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The Imitation of Christ in I Peter

BY STEPHEN SMALLEY

CHAUCER'S *Tale of Melibee* tells the sad story of a young man named Melibeus whose wife Prudence and daughter Sophie are attacked and beaten by three of his enemies while he is in the "feeldes" disporting himself. On his return, Melibeus is stricken with grief, and is all for vengeance; but he is restrained by his wife (true to her name), who luckily recalls a sentence or two of Ovid recommending patience in adversity. Friends with advice are not wanting, but in no time at all the *Tale* settles down into a monumentally dull dialogue between husband and wife, full of the most excellent counsel, at the end of which Prudence wins her point, and the heart of Melibeus (not surprisingly, since Prudence has more than had her say) begins to "incline to the will of his wife".¹ But in the course of her argument Prudence has occasion to quote, as well she might, the example of Christ's patient endurance mentioned in *I Peter*: "ye owen to enclyne and bowe your herte to take the pacience of our lord Jesu Crist, as seith seint Peter in hise epistles: 'Jesu Crist', he seith, 'hath suffred for us, and yeven ensample to every man to folwe and sewe him'."² It is this "taking" of the patience of Christ that provides a leading thread of thought in Peter's epistle; it seems to be informed by the writer's own experience, and has in mind throughout a practical and pastoral intent.

* * * *

We must begin with an exposition of the two chief passages in *I Peter* where the notion of *imitatio Christi* occurs, in order to discover the precise nature and significance of their setting.

(i) *ii. 21ff.* In chapter ii the writer embarks on his second doctrinal section (verses 4-10), dealing with the nature and function of the Christian Church. In the passage *ii. 11-iii. 12* he goes on to apply this doctrine in terms of the Christian ethic in its social, family, and individual aspects. F. L. Cross, following his thesis that *I Peter* comprises a baptismal liturgy for the paschal vigil, regards this section as part of the bishop's address to the newly-baptized on the duties of Christian discipleship, dealing in this case with moral responsibility.³ From a different standpoint, A. M. Hunter has indicated the extent to which the exhortations in *I Peter*, as in the Pauline *corpus* and some early Christian writings beyond the New Testament, are probably indebted to a common, primitive paraenetic tradition.⁴ Whatever the source, the teaching remains clear: in view of their Christian calling to be the true temple (*ii. 5*) and Israel of God (*verse 10*), Peter urges his readers negatively to allow no place for the impulses which arise from solidarity with the first Adam (*verse 11*), and positively to give full rein to the fruit of their incorporation into the second (*verse 12*).

After a plea against civil disobedience, on the grounds of the divine origin of all temporal authority (verses 13-17), Peter uses the master-servant relationship, to which he turns, as an illustration of the way in which the principles of daily Christian living are to reflect those involved in membership of the Christian community itself (verses 18ff.). The Christian slaves addressed are encouraged to pursue, within the existing social structure, a policy of submission, since they are in any case freedmen ἐν χριστῷ; and such innocent suffering as they are called upon to bear may now be offered to God, and for Christ's sake transformed. It is to this kind of patience, indeed, that they are "called" (verse 21), since the vicarious suffering of Christ (ὕπερ ἡμῶν—some MSS. read ἡμῶν) was *par excellence* a demonstration of endurance both exemplary in its character (verses 22f.), and effective in its outcome (verse 24). The steps of their Ποιμήν and Ἐπίσκοπος, to whom they have converted, are for these slaves to become an abiding ὑπογραμμός (verse 21).

