that, in eighteenth-century Britain, “the imitation¹ of Christ was an ideal of Christian personhood believed in and promoted by Christians from a range of theological positions.”² The imitation of Christ was closely linked with Christian ideals of manliness, although “not in itself a gender specific model.”³ It was a goal that encouraged commonality shared by Anglicans from

¹“Pattern,” “example” and less frequently “resemble” are used as synonyms of imitation in John Wesley’s writings and those of his contemporaries. The closely related language of “likeness” to and “participation” in God and Christ was thought to naturally lead to imitation.

²“Christian Ideals of Manliness During the Period of the Evangelical Revival, c. 1730 to c. 1840,” D.Phil. thesis (University of Oxford, 2007), 25; cf. Van Reyk, “Christian Ideals of Manliness in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Historical Journal* 54:4 (2009): 1053-73. J. Sears McGee has shown that this was also true in seventeenth-century England, especially for Anglicans (*The Godly Man in Stuart England: Anglicans, Puritans and the Two Tables, 1620-1670* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 107-113. Van Reyk’s thesis develops ideas found in Jeremy Gregory’s “Homo Religiosus: Masculinity and Religion in the Long Eighteenth Century,” in Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen, ed., *English Masculinities 1660-1800* (London: Longman, 1999), 85-110, esp. 99-101.

³Van Reyk, 1, 19.

diverse spectrums of churchmanship and Dissenters.⁴ The imitation of Christ was "an all-encompassing ideal; it required the change of a man's entire nature. Imitation above all required practicing the virtues of duty and charity."⁵

"Imitation" Influences on Wesley

Duty and charity were defined as loving God and neighbor. The ideal was advocated through the genre of sermons and devotional manuals, biography and autobiography, religious periodicals, novels and plays.⁶ John Wesley explored the imitation of Christ through these genres, with the exception novels and plays. He was a central promoter of the *imitatio Christi* ideal. It is well-known that his spiritual journey was shaped by what were arguably the three most significant devotional authors for contemporary Anglicans that appealed to the imitation of Christ: Thomas à Kempis (*The Imitation of Christ*), Jeremy Taylor (*Holy Living and Holy Dying*), and William Law (*Serious Call and Christian Perfection*). Wesley published editions of these works to encourage his fellow Methodists to model their lives after the imitation of Christ.⁷ He invoked these authors as foundational to the spiritual journey that led him by 1729 to recognize "the indispensable necessity of having the mind which was in Christ, and of walking as Christ also walked . . . in all things."⁸

⁴On the Anglican side this was shared by "Latitudinarians," high churchmen and Nonjurors, and evangelicals. On Dissenters and imitation, see Isaac Watts' *A Humble Attempt towards the Revival of Practical Religion* (1731) and Phillip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745). According to Van Reyk, this commonality was brought under strain by differing conceptions of regeneration and disagreements over moralism (45-68). In the late eighteenth century, the imitation of Christ took on an increasingly partisan tone as it came to be associated with Methodists and Evangelicals (64, 66).

⁵Van Reyk, 23.

⁶Van Reyk, 16-17, 37.

⁷Wesley published six distinct editions or extracts of a Kempis. See Frank Baker, *A Union Catalogue of the Publications of John and Charles Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Stone Mountain, GA: George Zimmermann, 1991); Frank Baker, "John Wesley and the 'Imitatio Christi,'" *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 166 (1941): 74-87; Isabel Rivers, "Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity," in idem, ed. *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 153-54.

⁸John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1966), 11.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that à Kempis, Taylor, and Law were not the only influences on Wesley's adoption of the *imitatio Christi* ideal. Without underestimating the impact of this oft-cited triumvirate, Wesley would still have been well acquainted with imitating Christ as a central theme in the works of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Anglican devotional writers such as the Cambridge Platonists⁹ and John Norris.¹⁰ The imitation of Christ was also a key emphasis of other writers affected by mysticism such as the author of the *Theologia Germanica*,¹¹

⁹Henry More, *Extracts from the Sermons of Dr. Henry More*, in *A Christian Library*, ed. John Wesley, vol. 39 (Bristol: E. Farley, 1754), 53. Ralph Cudworth, *The Life of Christ the Pith and Kernel of all Religion: A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, at Westminster, March 31, 1647*, in *A Christian Library*, ed. John Wesley, vol. 27 (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1753), vi. Based on I John 2:3-4 Cudworth argues that imitating Christ is keeping his commandments both inwardly and outwardly, although his emphasis is on inward holiness; he also defines holiness as participation or partaking in the life of Christ and God (see pp. v, 30, 32, 34). Wesley also printed this sermon in the *Arminian Magazine* 5 (1782): 257-61, 318-21, 371-74, 419-21, 481-82, 535-37, 593-96, 655-60. On Wesley and the Cambridge Platonists see John C. English, "The Cambridge Platonists in Wesley's 'Christian Library,'" *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 36 (1968): 161-68.

