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THE GREAT IMITATION

His classmates called him "the Dumb Ox" because of he was heavysset, serious, and usually silent. Historians, however, call him "the Angelic Doctor," and Roman Catholics revere him as a saint. His name: Thomas Aquinas--the most influential theologian of the thirteenth century.

If the young scholar's mother could have had her way, the world would never have heard of Thomas Aquinas. She strongly opposed his wishes to study theology and join a priestly order. In fact, she even had him confined in a castle for over a year in an attempt to keep him from becoming a priest.

The life mission of Thomas Aquinas was to reconcile the Christian faith with human reason, and to intellectually prove the existence of God. Of the many theological books Aquinas wrote, his final work--the *Summa Theologica* or *Summary Treatise of Theology* (1265-73)--is considered his greatest and most important. Amazingly, Aquinas himself never finished the *Summa Theologica*. No, he didn't die before it could be completed. He simply lost interest and stopped writing!

What happened to Aquinas that made him abruptly abandon his lifelong pursuit of theology? We find a clue in the fact that his great unfinished work was composed of three parts: "On God," "The Moral Life of Man," and "On Christ." He had completed the first two sections and was deep into the writing of the final section on Christ that something happened to him--a profound and emotionally shattering spiritual experience. Aquinas himself was never able to put that life-changing experience into words, but many who have studied his life believe that, in the process of writing about Christ and meditating on our Lord's life and words, Aquinas experienced a vision in which he came face to face with the Savior.

Following his spiritual encounter with Jesus, Aquinas said, "I have seen that which makes all I have written and taught look small to me. My writing days are over." And with that, he simply stopped writing, leaving his theological masterpiece on Christ unfinished. All human pursuits--even the study of religion and theology--are mere pale imitations once we come into the presence of the Great Reality, Jesus Himself.

The Christian life begins with an encounter with Jesus Christ. It cannot be otherwise. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). Many influences and experiences may lead us to an encounter with Jesus Christ. Those influences and experiences may even be intensely religious and theologically profound--but until a person responds to the promise of Christ and receives Him as Lord, there can be no spiritual reality, no eternal life.

The act of receiving Christ may be so effortless, gentle, and gradual that the person may not even be aware of the exact moment he or she passed from death into life. This is often the case with children who are raised from an early age to love God and to follow Jesus. In other cases, the moment of conversion is shattering and dramatic, as in the experience of Thomas Aquinas or the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. In still other cases, a specific moment of decision results in the conversion experience--yet it takes place without great drama, miracles, or visions; that is the conversion experience John Wesley describes when he says he felt "strangely warmed" when he gave his life to Christ.

In still other cases, conversion may actually be a tortuous, painful experience, accompanied with great

resistance, almost as if the individual is "dragged kicking and screaming" into the Kingdom of God; such was the case with St. Augustine. He spent years seeking pleasure and exploring various worldly philosophies until one day he heard a voice, like that of a child, repeating, "Take up and read." Believing this to be a command from God to read the Bible, Augustine took up the book of Romans, opened it at random, and read, "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). Though he did not want to give up his sinful ways, though he resisted God's call upon his life, Augustine knew that he had at last discovered the truth--and he gave up the struggle and accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

A person's encounter with Jesus Christ--what we call "conversion"--may take place in any one of a number of ways. However the act of conversion occurs, it absolutely must take place before there can be any hope of living the authentic Christian life.

No other way

The experience of encountering Christ rests upon the written promises of the Bible. At least some knowledge of the truth of God's Word is essential to believing in or receiving Christ. It is the biblical account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus which gives us reason to believe that Jesus is alive and available to us; that Jesus can, by the Holy Spirit, actually come to live within a human being; and that He can so entwine His own life with our own so that, from then out, we and Christ can be essentially regarded as one. The biblical account of the life and character of Jesus gives us the basis for believing that Jesus is truly the Savior He claimed to be and that He has the power to set us free from bondage to sin. Our assurance as Christians rests upon such promises as, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28) and "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8: 12).

