

the imitation of Christ

What if just 10% of Christians actually lived the way Jesus called us to? What would that world look like? Can you imagine it?

These are the central questions of the mission of www.theimitationofchrist.com. And it is to these ends that we are committing the next twenty-five years as we work to bring the ageless wisdom of Thomas à Kempis' classic work, *The Imitation of Christ*, into a spiritually hungry world in desperate need of revival and renewal. And in the process, perhaps inspire that "10% of Christians"—whoever, wherever they may be—to live a life of imitation.

It's really not about the Culture

The historian and theologian Ronald J. Sider wrote, "I have no doubt that if 10 percent of the Christians today would really live the way Jesus called us to, we would transform the world in powerful ways in the next twenty-five years."

If that's true, then why is it that Christians don't live that way? And if they were to do so, could they really transform the world? Well, let's unpack this a bit. First, the problem behind the problem is the suggestion that fewer than 10 percent actually do live the way Jesus called us to. Perhaps far fewer—maybe somewhere in the low single digits. If this is the case, then it should be no wonder that the Church has lost the so-called culture war in this country. To be clear, though, the notion of a culture war is overstated. There never really was a war. Christians not only willingly surrendered the territory, they have been complicit in it, passively aiding and abetting the cultural slide for much of the past century. Look no further than the divorce rate (and all that attends it) among professing Christians to see that this is true.

As a consequence of this slide, the core ideas of Christianity, including its ethics and morals, have not only been marginalized in today's society, but they are now overtly ostracized by the media, the courts, and yes, the culture that Christianity's abdication helped create. Indeed, the greatest challenge the Church faces today is not the culture, but the state of the Church, herself.

Today we find that the perception of Christians by non-believers is overwhelmingly negative. David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Research Group, observes, "Only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe that labels 'respect, love, hope, and trust' describe Christianity. A minority of outsiders perceives Christianity as genuine and real, as something that makes sense, and as relevant to their life."

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And apparently, it's becoming less relevant to many Catholics, as well. Most Rev. Thomas J. Olmsted, Bishop of Phoenix, adds, "Since AD 2000, 14 million Catholics have left the Faith, parish religious education of children has dropped by 24 percent, Catholic school attendance has dropped by 19 percent, infant baptism has dropped by 28 percent, adult baptism has dropped by 31 percent, and sacramental Catholic marriages have dropped by 41 percent."

Indeed, many Americans are losing their religion. According to Pew Research, the number of Americans who do not identify with *any* religion—the so-called "nones"—continues to grow at a rapid pace. "One-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30," Pew reports, "are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%)."

There is no question that such changes in spiritual beliefs—particularly those of young adults—will dramatically alter the spiritual landscape in America. This is particularly troubling as Barna's Kinnaman adds that young Americans see present-day Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, boring, overly political, anti-homosexual, insensitive toward others, out of touch with reality, and more interested in converting people than engaging and loving them. In short, they reject it modern-day Christianity because it no longer seems "Christian"—whatever the word might mean to them. Worse, these observations of Christians in the world shape many people's perceptions of God, as well. Nearly 50% of all Americans, for example, perceive God as cold, critical, and harsh—a view that reflects the popular perception of Christians and only reinforces the accelerating trend of this general falling away. And so we have seen a weakening of the power that the Christian story has historically had over the popular imagination.

But why has this happened? Why has Christianity been abandoned at such scale? The reason may be simply that it is just too inconvenient. Not only is Christianity misunderstood, but it is also perceived to be impractical. Or more precisely, as G.K. Chesterton observed, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

Indeed, it is a great difficulty to detach from all that comes with our Earth-boundedness, its great expense notwithstanding. Augustine, himself, speaking to this struggle, wrote ". . . all was wavering, and my heart had to be purged from the old leaven. The Way, the Savior Himself, well pleased me, but as yet I shrunk from going through its straitness . . . Two wills were mine, old and new, of the flesh, of the spirit, each warring on the other, and between their dissonances was my soul disintegrating. I balked at following Christ's ensigns, since I was in service to earthly ties, and I feared more their loss when I should have feared more their load."

To these same fears, Thomas à Kempis wrote, in *The Imitation of Christ*, "There is one thing which keeps many back from spiritual progress and earnest amendment of life, and that is, *a horror of the difficulty and labor of the conflict*. Those mostly outstrip others in forming virtues, who strive to overcome those things which are most grievous and repugnant to themselves."