¹⁰[John] Norris, *A Treatise on Christian Prudence*, ed. John Wesley, 2nd ed. (London: W. Strahan, 1742), 9, 34. He also published extracts from Norris's *Reflections Upon the Conduct of Human Life* (1734). Wesley read Norris more than any other writer at Oxford and Norris was regularly studied by the Oxford Methodists.

¹¹Wesley read the *Theologia Germanica*, an anonymous work written around 1350 that was published by Martin Luther and esteemed by German Pietists with the Methodists at Oxford. Wesley re-read it on the voyage to Georgia. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists," Ph.D. diss. (Duke University, 1972), appendix IV; John Wesley, *Journal and Diaries I* (1735-38), ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 18 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), Diary, Dec. 30, 1735, Jan. 2, 4, 8-9, 11-17, 1736, 335-42 (hereinafter cited as JWD). William Law, who recommended this work to Wesley during Wesley's second visit to him, seems to have been the impetus for this. See William Law to John Wesley (May 19, 1738), 544 and John Wesley to William Law (May 20, 1738), 547 in *Letters I*, ed. Frank Baker, vol. 25 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). Although the *Theologia* predicated à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, Christ as our pattern is a theme of the work.

Johann Arndt (e.g., his *True Christianity*),¹² and Henry Scougal,¹³ all of whom wielded significant influence on the devotional life of the young John Wesley. While recognizing the importance of imitation to a wide range of devotional writers who influenced Wesley, this essay analyzes two understudied sources: Wesley use of à Kempis to promote the imitation of Christ and his thoughts on imitation in his early sermons from 1725-37.

In addition to the authors who had an impact on him, John's parents were certainly key influences on his adoption of the *imitatio Christi* ideal. After reading à Kempis in 1725, he wrote to his mother and father about his admiration for à Kempis' "great piety and devotion" and his revulsion toward à Kempis' declaration that God has "irreversibly decreed that we should be miserable" in the world. Wesley also objected to à Kempis' contention that "mirth is vain and useless."¹⁴ While Susanna's reply to her son contains a fairly strong critique of à Kempis, her spiritual diaries indicate that she shared his overarching concern for the imitation of Christ.¹⁵ Samuel's reply to his son endorses à Kempis. Samuel's published writings are largely made up of polemical and poetic works that do not have the imitation of Christ as a particular concern.¹⁶ This may be misleading since he preached twelve sermons on Luke 9:23 ("And he said to them

¹²Wesley mentions reading Arndt while in Georgia. This was probably Arndt's *True Christianity*. See JWD, March 24-29, 31, 1736, 18:371-73. Wesley later published extracts of this work in volumes one and two of his *Christian Library*.

¹³Wesley read Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677) and his sermon(s) with the Methodists at Oxford and re-read him in Georgia (Heitzenrater, Appendix IV; JWD, Feb. 23 and July 18-20, 22-23, 1736, 18:360, 403-04). Wesley published an abridged version of *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* in 1744 in which the imitation of Christ features as an important theme (Newcastle Upon Tyne: John Gooding), 10-15.

¹⁴John Wesley to Susanna Wesley (May 28, 1725), *Letters*, 25:162-63. While Susanna strongly criticized à Kempis on both accounts, Samuel conceded that à Kempis went too far in these matters, but Samuel nonetheless insisted that "mortification is still and indispensable Christian duty." He generally believed à Kempis "may be read to great advantage" and should inspire the pious reader into "imitating his heroic strains of humility, piety, and devotion." Susanna Wesley to John Wesley (June 8, 1725) and Samuel Wesley to John Wesley (July 14, 1725), *Letters*, 25:164-66, 171.

¹⁵*Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 322, 349.

¹⁶Nonetheless, in one of his polemical works against the Dissenters, he declares himself bound to imitate the life of Christ. Samuel Wesley, *A Reply to Mr. Palmer's Vindication of the Learning, Loyalty, Morals, and most Christian Behaviour of the Dissenters towards the Church of England* (London: Robert Calvel, 1707), 119.

all. If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me") in which he argued that the three great duties of religion are self-denial, mortification, and the imitation of Christ.¹⁷

Wesley's Oxford diaries and first-published *Journal*, along with his first publication, *A Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day in the Week* (1733), illustrate the significance of the imitation of Christ to the spiritual life of the Oxford Methodists. Christ, "who went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), is featured in the preface to Wesley's *Journal* as a key motivating factor for the devotional practices of the Oxford Methodists. The first question Wesley said he put to their opponents was "Whether it does not concern all men of all conditions to imitate him, as much as they can, 'who went about doing good?'"¹⁸ "Have I been zealous in undertaking and active in doing what good I could?" was one of the "General Questions" of self-examination that he reflected on daily (even hourly) in recording his Oxford diary.¹⁹ This question was later included in his *Collection of Forms of Prayer* (to aid devotional reflection), and Acts 10:38 was used as an exhortatory tool in later sermons.²⁰ The *Collection* specifically refers to imitating Christ's love, meekness, and humility, and contains a general prayer for "Grace to walk after thy [Christ's] Pattern, to tread in thy Steps."²¹

While Wesley has much to say about the imitation of Christ in his early sermons and preface to à Kempis, it is important to make clear that the theme of imitation in Wesley's thought is wider. He writes about imitating God the Father as much as Christ.²² This tendency to advocate the

¹⁷Samuel Wesley, *Sermon Notebook*, MS D2/5, Wesley College, Bristol, fols. 268-354.