(ii) iii. 18ff. These verses occur in the third and final doctrinal section (iii. 13-iv. 19), in which the writer discusses the redemptive work of Christ in its most inclusive categories, as the ground once more for Christian patience in suffering. Mention of the sufferings of Christ, who died δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων (verse 18a), arises from a reminder of the painfulness as well as the glory of being dead to sin (verses 13-17), and leads to the exhortation, "arm yourselves with a temper of mind like his" (iv. 1, NEB); and this followed by a further application of the *imitatio* theme in the face of a suffering which seems by now to have overtaken the readers (verses 12ff.). Professor C. F. D. Moule has suggested that this section (iv. 12-v. 14) belongs to a letter written to Christians actually undergoing suffering, and that it was combined with an alternative epistle (i. 1-iv. 11, etc.) which was written in preparation for persecution, and is therefore less "terse" and "swift" in style.⁵

Verses 18b-22 of chapter iii form an excursus on the congruence of Christ's suffering and that of the Christian, expanded in terms of the *descensus ad inferos* (iii. 19, the single explicit New Testament reference to this doctrine), and given its focus, as we shall see later, in baptism. The sovereignty of Christ's person and the efficacy of His work, are clearly as inclusive in their application as His experience of every area of existence. The vindication of the Lord Christ, and His victory over sin and therefore death, similarly means that the Christian who dies to sin by incorporation into Christ (iii. 21) is able in union with Him to know, particularly through the discipline of suffering, the conquest of sin (iv. 1), and also to live θελήματι Θεοῦ (verse 2).⁶ It is because this is true, moreover, that the πρεσβύτεροι addressed are able in turn to become τύποι of the flock of God (v. 1-4).

* * * *

We are now in a position to examine more closely the theme of *imitatio Christi* in I Peter; and this we shall do by investigating the way in which the Christ-Christian relationship is rotated around the concept of suffering.

In the first place, it is important to notice, as E. G. Selwyn points out,⁷ the deep connection made by our writer between soteriology and ethics. His encouragement to holiness in i. 15f. (citing Lev. xi. 44), for example, picks up the antecedent references to the death of Christ in that chapter (verses 1 and 11), and introduces a summary of the redemptive work of Christ as both spiritual in effect and eternal in scope (verses 18-21). The weighty link-words, Διό (verse 13) and διότι (verse 16), and the participial constructions in verses 18ff. which are followed by doctrinal statement as well as ethical encouragement, pull the thought of this chapter very much together, and underline the truth that it is because of the work of the holy God in Christ on our behalf that we are able to achieve the very holiness He demands: κατὰ τὸν καλέσαντα ὑμᾶς ἅγιον καὶ αὐτοὶ ἅγιοι (i. 15). F. W. Beare insists that ultimately the life of holiness for this epistle is grounded not in the imitation of Christ, but in the nature of God Himself.⁸ But are we not able, none the less, to see the *imitatio Christi* in Petrine terms as one means to that end? To follow the example of Jesus will result in a holiness reflecting the very character of God, and expressed practically by means of active well-doing (*cf.* ii. 15, 20; iii. 17; iv. 19).

The connection between the death of Christ and the life and conduct of the Christian becomes clearer from the more explicit treatment of the *Christus patiens* theme in chapter ii. It is the incarnate life and example of Christ that are in mind in this passage, considered exclusively in the context of His demeanour in suffering, and against the background of Isaiah liii. The catch-word of verses 18-25 is "subordination", and the logion of injunction to slaves (in this case) reads, ὑποτασσόμενοι ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ (that is, of God) τοῖς δεσπόταις.⁹ Three features of the sufferings of Jesus are selected for particular mention: it was innocent (verse 22), submissive (verse 23, *cf.* ii. 13), vicarious (verse 24); it was also, incidentally, as Messiah, inevitable (i. 11; *cf.* Lk. xxiv. 25f.). In line with His own promise (Mark viii. 34f., *al.*), the followers of Jesus must also be prepared for suffering, according to the ὑπογραμμός—literally, either the design for a sketch or a pattern to be copied—of the Master Himself. A. M. Stibbs points out the force of the compound ἐπακολουθήσητε: the example of Jesus is to be followed *closely*, in the spirit of the command given to Peter himself and the other disciples on the occasion of the *Pedilavium* (John xiii. 15, 17).¹⁰

Now it is evident that there is a close connection between the attitude of the Lord adopted during His passion, and the incident of Calvary itself. Reference to the παθήματα of Christ in ii. 21, for example (where ἔπαθεν is certainly the correct reading), leads naturally to the mention of His death in verse 24; and these two thoughts are yoked even more closely together in iii. 18. Corresponding to this connection is the parallel behaviour of the Christian which the writer is encouraging. The persecution of believers may well lead to their martyrdom; and if *en route* their sharing in the sufferings of Christ (κοινωνεῖτε, iv. 13, an integral part of the *imitatio* doctrine, and a clue to its quiddity) leads also to the conversion of others, as the cross

of Christ leads to the life of all men (ii. 24f.), this is a matter for nothing but rejoicing (ii. 12 ; iv. 13b).