Yet on the heels of these words of horror, difficulty, and labor, à Kempis asserts, ". . . The more a man conquers himself . . . so much the more does he progress in holiness, and the more grace does he acquire." And that begins, Theresa of Avilla says, ". . . with the determination to follow the way of the cross—and not the desire for consolation, since the Lord Himself pointed out this way of perfection, saying, 'Take up your cross.' He is our model; whoever follows His counsels solely for the sake of pleasing Him has nothing to fear."

Yet so few do follow His counsels. Fewer even than 10 percent. And *that*—not the culture—is the fundamental problem the Church faces in the world today. So how, then, in a world where most believers

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tend to discount, disregard, or worse, domesticate Jesus' teachings, shall we "move the needle?" How do we move the hearts, minds, and souls of multiple generations of Christians who have grown accustomed to the darkness of our age?

Surveys of American religion reveal a vague "self-help" sense of spirituality that pervades the culture—an assessment that does not spare sizable swathes of the Church—and all of it designed to suit the desires of the self. Andrew Murray, addressing the Church more than a hundred years ago in language that resonates perhaps even more loudly today, grieved, "So little power, so little devotion or consecration to God, so little perception of the truth that a Christian is a man utterly surrendered to God's will." And because oft-diluted

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or otherwise confused spiritual sensibilities have little or no import in one's daily life—or that of the Church, for that matter—many end up being, as playwright John van Druten put it, "...forced into a fatal dualism, trying to live on two planes at once, the material and the spiritual, both apparently equally real, yet without any understandable relation to each other—like a firm composed of two partners who are not on speaking terms."

Likewise, à Kempis sorrowfully observed, "Many indeed proclaim it with their mouth, but are far from it in their life."

Murray, further lamenting the point, adds, "God knows

there are hundreds of hearts who have said it, and there are hundreds more who long to say it but hardly dare to do so. And there are hearts who have said it, but who have yet miserably failed, and who feel themselves condemned because they did not find the secret of the power to live that life." Nowhere in this middle ground, it seems, is a man safe!

Indeed, where the self-life is concerned, the imitation of Christ is *not* safe. Yet neither does à Kempis strand his readers on the brink of despair: the object of our imitation is also *good*. "My friend," à Kempis continues, "you cannot have perfect liberty unless you entirely deny yourself. All self-seekers and lovers of self; all covetous, anxious persons; and all who wander about and are ever in quest of ease and comfort, and not the things of Jesus Christ, are in bondage. Hold fast this short and summary saying: *Forsake all, and you shall find all; leave your desires, and you shall find rest*. Give your mind to this, and when you have put it into practice, you shall understand all things."

Putting into practice, understanding all things—these, then, are the objectives of our mission, the foundation stones of our vision, the razor with which we shall slice through and peel away the layers of all that compromise, encumber, and hinder those who truly desire to follow Christ and imitate His life—whatever that might mean for them. And that is nothing for Christians to fear. "Doctrines don't restrict us," Catholic apologist Robert Haddad reminds us. "They *liberate* us."

Toward a Renewed—and Liberated—Christian Enlightenment

"He that follows Me shall not walk in darkness," says the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are reminded that we must copy His life and conduct if we wish to be truly enlightened and to be delivered from all blindness of heart. To meditate on the life of Jesus should therefore be our chief study.

Thus begins the great work known, loved, and venerated for six centuries as *The Imitation of Christ* (*De Imitatione Christi*), first published in 1418 by the German-Dutch monk and scribe, Thomas Hemerken of Kempen, better known as Thomas à Kempis (1380 – 25 July 1471). For good reason, "The Imitation"

became, and has remained, after the Bible, the most widely read and translated book in the world, and certainly the most influential of Christian devotional writings.

But what, exactly, does “imitation” mean? What will it require of one who sets out on such a path to

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copy Jesus’ life and conduct? Are its demands reasonably compatible with modern, practical, daily living? What kinds of sacrifices will it involve? And what of professional ambitions and personal goals—how might those be affected? More to the point, is it even *possible* to live such a life today? If so, who is living it? And how are they living it? In what ways has it mattered? Or is the notion of imitating Christ really just an outmoded, archaic idea to be taken more figuratively than literally? Has the theology somehow evolved to accommodate or otherwise fit a conventional, average Christian life lived in contemporary society? What does

Scripture *really* tell us about imitating Christ? And this business of denying self and taking up crosses—what, practically speaking, does that mean *today*? These are, indeed, the fundamental questions with which Christians must grapple—and they are the very questions addressed in this most profound and sublime work of devotional literature.