¹⁸*Journal*, October 19, 1732, *Journal and Diaries*, 18:128 (hereinafter cited as JWD).

¹⁹Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 60.

²⁰For example, see "The Reward of Righteousness" (1777), *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of The Bicentennial Edition of the *Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 412, and "On Visiting the Sick" (1786), *Sermons*, 3:394.

²¹*A Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day in the Week*, 5th ed. (Bristol: J. Palmer, 1755), 15, cf. 22; 24, 36, 41. Although the prayers were first published in 1733, the first extant edition was printed in 1738.

²²See "The General Deliverance" (1781), *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2 of The Bicentennial Edition of the *Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 449. On the theme of the imitation of God in scripture, see Leviticus 19:2 and Ephesians 5:1. In his questions for self-examination written at Oxford, Wesley refers to God as "my Pattern." *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Mason, 1829-31), 11:521.

imitation of God and Christ was shared by many of the devotional writers who were formative influences on him.²³ It was conceived as a unified imitation: one "follow[s] Jesus as [he] himself followed his Father."²⁴ In various contexts, Wesley exhorts his hearers to imitate Moses, the prophets, St. Paul, angels, and Christ.²⁵ Imitating the primitive Christians, though prominent in Wesley's thought from at least 1732, is not a common theme in his early sermons or preface to à Kempis.²⁶

Jeremy Taylor believed people "have fondness of imitation" and would "do well to make our imitations prudent and glorious" by imitating Christ.²⁷ In Wesley's conceptualization of life, imitation is inevitable. All

²³Jeremy Taylor, "An Exhortation of Imitation of the Life of Christ," in *Antiquitates Christianae: Or, the History of the Life and Death of the Holy Jesus . . .*, ed. William Cave, 9th ed. (London: J. Leake, 1703), ii; "Sermon VI: Via Intelligentiae," in *Jeremy Taylor: Selected Works*, ed. Thomas K. Carroll, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 379; and *Holy Living in Extracts from the Works of Jer. Taylor, D.D.*, in *A Christian Library*, ed. John Wesley, vol. 16 (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1752), 90. Henry Scougal, "Sermon II: The Indispensable Duty of Loving our Enemies," in *A Christian Library*, ed. John Wesley, vol. 45 (Bristol: E. Farley, 1755), 82, 88. A few pages later Scougal writes about imitating the example of Christ (see pp. 91, 92). William Law, *A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection*, in *The Works of the Reverend William Law, M.A.*, 9 vols. (Setley/Brockenhurst, Hampshire: G. Moreton, [1726] 1893), 3:149; William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (New York: Vintage, [1728] 2002), 48, 129.

²⁴Taylor, "An Exhortation of Imitation of the Life of Christ," iv. This resonates with Richard A. Burrige's recent comment that Jesus' *imitatio Dei* ethic was based on "the Jewish tradition that the imitation of the rabbi was an imitation of Torah and thus ultimately an imitation of God [which] reflects the central command in the Torah, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (Lev. 19:2)." *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 75.

²⁵In "On Mourning for the Dead," Moses, the Prophets and Christ are cited and St. Paul in "On Corrupting the Word of God" (*Sermons IV*), ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 4 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 4:241, 246; cf. Law, *A Serious Call*, 178. According to Wesley, angels imitate God as "their business, and pleasure, and glory"; therefore, "we are to imitate them" ("On Guardian Angels," preached September 1726, *Sermons*, 4:229; "In Earth as in Heaven," *Sermons*, 4:348). In the surviving fragment of his sermon "In Earth as in Heaven" (written April 1734) Wesley outlines his "doctrine of angelism," stating that humans were created "to be angels" (*Sermons*, 4:346, 348). For this reason, God designed that humans should imitate angels in their lives on earth.

²⁶On this topic see Geordan Hammond, "High Church Anglican Influences on John Wesley's Conception of Primitive Christianity, 1732-1735," *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 78:2 (2009).

²⁷Taylor, "An Exhortation of Imitation of the Life of Christ," ii.

people will either "imitate the politics of the dark kingdom" or Christ.²⁸ In his sermon "Wiser than the Children of the Light" (date unknown) drawing on Luke 16:8 ("The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of the light"), Wesley argues that "the great bias of mankind" is to seek their temporal interest. For the children of the world, "the world is their God" and possessions are their "chief happiness." In sum, the lives of the children of this world are tantamount to imitating "the politics of the dark kingdom."²⁹ Although "Wiser than the Children of the Light" is primarily focused on exposing the foolishness of worldliness,³⁰ an alternative vision of imitating the Father and Son is offered throughout Wesley's early sermons.