But no matter how clearly we may understand who Jesus is and what He can do in our lives, and even how He gives us eternal life (by His death and resurrection, God's plan of salvation), we cannot receive the gift of eternal life until we, in our human will, respond to the invitation of Jesus and choose to receive Him, obey Him, and follow Him. God's plan of salvation, as it is presented to us throughout the New Testament, is aimed squarely at our human will, our human decision-making ability. We must make a choice to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus.

We cannot attain eternal life through a mere intellectual exercise. We do not become authentic Christians by intellectually comprehending and accepting the historical facts about Jesus. Nor do we become authentic Christians by grasping the theological implications of his death and resurrection. We do not become authentic Christians by adhering to certain moral and ethical standards which Jesus taught. Nor do we become authentic Christians by trying to relate to God apart from Jesus Christ. Our lives must be joined to His life. We become authentic Christians by asking Jesus to come in as Lord and Master, and by trusting Him to accomplish and fulfill His eternal life in us by means of the Holy Spirit. When that happens, a miracle takes place--even though that miracle may be of a quiet, almost invisible kind. A new quality of life--*eternal* life--is imparted to us and we are "made alive in Christ." It is this divine action that makes us authentic Christians. Nothing else can do it. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." It is that simple.

Signs of life

Conversion is just the beginning. A newborn baby, fresh from her mother's womb, is a complete, authentic person, a genuine human being, even though she is physically and mentally undeveloped. In the same way, a newborn Christian is a complete, authentic Christian and truly shares the life of Christ, even though he is spiritually undeveloped. There is much to be learned and experienced before this person achieves anything that can properly be called maturity. Happily, however, certain manifestations of the new life do quickly appear. Perhaps the easiest to recognize is a sense of peace and well-being, especially in terms of one's feelings about God. It is, as Paul tells us, the result of God's Spirit bearing witness with our human spirit that we are now the children of God (see Romans 8:16). And that sense of peace is made more intense and lasting as we come to realize the full implication of having our sin forgiven through our relationship with Christ. This release from guilt and shame is a large part of the peace Christians experience.

One of the joys of a new Christian is a new and exciting sense of belonging to a family. We discover we are not alone, but have become members of a large and ever-growing family. As members of that family, we have many brothers and sisters to relate to and enjoy, while having continual access to our heavenly Father through prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit. For many, the most joyful aspect of this new life is release from the fear of death and what lies beyond. To have the certain hope of heaven rather than the fear of hell is a relief beyond our ability to express.

Because of these elements of the Christian life, many new Christians experience intense excitement and joy. The Bible becomes a fresh and exciting book, and meeting with other Christians is a continual joy. The change that comes over the outlook and emotions of the new Christian is obvious to everyone. Many new believers wonder, *"Why did I wait so long to experience something so wonderful?"*

Three possible choices

This initial state of euphoria may continue for weeks or even months. Inevitably, sooner or later, the old natural life begins to reassert itself. The glow begins to fade from Christian worship, and Bible reading becomes less and less rewarding. Christian fellowship in meetings and individual contact becomes dull and routine. Old patterns of thinking and behavior begin to reassert themselves. This is a critical time when one of three possibilities may occur.

First, the young Christian may continue his decline to the point of dropping out of all Christian relationships, neglecting the Bible, abandoning prayer, losing interest in spiritual things, and falling back into his pre-Christian lifestyle. This may be just a temporary period of "backsliding," one of several periods of remission before the person settles into a consistent Christian lifestyle. In the majority of cases, however, there is no return (at least for many years). The question naturally occurs: Was this person ever really a Christian at all?

Second, the young Christian may become aware of his cold and rebellious heart, become frightened by the thought of regressing to what he was before, and repentantly cast himself upon God's mercy, renewing his trust in God's promises. Such Christians often seek the help of older, more experienced Christians as mentors and prayer partners who encourage them and hold them accountable as they return to a state of obedience, peace, and joy. This cycle may be repeated many times until it becomes the pattern of his experience and he comes to think of it as normal Christianity. On the other hand he may, happily, learn something from each repeated cycle, so that his eyes are opened to the truth and he is able to leave his spiritual roller-coaster existence and become a stable, mature, Spirit-led Christian.