The fact is, for many, the idea of the imitation of Christ is unexplored territory, which means that essential spiritual truths still lie undiscovered by the average believer. But *this* is what promises to make learning and practicing the wisdom of *The Imitation of Christ* life’s most stimulating, challenging, and rewarding adventure. And if just 10 percent of Christians will embrace it answers, the world will most certainly be transformed. But how can such a vision come to pass?

Simply stated, living the way Jesus called us to means imitating the *pattern* that He established for us. And that pattern has always been radical, but also essential; daring, but also exciting. And yet, living it in today’s world will mean nothing short of splitting the atom, and in the process, releasing massive spiritual energy—indeed, a tremendous outpouring of the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Consider these attributes in contrast with the prevailing—and perhaps, deserved—opinion of Christians in America today: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity. These are the very attributes that a life of imitation yields. But getting there won’t be easy.

First and foremost, what’s needed is an existential sea change—a change that has nothing to do with the culture, or even the Church writ large, but the *individual* believer. Scripture gives us a clue here. Rather than conforming to the pattern of the world, we are instead to be transformed by a renewal of the mind—one mind at a time. In other words, through the call of Jesus, men become individuals. Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a man who was thoroughly acquainted with the cost of standing apart from the crowd—wrote, “It is no choice of their own that makes them individuals: it is *Christ* who makes them individuals by calling them. Every man is called separately, and must follow alone.”

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Indeed, Jesus deals only with the individual. “The most ruinous evasion of all,” echoes Keirkegaard, “is to be hidden in the crowd in an attempt to escape God’s supervision of him as an individual, in an attempt to get away from hearing God’s voice as an individual.” To which Thomas à Kempis concludes, “He, therefore, who aims at attaining to a more interior and spiritual life, must, with Jesus, depart from the crowd.” And that brings us to the distinct minority of Christians who choose this path with Jesus—the path less chosen.

On the True Individual and the Power of the Small

Are there twenty men alive in the world today who see things as they really are?" That was the question on the mind of Thomas Merton. If there were, he mused, "...that would mean that there were twenty men who were *free*, who were not dominated or even influenced by any attachment to any created thing or to their own selves or to any gift of God, even to the highest, the most super-naturally pure of His graces."

It turns out he didn't believe that was the case. But perhaps there were one or two out there. There must be, he reasoned, because the world needed *someone* who was holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart!

But hasn't that always been the case? Jesus' little band of apostles were certainly few in number, but that's all He needed. And He knew they would always be few. Jesus never pinned his hopes on large numbers. In fact, if there is to be any positive change in the world, those numbers may actually have to get smaller. A lot smaller.

Peter Kreeft, writing on American culture, makes the point in a particularly compelling way: "If God still loves His church in America, he will soon make it small and poor and persecuted just as He did to ancient Israel—so that He can keep it alive by pruning it. If He loves us, He will cut the dead wood away. And we will bleed. And the blood of the martyrs will be the seed of the Church again and a second spring will come and new buds—but not without blood. It never happens without blood, without sacrifice, without suffering. Christ's work, if it is really Christ's work and not a comfortable counterfeit, never happens without the cross. Whatever happens without the cross may be good work, but it is not Christ's work. For Christ's work is bloody. Christ's work is a blood transfusion. That is how salvation happens."

Scripture is replete with stories of victorious underdogs and outnumbered armies. Jesus seems to reveal and reveal Himself in smallness. And His story is only magnified by these small numbers of small men who persevere in spite of the odds, which are, humanly speaking, stacked against them. Hans Küng writes that we persevere because the vision is *true*. "Because in the light of Jesus' message," he says, "the small size of a group, the limited means, the seeming ineffectiveness of the activity, the work should not be seen as signs of failure. It is precisely in impotence that power, in weakness that strength, in smallness that greatness, and in humility that self-consciousness can be manifested. We can hope against hope, even in the Church. The power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will prove in the long run to be stronger than all human incompetence, fear, and insincerity, and more forceful than all our foolishness, weakness, and cynicism."