In Wesley's early sermons there is a consistent equation of holiness with the imitation of God the creator and Christ the redeemer. This theme of holiness and imitation can, in part, be attributed to the influence of Thomas à Kempis' devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418) which Wesley read as early as 1725 (the same year his first surviving sermon was written).³¹ However, the impact of à Kempis on Wesley should be seen as one considerably mediated through the Anglican tradition of holy living related to the Anglican and Puritan emphasis on practical piety powerfully advocated by the seventeenth-century exemplar of the holy living school, Jeremy Taylor.³² Taylor's *The Great Exemplar . . . the His-*

²⁸Henry Scougal also wrote about the danger of "false imitation." "Sermon I: The Superior Excellency of the Religious," in *Christian Library*, 45:58 and *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, ed. John Wesley, 2, 7, 17, 33.

²⁹*Sermons*, 4:363, 366-67, 368-69, 370.

³⁰Condemnation of worldliness is a consistent feature of Wesley's sermons that reaches its peak between 1732 and 1735, a period in which he was increasingly influenced by William Law.

³¹John Wesley to Susanna Wesley and Samuel Wesley, Senior to John Wesley (May 27 and July 14, 1725), *Letters*, 25:162-63, 170-71. The importance of this work to Wesley can be seen in his resolution made at Oxford to use à Kempis as a meditation tool every Sunday. *Works*, ed. Jackson 11:522.

³²In his *Holy Dying*, Taylor praised the *Imitation of Christ* (*Christian Library*, 16:256; cf. 124). On Taylor and Wesley, see H. Trevor Hughes, "Jeremy Taylor and John Wesley," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* (Oct. 1949): 296-304, and T. Francis Glasson, "Jeremy Taylor's Place in John Wesley's Life," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 36 (1967): 105-07. For a perspective on Anglican practical piety in John Wesley's family background, see Geordan Hammond, "The Revival of Practical Christianity: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Samuel Wesley, and the Clerical Society Movement" in *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, vol. 44 of *Studies in Church History* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), 116-27.

tory of the Life and Death of the Ever Blessed Jesus Christ (1649) has been described as "the most extensive [seventeenth-century] Anglican elaboration" of the imitation of Christ.³³

Likewise, William Law had a tendency toward the rigorous disciplined spirituality of the Puritans with its emphasis on obeying one's conscience. He also was attracted to mysticism, being highly influenced by a Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying*.³⁴ It is worth noting that, while stress on the efficacy of imitation was a prominent characteristic of Anglican piety, it was treated with suspicion by some Dissenters who emphasized human depravity and were concerned that it would blur the distinction between Christ and the Christian.³⁵ A similar concern seems to have encouraged the Anglican reluctance to promote the imitation of Christ in a literal manner. The value of imitating Christ was an idea both High Churchmen and Latitudinarians³⁶

³³McGee, *Godly Man*, 110.

³⁴B. W. Young, "William Law and the Christian Economy of Salvation," *English Historical Review* 109 (1994): 310. Law recommended a Kempis to Wesley at the time of their first meeting in July 1732. Baker, "John Wesley and the 'Imitatio Christi,'" 77. In his May 19, 1738, letter to Wesley, Law stated, "You can't but remember what value I always expressed for Kempis, and how much I recommended it to your meditation" (*Letters*, 25:543). With his increased emphasis on justification by faith from 1738, Wesley later criticized Law by quoting the mystic Anna Maria Van Schurman's statement that there is "no more sure way to the imitation of Christ than faith in Christ crucified." Wesley to Law (Jan. 6, 1756, Telford, ed., *Letters*, 3:354).

³⁵McGee, *Godly Man*, 107, and McGee, "Conversion and the Imitation of Christ in Anglican and Puritan Writing," *Journal of British Studies*, 15:2 (1976), 27-28; Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 142. During the turbulent decades of the seventeenth century, Anglicans encouraged the imitation of Christ as a method for avoiding controversy and promoting Christian unity. It also became a polemical tool to criticize Puritans who were so preoccupied with intellectual knowledge that they would persecute those who imitated Christ. McGee, "Conversion and the Imitation of Christ," 30, 32. Recently Robert Webster has sought to counter contemporary Protestant objections to the imitation of Christ by arguing for the uniqueness of Christ and the usefulness of the imitation of Christ for Christian morality. "The Imitation of Christ," *Tyndale Bulletin* 37 (1986): 95-120.