We come again to the passage, iii. 18ff. In these verses the soteriological stress shifts from that of *Christus patiens* to that of *Christus victor*.¹¹ In the earlier chapter, iii. 21ff., the submission of Christ was in mind ; here, the triumphant and final use of ἄπαξ (verse 18) provides in itself the setting for a new key. This fresh theme is developed through the implications of the participial ζωοποιηθείς, used in apposition to χριστός, in terms of the *descensus ad inferos*. The notion of "descent" bears out for Peter not only the fact of Christ's experience of every possible realm of existence, but also the truth of an inclusive announcement (ἐκήρυξεν, verse 19) of His vindication and sovereignty (verse 22). But the important lesson being taught, for our purposes, is that the vicarious (ὑπὲρ ἁδελφῶν, verse 18 ; cf. ii. 21), atoning (περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ; cf. ii. 24) death of Christ is to be regarded as the ground of all Christian behaviour : καὶ ὑμεῖς τὴν αὐτὴν ἔννοιαν ὀπλίσασθε (iv. 1).

In the course of his extended and illuminating treatment of the issue of the "disobedient spirits" in *I Peter*, Bo Reicke has a section on iii. 17, 18 in which he considers the precise implications of those two verses.¹² Reicke finds a close connection between them, linked as they are by καί (verse 18a) ; and he suggests that the expressions in verse 18 indicate accordingly "what is common to the Saviour and the saved".¹³ If Christ's death περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν be taken to mean, "He died (*sc.* for others) as a sin-offering", then the parallelism becomes clear : Christians must be prepared to risk suffering and even death in order to win the unconverted for Christ (verse 17, recapitulating the paraenesis of verses 13-16), just as Christ died for us, as a sin-offering, to bring us who are equally unrighteous to God.¹⁴ This then becomes the second argument advanced in support of the paraenesis in iii. 13-16 ; the third, verses 19ff., is the fact of the *descensus* itself, with its implications already discussed. Certainly this analysis makes admirable sense of the whole section iii. 13-22 ; but it also lends weight to the appositions θανατωθείς and ζωοποιηθείς (used of Jesus in verse 18), when these are considered in the light of the Petrine doctrine of the imitation of Christ. Not only, however, is the context that of a "martyr ideology", in Reicke's phrase ;¹⁵ its gravitation-point is surely also that of baptism itself, the focus of the believer's death and resurrection.¹⁶ It is to the meaning of the recapitulatory phrase, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (verse 21, RSV, a reference thought by some to interrupt an otherwise unified credal passage), that we must now turn.

* * * *

To what does the ἀντίτυπος of baptism correspond? The "figure" under review in verse 20 is the deliverance of Noah and his company from the judgment of God. The Greek, however, is difficult : either they were "brought through" the water (διεσώθησαν δι' ὕδατος), or alternatively, taking διὰ as "by", the flood-waters,