The third and most likely possibility is that the new Christian may discover what millions of others before him have learned: It is possible to avoid the pain and humiliation of these cycles of repentance and renewal by maintaining an outward facade of spiritual commitment, moral impeccability, and orthodox behavior. He can simply maintain an outward reputation for spiritual maturity that is satisfying to the ego, even though he is inwardly haunted by the fact that his "Christianity" is a hollow shell. Such an outwardly Christian life-style is so prevalent today that a new Christian can hardly be blamed for adopting it and regarding it as the expected thing. He drifts into it with only an occasional twinge of doubt or a rare, faint pang of conscience.

He is in denial, and would be deeply offended if anyone called him what he really is: a hypocrite. To him, the word "hypocrite" suggests something nasty and sinister, like the Pharisees of old. He sees himself as a "real Christian," even though his faith is only an inch deep. It is not the kind of rock-solid, deep-rooted relationship with Jesus that can carry him through any crisis. The fact is, the "peace" he claims to have is present only while his circumstances are untroubled; when his circumstances turn dark and troubling, his "peace" evaporates in an instant. The "joy" he sings about seldom shows on his face, and the "Christian love" he is talks about is reserved only for those who please him and get along with him. It is all a giant (though largely unconscious) sham. He may be a true Christian in whose heart Christ dwells, but he does not live the Christian life on a consistent basis. He may be a highly moral, highly religious, even a highly generous person--but the reality is that he is living pretty much as he did before his conversion, only now his speech and behavior are covered with a thin glaze of Christianity. That glaze is the first thing to crack and crumble when life becomes

irritating, difficult, or threatening.

The phony and the genuine

You may think this is a harsh judgment. Many people think that the mark of an authentic Christian is doctrinal purity; if a person's beliefs are biblical and doctrinally orthodox, then he is a Christian. People who equate orthodoxy with authenticity find it hard to even consider the possibility that, despite the correctness of all their doctrinal positions, they may have missed the deepest reality of the authentic Christian life. But we must never forget that true Christianity is more than teaching--it is a *way of life*. In fact, it is *life itself*. "He who has the Son has life," remember? When we talk about life, we are talking about something that is far more than mere morality, far more than doctrinal accuracy. Life is a positive quality, not negative--a description of what we fundamentally are, not what we are not. The eternal life that Jesus brings to us is radical, not superficial. It is humble, not self-promoting. It is compassionate, not indifferent. It is courageous, not timid or retiring. It is a far cry indeed from the mild compatibility, agreeability, and affability that passes for Christianity in thousands of churches across the land. In fact, the Great Imitation is so widely accepted as genuine Christianity that the real thing is often regarded as a threat or a heresy whenever it appears.

Our purpose in this book is to trace the sharp distinctions between the phony and the genuine. We shall be guided entirely by the revelation of Scripture, for the Word of God is the only sufficient guide to distinguish truth from error. We shall explore together a major passage from Paul's epistles--2 Corinthians 2:14 to 6:13. In this passage Paul helps the Corinthians to distinguish between authentic Christianity, as he himself lived it, and the pale imitation that many of them had mistaken for the real thing. Then the apostle takes them on (and us with them), step by step into an understanding of the enormous enrichment that awaits those who learn to live by the New Covenant, which gives life, rather than the Old Covenant, which kills. Our study of this passage will not be "theological" (that is, lofty, complicated, and technical), nor will it be "devotional" (horrible word). Rather, it will be intensely practical and straightforward. Our goal in this book is to rediscover the kind of genuine, workable Christianity that can be put to the test in the trenches of everyday living--that kind of Christianity that can bring you safely through any crisis, that will enable you to look back on your life and say, "I have truly known God."

If you are interested in that kind of real, radical, authentic Christianity, read on.

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