³⁶Wesley read the Latitudinarian Archbishop John Tillotson's *Sermons Preach'd Upon Several Occasions with the Oxford Methodists* (see Heitzenrater, appendix IV). Wesley later published two of Tillotson's sermons in the *Christian Library* wherein the theme of imitating Christ is invoked. *Extracts from the Works of Archbishop Tillotson*, in *A Christian Library*, ed. John Wesley, vol. 45 (Bristol: E. Farley, 1755), 343-4.

could agree on, illustrating the fact that Wesley's emphasis on this theme places him squarely within the mainstream of Anglican moral theology.³⁷

For Wesley, imitation should be viewed in the context of the happiness that comes from a restored relationship with God and enables both the power and desire to live a holy life. In "The Wisdom of Winning Souls" (preached September, 1731) one of the motivations for evangelism that Wesley argues for is the personal motive of imitating God. Winning a soul is an act of imitating God's goodness which allows one to experience true happiness that comes from God.³⁸ Given that Wesley sees imitation as inevitable, in the same sermon he declares that there is "a general commission . . . given to all the servants of Christ to tread in his steps" in saving souls.

Since Wesley sees the imitation of Christ as a universal duty of Christians, what does it consist of? His contemporary Samuel Johnson (1709-84) defined imitation as "The act of copying; [the] attempt to resemble."³⁹ Henry Scougal wrote about "Religion being a Resemblance of the divine Perfections." Scougal's emphasis was on embodying the characteristics of Christ such as "His diligence in doing God's Will," patience in suffering, "constant Devotion," charity to all people, meekness, purity, and humility.⁴⁰ William Law believed that imitating Christ was "necessary to salvation," but Christians are not called to literally imitate the life of Christ but the "Spirit and Temper" of Christ.⁴¹ Jeremy Taylor took a slightly more literalistic approach than Law by encouraging the imitation of Christ's "Actions or his Spirit." In addition to highlighting the imitation of many of the same virtues of Christ as Scougal and Law, Taylor also mentions Christ's justice, temperance, chastity, zeal, and simplicity.⁴²

Along with Law and Taylor, Wesley does not recommend a literal copying of Christ, but an "attempt to resemble" Christ.⁴³ In common with

³⁷Van Reyk, 25-70.

³⁸*Sermons*, 4:310.

³⁹*A Dictionary of the English Language*. . . , vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: W. Strahan, 1755), n.p.

⁴⁰*The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, 5, 10-15.

⁴¹*Christian Perfection*, 216, 224; cf. 217, 232, *Serious Call*, 82.

⁴²*Ibid.*—Justice: iii, v; temperance: iii; chastity: iii; zeal: simplicity: v; Taylor also mentions giving of alms, comforting a brother in affliction, penance and compassion, and meditation as acts pleasing to Christ.

⁴³For Law's use of the language of resemblance, see *Christian Perfection*, 16, 32. Taylor, "An Exhortation of Imitation of the Life of Christ," iv, v.

Seougal, Wesley also uses the language of resembling God.⁴⁴ His focus is on embodying virtuous characteristics of God and Christ. For example, in "The Circumcision of the Heart" (preached January 1, 1733) he refers to the lowliness of mind "learned of Christ [by those] who follow his example and tread in his steps."⁴⁵ Modern theologians have shown the same reluctance to be overly literalistic or prescriptive about the imitation of Christ, calling it "an active dynamic process . . . sustained and directed by the Spirit" and a "metaphor" to challenge one to ask, "How might I imitate Christ in this moment."⁴⁶

In Wesley's early sermons, the subject of imitation is most prominent in his sermon "On the Sabbath" (written July 1730). Indeed, it is perhaps the dominant theme of the sermon. For Wesley, the very reason God declared the Sabbath and memorialized it in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8) is so "man might learn to imitate God." Not only is the Sabbath for imitating God, but humans were created "for the imitation of God." For Wesley, to imitate God is a logical expression of the fact that God created humanity in his image. Imitation of the Creator becomes the desire of those whose corrupted human nature has been restored to God's image. Basic to the Sabbath is the pattern that God set by "bestowing six days on the works pertaining to this world, and resting from all these works on the seventh, to retire to a better world." In this way, the Sabbath provides a foretaste of heavenly rest and contentment. As Wesley put it, Christians are to "work together with him" who created them and "conform . . . to his likeness, to be holy as he is holy." Such an intimate partnership or participation in the life of God is expressed by Wesley in the mystical language of perfecting "his image in our souls."⁴⁷

John Wesley's Preface to Thomas à Kempis' The Christian's Pattern
Despite Wesley's initial mixture of admiration and revulsion for à Kempis he read the work with the Oxford Methodists and returned to it

⁴⁴Scougal, 5; Wesley, "The Wisdom of Winning Souls," *Sermons*, 4:310.

⁴⁵*Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 404.

⁴⁶E. J. Tinsley, *The Imitation of God in Christ: An Essay on the Biblical Basis of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1960), and Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Image and Practice of Holiness: A Critique of the Classic Manuals of Devotion* (London: SCM Press, 1988), cited in Robert Jeffery, "Imitating Christ: Wesley's Christian Pattern and Spirituality for Today," (*Methodist Sacramental Fellowship*, 2006), 12, 13.