which brought judgment to the disobedient, brought salvation to them. E. G. Selwyn takes ἀντίτυπον to refer to ὑμᾶς and not to βάπτισμα;¹⁷ but surely the most natural sense is that baptism "corresponds" to the antecedent means of salvation cited from the Old Testament. But even as an "antitype" it is much more than simply a "figure", since in baptism the *imitatio Christi* takes its origin and finds its enabling. Here the believer accepts the judgment of God upon sin already accepted by Christ in the βάπτισμα of the cross, and rises from spiritual death, through the resurrection of the Saviour, to newness of life in Him.¹⁸ It is incorporation that effects this, not simply participation (verse 21b); and here no doubt Peter still has in mind the participles θανατωθεῖς and ζωοποιηθεῖς of verse 18, since it is precisely in baptism that the essential imitation of Christ becomes sacramentally possible. The very category of "imitation", in fact, is dynamic and (if we may use the term) existential. It belongs to the dimension of the new birth (i. 3), and is never, as a result, far removed in theology or experience from the grace and power of God: "the God of all grace, who called you into his eternal glory in Christ, will himself, after your brief suffering, restore, establish, and strengthen you on a firm foundation" (v. 10, NEB). Neither the Pauline "reckoning" of the self as "dead to sin" (Rom. vi. 11), nor the Petrine "imitation" of the Lord Jesus Christ, are to be thought of as matters of speculative imagination.

In the corporate setting of the spiritual household (ii. 5), the new life of faith (i. 8) and worship (ii. 5) and witness (ii. 9), in answer to the love of Christ (like the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Christian life, mostly implicit in this epistle) centred in His sacrificial self-offering, becomes full of an "exalted joy" (i. 8, RSV). It is in a dimension of glory and hope, indeed, as F. W. Beare points out,¹⁹ that the sufferings of Christ and of the Christian alike are set. Suffering for the name of Christ now (iv. 14) means participation in His own sufferings (iv. 13), and both, Christ's sufferings and ours in Him, anticipate the revelation of His glory (iv. 13) and our salvation (i. 5-7). We are back to the point from which we began: the Christ-Christian relationship considered in its paschal setting.

Suffering, said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is "the badge of the true Christian". To follow Christ "means *passio passiva*, suffering because we have to suffer."²⁰ He does not leave it there, however, but goes on to speak of the transformation of Christian suffering into joy. Again, victory and vindication through the cross, disarming opposition by a reply of patient goodness to undeserved injury, are notes struck by another saint—this time a fifteenth century monk—in a famous version of the *imitatio Christi* theme: "Up, then, my brothers! Let us go forward together! Jesus will be with us. For Jesus' sake, we have taken up the cross; for Jesus' sake, let us persevere in it. He will be our helper, who is also our leader; He has gone before us."²¹ And these twin notions, suffering with joy and returning good for evil, after the pattern and in the strength of our Saviour Christ, are the heart of the doctrine of "imitation" in *I Peter*. Initiated in baptism, the believer's *imitatio Christi* may well find its focus in sufferings

answering Christ's, which, like the sacraments themselves, breathe eternity as well as history. As a result, the whole of *I Peter* becomes, in Ragnar Leivestad's words, "a testimony of striving faith, conquering love, and triumphant hope".²³

A Note on the word "vicarious"

The language of *I Peter* with reference to the death of Christ, particularly in ii. 21 (ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν) and iii. 18 (περὶ ἀμαρτιῶν . . . ὑπὲρ ἀδικῶν) has prompted the use of the adjective "vicarious" to describe one significant aspect of the Atonement. A glance at standard works on the death of Christ, however, will reveal the variation and indeed confusion which have gathered round the use of this term, and the corresponding importance of precision in its present use.

Dr. J. S. Whale, for example, in his recent study of the Christian doctrine of redemption, *Victor and Victim* (1960), is anxious (*inter alia*) to eliminate wrong notions of penal substitution from our understanding of the Cross. In the course of his arguments he aligns "explicitly vicarious" *tout court* with "substitutionary" (p. 72; so also H. A. Hodges, *The Pattern of Atonement* (1955), p. 46); and this is coloured by his earlier ascription to Levitical sacrifice of the meaning, "penal substitution *or* (that is, alternatively) vicarious punishment" (p. 52, my italics). Clearly the issue is complicated further by Dr. Whale's attempt to determine the significance of "punishment" in this setting; but enough has been said to indicate that he appears to be allowing to the term "vicarious" only one soteriological implicate, and that substitutionary.