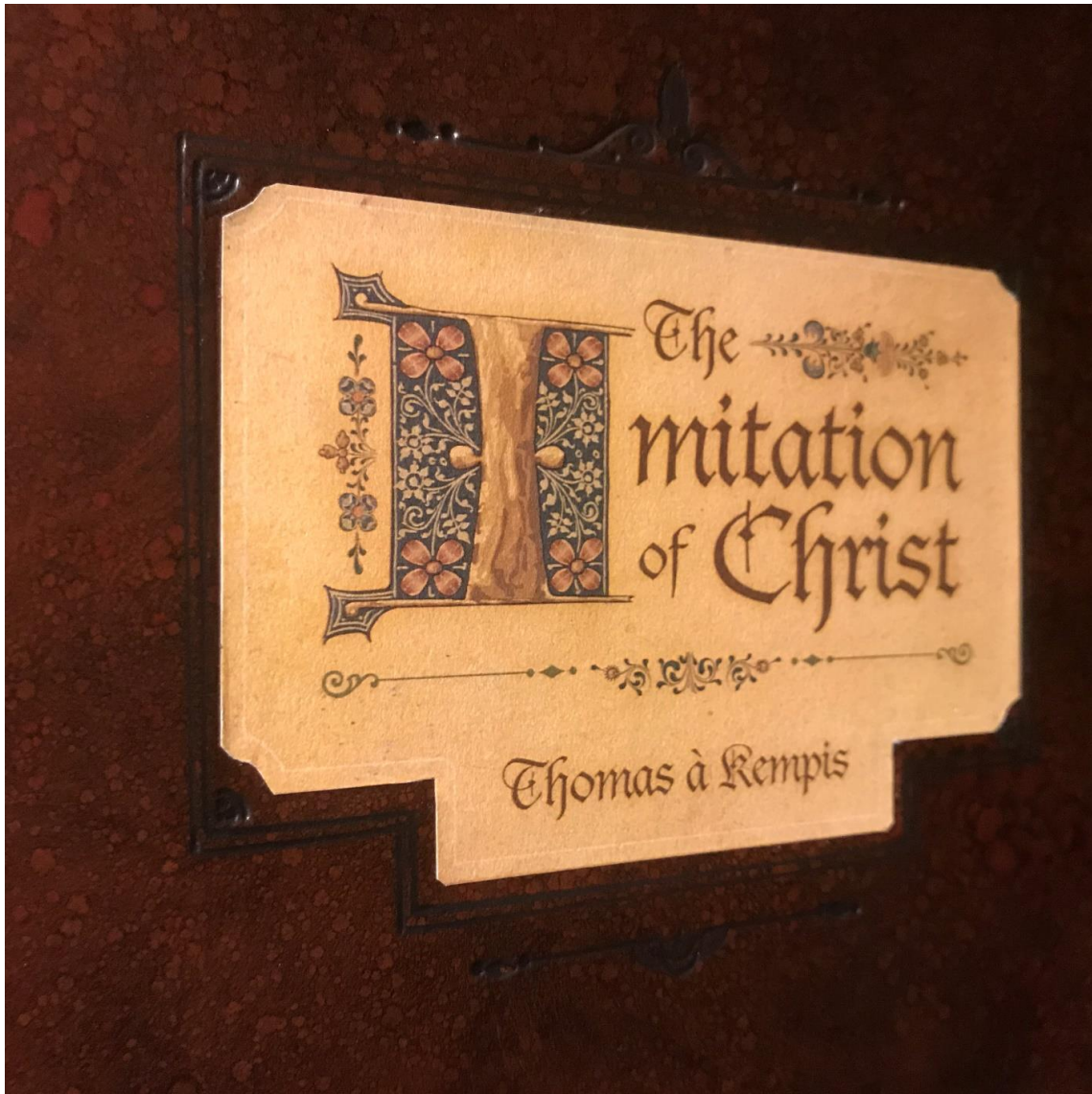
"If God still loves His church in America, he will soon make it small and poor and persecuted."

So let's say we've got our 10 percent. Or Merton's twenty men. Or Jesus' twelve. Who are they today? Where are they? Are there just 10% of all Christians alive in the world today who see things "as they really are?"

On one hand, you have to be careful with numbers like these. They are, really, nothing more than abstractions. *Whose* names will be counted among them—whatever their number? On the other, we find William Law who pondered this question of the imitation of Christ when he asked, "Now, who that wants this general sincere intention, can be reckoned a Christian? And yet if it was among Christians, it would change the whole face of the world . . . Let a tradesman but have this intention and it will make him a saint in his shop." Indeed.

Finally, we affirm Margaret Mead’s sentiment when she wrote, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has!”

This, then, is the work to which we are committing the next twenty-five years—the cultivation of just 10% of believers who will dare a life of imitation. Wouldn’t you like to see the world transformed—or shall we say, *transfused and revived*—by such a small group of thoughtful, committed Christians? Will you join us in this vision?



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