⁴⁷*Sermons*, 4:270, 275.

repeatedly in Georgia.⁴⁸ There are fifty-five references to reading à Kempis in Wesley's Georgia diaries. Wesley and the Moravian August Spanenberg discussed their "friend [à] Kempis" in the colony.⁴⁹ The frequency to which he turned to à Kempis makes it clear that he saw the imitation of Christ as a central goal of Christian spirituality. The fairly negative tone of his 1725 exchange of letters with his parents may be somewhat misleading, at least in light of his 1738 and subsequent assessments of à Kempis' primarily positive impact on his Christian pilgrimage.⁵⁰

Wesley published his abridged edition of à Kempis in the summer of 1735 during a time of transition between his father's death and his departure for Georgia. The work was published by Charles Rivington, Wesley's High Church friend with Nonjuror sympathies.⁵¹ *The Christian's Pattern; Or, a Treatise on the Imitation of Christ* was advertised in the *Gentleman's Magazine* "Register of Books" for June, 1735. In the following month Rivington made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade to the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) to enter the book into their catalogue. This rejection was almost certainly due to the perception that Wesley did not sufficiently cleanse the book of its Catholic elements; Wesley's friend, benefactor of the Oxford Methodists and longstanding member of the SPCK, Sir John Philipps, strongly criticized Wesley's edition for this reason.⁵²

By publishing an edition of à Kempis, Wesley placed himself within a long-standing tradition of English productions of this perennially popular book. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, demand was such that a regular stream of *The Christian's Pattern* was needed to satisfy public desire.⁵³ It went through over one-hundred editions in the eighteenth century alone. George Stanhope produced a popular paraphrased translation which went through nineteen editions between 1698 and 1814.⁵⁴ Through Stanhope's translation, Wesley first became

⁴⁸On his reading of the work at Oxford, see Heitzenrater, appendix IV.

⁴⁹JWJ (manuscript), March 9, 1736, 18:354-55. The patron of the Moravians, Count Zinzendorf, was influenced by à Kempis (Jeffery, 15).

⁵⁰JWJ, May 24, 1738, 18:243-45.

⁵¹*The Diaries of Thomas Wilson, D.D. 1731-37 and 1750*, ed. C. L. S. Linnell (London: SPCK, 1964), Sept. 9, 1734, 119.

⁵²Wilson, *Diaries*, July 22, 1735, 128-29.

⁵³Van Reyk sees "a revived interest on the imitation of Christ from the mid-seventeenth century" (26).

acquainted with à Kempis in 1725. However, Wesley's 1738 *Journal* comments that "I read him [à Kempis] only in Dean Stanhope's translation" reveals that he was unhappy with Stanhope's edition.⁵⁵ Relying on his predecessors, Wesley informs the reader that his own version is based on a revision of the 1677 reprint of John Worthington's revised translation of the Latin text.⁵⁶ In a 1738 letter to William Law Wesley stated that he "correct[ed] a translation of [à] Kempis, and translate[d] a preface to it."⁵⁷ The twenty-five page preface to his octavo edition is divided into five sections (he also published a duodecimo pocket edition in 1735 with the same content as the octavo edition, except the preface, which only contains a slightly revised version of section four of the octavo edition preface). His dependence on his predecessors is evident in the preface, which he states was extracted from the 1677 English edition along with the prefaces of three seventeenth-century Latin editions.⁵⁸ The fifth section was written by Wesley. Despite his reliance on the work of others, Wesley complied the preface and was responsible for promoting its content; therefore, it reveals why the treatise appealed to him and is reflective of his views.

Following a brief introduction to the life of à Kempis, the preface opens with some general statements on the nature of the book. It is said to comprehend "all that relates to Christian perfection," including directions on "internal worship."⁵⁹ Although mystical contemplation is one of the means to attaining perfection, it is not something that is realized through sheer passivity. Perfection consists in active participation in the life of

⁵⁴Gregory, "Homo Religiosus," 101 and note 62.

⁵⁵JWJ, May 24, 1738, 18:243-44.

⁵⁶Worthington's first edition was published in 1654. He was closely associated with the Cambridge Platonists. John T. Young, "Worthington, John (*bap.* 1618, *d.* 1671)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Wesley read Worthington's *The Great Duty of Self-Resignation to the Divine Will* (1675) in Georgia (JWD, Sept. 2-3, 1736, March 10, 17, 1737, 18:418, 487, 490) and published an extract of it in his *Christian Library* volume 24, 5-104.

⁵⁷John Wesley to William Law (May 20, 1738), *Letters*, 25:546.

⁵⁸*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, iii.

⁵⁹Susanna Wesley shared her son's interest in the teaching of Roman Catholic mystics on Christian perfection. One of her favourite works was Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*, a book John Wesley used in his study with the Oxford Methodists. John A. Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism*, 2nd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 136-37; Heitzwraeter, appendix IV; Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 107-08, 251-52.