In his eagerness to focus one element of a doctrine, then, Dr. Whale has ignored its relation to the general category, since on etymological as well as theological grounds "vicarious" surely carries a wide connotation, denoted by the New Testament language of ὑπὲρ ("on behalf of"), as well as ἀντί ("in place of"). Jesus died vicariously as a "representative sacrificial offering to the Father on behalf of sinful humanity" (J. S. Whale, *op.cit.*, p. 58); and the language and thought of the New Testament seem to suggest that He also "stood condemned" vicariously in its place (*ibid.*, p. 70).

E. G. Selwyn, in his comment on iv. 1 (*op.cit.*, *ad loc.*, p. 208), also mentions the "vicarious" suffering of Christ, which he believes this verse implies by picking up (οὖν) the thought of iii. 18a. Indeed, his suggestion is that the vicarious element in Christ's sufferings was responsible for the early omission of the words ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν (read by AKLP, *al.*) after σαρκί at iv. 1, since it was felt to be one "beyond the scope of believers' imitation". But, as he also goes on to say, the "vicarious" element is in any case implied by the link between iv. 1 and iii. 18a; and the more important consideration is the sense in which the term "vicarious" will apply to the parallel behaviour of the *Christian* who suffers, if the deep connection between the sufferings of Christ and of the Christian, proposed above, is accepted.

It becomes clear at once that we must distinguish between the vicarious *atoning* sufferings of Christ (however widely the term "vicarious" is construed), and the "vicarious" suffering of Christians,

for the bearing of which the *παθήματα* of Christ provide both an example and a motive. Undertaken submissively (a Petrine keyword in chapters ii and iii, as we have seen), the innocent suffering of the believer "for righteousness' sake" (iv. 14) may well have reference to others (*cf.* II Cor. i. 6, where *ὑπέρ* again predominates, though Paul's teaching is more developed), causing them to be silenced (I Peter iii. 16), and even to "glorify God" (ii. 12).

¹ G. Chaucer, *Complete Works*, ed. W. W. Skeat (1912), p. 529, 1.3060.

² *Ibid.*, p. 521, 11. 2690-91.

³ F. L. Cross, *I Peter: a Paschal Liturgy* (1954), p. 39 *et passim*.

⁴ A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors* (revised edn. 1961), p. 53; *cf.* E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (1946), *ad loc.*, pp. 168f., and P. Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Catechism* (1940), pp. 23-29.

⁵ C. F. D. Moule, *The Nature and Purpose of I Peter*, in *NTS* III, 1956, pp. 1ff.

⁶ *Cf.* A. M. Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (1959), p. 148: "What is here inculcated is more than *imitatio Christi* . . . It is rather *unio mystica*."

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 20f.

⁸ F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (second edn. 1958), p. 35.

⁹ In the catechetical plan of Archbishop Carrington, this section belongs to the "Code of Subordination" (actually a Clementine phrase) which he finds emerging as one of the four "points" of teaching given to catechumens, and lying behind material common to *Colossians*, *Ephesians*, *I Peter*, and *James*. Its keyword is *subjecti estote*. See P. Carrington, *op. cit.*, pp. 31ff.

¹⁰ A. M. Stibbs, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*, p. 117.

¹¹ See the analysis of E. G. Selwyn, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*, p. 195.

¹² Bo Reicke, "The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism," in *Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis XIII*, 1946, pp. 211 ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁴ Significantly enough, almost all the exhortations to "well doing" in this epistle (ii. 20; iv. 19, *al.*), are linked with the fact or possibility of suffering.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁶ Hans Windisch (*Die Katholischen Briefe*, third edn. edited by H. Preisker, 1951, p. 70) considers iii: 18-22 to be actually a primitive baptismal hymn to Christ.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, *ad loc.*, p. 203.

¹⁸ *Cf.* Rom. vi. 4f.; and see C. F. D. Moule, "The Judgment Theme in the Sacraments," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, edited by W. D. Davies and D. Daube (1956), pp. 464-481.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (tr. R. H. Fuller, 1948), pp. 74f.

²¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (tr. L. Sherley-Price, 1952), p. 172 (iii. 56; *cf.* iii. 19).

²² R. Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror* (1954), p. 169.