God. It is something "every Christian is bound to aspire to." And it is brought to fruition in the "perfect love" that is possible in the union of the soul with God.⁶⁰ Active mysticism that emphasizes participation in the life of God is the type of mysticism Wesley consistently embraced.⁶¹

Corresponding with the established medieval tradition of mystical devotion literature, a series of stages are prescribed that lead to perfection. First, the starting point is "entire humility;" second, "absolute self-renunciation" is required; but within this step there are two degrees of renunciation. The first type is the rejection of worldliness, while the second and superior degree involves the cleansing of the soul to allow a single-minded focus on "heavenly and spiritual things." The third stage is "unreserved resignation" to God's providence.⁶² Lastly, in harmony with the mystical tradition of the Cambridge Platonists and Henry Scougal, the goal of the previous stages is "union of our will with the divine, as makes the Christian one spirit with God . . . whereby he that loves God is made partaker of the Divine Nature."⁶³

The preface continues on the theme of spiritual stages to cover a further fundamental feature of the mystical tradition, the intimate connection between purgation and illumination. Purgation is acknowledged as a branch of self-renunciation accomplished through the entire mortification of one's passions. Purging oneself from sin leads to enlightenment of the understanding by which virtue can be understood; the comprehension of virtue, however, is of no effect apart from putting it into practice. To further underscore the importance of practical application, the union of the soul with God is described as something reached in an "experimental manner." Complementary to these stages are the means to cultivate Christian perfection. These include: "above all and in all, the grace of God," "prayer, self-examination, reading the scriptures, and the holy communion."⁶⁴

⁶⁰*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, ix-x.

⁶¹Although Wesley was highly-critical of mystics from 1736, he continued to recommend the work of select mystics such as à Kempis and Law.

⁶²See Wesley's question of self-examination for Thursday evening prayers: "Have I laboured to be wholly indifferent to whichsoever Way He shall ordain for me?" *Collection of Forms of Prayer*, 54.

⁶³These stages can be compared with the five central Christian duties cited in the preface to Wesley's *Collection of Forms of Prayer*: self-renunciation, devotion to God, self-denial, mortification, and "Christ liveth in me" (iv-vi).

⁶⁴*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, x-xiv. Robert Jeffery has claimed that one reason à Kempis appealed to Protestants is because he advocates frequent communion while not promoting a specific doctrine of the Eucharist (9).

In the third section of the introduction on "the temper required in order to read it with improvement," more is said about the essence of the treatise, the nature of imitating Christ, and the temper needed to profitably read à Kempis. The heart of *The Christian's Pattern* is identified as "being transformed into the image of God, or in the author's language, the Imitation of Christ in humility, self-renunciation, resignation and love."⁶⁵ Here it appears that union with God, embodying the image of God, and imitating Christ are all presented as ways of describing the single goal of the Christian life. Justification for imitating Christ is based on his "perfect Pattern of all Holiness," resembling Wesley's prayer "give me Grace to walk after thy Pattern, to tread in thy Steps." But what is the pattern he set? The closest we get to an answer is "the zealous observance of all those rules delivered by our Lord in his sermon on the mount." The section closes with a further appeal to "that inward, practical, experimental, feeling knowledge, so frequently commanded by our author."⁶⁶

In the section following, guidance is provided for reading à Kempis.⁶⁷ First, time should be set aside daily for the task; second, the text should be approached with "purity of intention;"⁶⁸ third, reading should be undertaken at a leisurely pace to allow time for self-examination and God to enlighten the understanding. At the same time, a serious approach should be taken with the intention of practicing what is learned. Fourth, the reader should actively seek to rouse their inner self to combine warmed "affections" with enlightened understanding. All of this

⁶⁵Compare this to Wesley's references to imitating Christ's love, meekness and humility in his *Collection of Forms of Prayer* (24, 36).

⁶⁶*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, iii, xvi, xviii, xxi; cf. *Collection of Forms of Prayer*, 41. In his later spiritual autobiography of events leading up to his Aldersgate experience, Wesley mentioned that à Kempis taught him that "true religion was seated in the heart" and this inspired him "to aim at and pray for inward holiness." JWJ, May 24, 1738, 18:243-44.

⁶⁷Wesley states that these directions come from "Praemonitio ad Lectorem, prefix to that printed at Cologn in 1682." Directions that are similar but lengthier than Wesley's can be found in the *Nonjuror*, George Hickes' edition of *The Christian Pattern*. Hickes, *The Christian Pattern: Or, the Imitation of Christ*, 2nd ed. (London: John Nicholson, 1710), no pagination.

⁶⁸This is a key theme in Wesley's early sermons, which is also found in à Kempis, Taylor, and Law. See, for example, "The One Thing Needful" (written May 1734), *Sermons*, 4:358-59 and "A Single Intention" (written January-February 1736), *Sermons*, 4:372-77.

should be concluded with a short prayer asking God that the reading would "bring forth fruit" in the reader's life.⁶⁹

The fifth and final section of the preface (the only one written by Wesley) outlines the goal of Wesley's edition to revise Worthington's translation in order to bring *The Christian's Pattern* "closer to the original" by avoiding paraphrase, rendering à Kempis words in a "literal" manner, and making the translation as a whole "plainer" and "clearer."⁷⁰ Based on Wesley's editorial policy, one can understand why Sir John Philipps criticized his "literal translation" for not editing out the "passages relating to Popery."⁷¹ The preface concludes with a brief exhortation containing phrases that Wesley returned to often in his later writings: the condemnation of "Half-Christians" in favor of becoming "altogether a Christian" and fixing one's "single eye" on the one thing needful, loving God with all of one's heart.⁷²

Conclusion

In comparison with Wesley's sermons, the preface to à Kempis provides a remarkably similar view of the path to holy living. Rejection of worldliness begins with humility and self-renunciation; holy living is conceived as the imitation of Christ and participation in the life of God; the goal of Christianity is perfect union with God consisting in pure love. Wesley's affinity with à Kempis was in no way a passing phase. He continued to reread the devotional classic, recommend it to others, and publish it.

The lasting importance of *The Christian's Pattern* for Wesley was demonstrated in at least three ways. First, he published six distinct editions or extracts from the work which assured it would reach a large audience. Three of these were reprinted multiple times. His 1741 abridgement, *An Extract of the Christian's Pattern*, continued to be reprinted into the twentieth century.⁷³ Second, in the 1763 *Large Minutes*, published as

⁶⁹*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, xxii-xxiv.

⁷⁰*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, xxiv-xxv.

⁷¹Wilson, *Diaries*, July 22, 1735, 128-29.

⁷²*The Christian's Pattern*, ed. Wesley, xxvi-xxvii.

⁷³The 1741, 1746, 1753, and 1756 editions do not have a preface. Editions from 1759, including the edition in vols. 7-8 of *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (1772), contain the same preface as the 1735, 1750, and 1763 pocket editions of *The Christian Pattern*, which has a slightly revised version of section four of the larger 1735 edition providing advice on how to profitably read à Kempis.

a summary of the Minutes of several previous Methodist annual conferences to provide guidance for Methodist preachers, Wesley declared that à Kempis should be found in every society and home.⁷⁴ Third, à Kempis' *imitatio Christi* continued to inform his theology and spirituality. In his 1765 letter to John Newton, Wesley explained that Taylor and à Kempis inspired him "to give God all my heart," and forty years later, "This is just what I mean by Perfection now: I sought after it from that hour."⁷⁵

The imitation of Christ was a persistent theme in Wesley's sermons and ministry, which was placed in the context of a stronger emphasis on "Faith working by Love" after his Aldersgate experience.⁷⁶ The dictum "having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked," a combination of Philippians 2:5 and 1 John 2:6, is the most frequently found biblical expression in his sermons with over fifty occurrences. Richard Heitzenrater has argued that this scriptural appeal to the imitation of Christ was Wesley's "most common way of expressing the nature of Christian perfection."⁷⁷ A burning zeal to imitate Christ was a defining characteristic of his early life and lifetime of ministry.

⁷⁴*Works*, ed. Jackson, 8:319; cf. John Wesley to George Meryweather and John Wesley to Joseph Taylor (January 24, 1760 and September 24, 1782), Telford, ed. *Letters*, 4:83; 7:143. Wesley also encouraged Thomas Rankin to publish and distribute à Kempis in the American colonies. Wesley to Rankin (July 28, 1775), Telford, ed., *Letters*, 6:168.

⁷⁵John Wesley to John Newton (May 1765), Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:299. See also John Wesley to John Fletcher (March 20, 1768) and John Wesley to James Macdonald (October 23, 1790), Telford, ed., *Letters*, 5:84, 8:243.

⁷⁶See John and Charles Wesley's *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: William Strahan, 1739), vii-ix.

⁷⁷"The *Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor," in *Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Dougals Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 58, 60. Compare John Deschner's statement that, for Wesley, "the 'mind of Christ' theme . . . serves widely as a definition of perfect holiness." *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1960), 161.

TREASURES BOTH NEW AND OLD: FIGURATION IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

by

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The title of this article is an allusion to Jesus' summation of his parables about the Kingdom of Heaven: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52). Figuration is an approach to the entire Scriptural canon by scholars (scribes) thoroughly aware of the benefits of historical, form, and redaction criticism (old treasures), but who also recognize their limits—what these approaches do not admit methodologically: that Scripture is a living document for living faith communities. Figuration finds meanings to texts that the author could not have known (new treasures), but to which the shape of the canon points. Figuration uses Scripture to make sense of later events and movements and highlights the significance of Scripture's own reuse of texts—its intertextuality—to make meaning for present and later recipients.

While typology—especially in the case of finding Christ in the Old Testament—is known for its disinterest in the specific historical contexts of the texts in question, modern figural reading values the early textual contexts while still comprehending God's work in Israel, in Christ, in the apostles, in the Holy Spirit, and in the two-testament canon. Precedents for figural reading are found in the New Testament, which reports that Jesus found his story in the Scriptures (e.g., Luke 24.13-35. This paper analyzes figuration by noting its contributions to Christology, while cautioning against the excesses that plague typological, allegorical, and other "spiritual" approaches.