

THE WISDOM OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Jesus is the center, *Philippians 2:1-11*

You have probably heard the quote from Oscar Wilde - "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" (it's a shortened quote; the full quote is less inspiring...). Wilde's phrase has become a way to talk about acknowledging and admiring someone's skills. The early church imitated Jesus but its imitation went beyond mere admiration. We could revise Wilde's quote to say, for the early Christians, "imitation (of Jesus) is the only way to salvation". This lesson begins a series considering the wisdom of the early church, the wisdom that allowed them to navigate the daily realities of the first century world and evidence their claim of citizenship in Jesus' kingdom. This first lesson considers the most important, and basic, wisdom of the early church:

Make Jesus the center of your life

"Be conformed to the image of [God's] Son"¹

- The New Testament contains the early church's compelling portrait of Jesus, who saw him as:
 - An all-powerful, all-sovereign king (*Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:18-20; Revelation 1:12-16*).
 - The one who possesses "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (*Colossians 2:3*).
 - God (*John 1:1, 14; 8:58-59; Colossians 2:9*).
 - The ideal human (*Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49*).
- The early church's understanding of Jesus did not, however, merely lead them to revere him as one might a well-regarded religious, political, or military figure. Instead, the early church believed Jesus' identity required them to be like him. Consider, for example:

Romans 8:29 – "be conformed to the image of [God's] Son"

Romans 13:14 – "put on the Lord Jesus Christ"

1 Corinthians 11:1; Galatians 2:20 – be "imitators" of Christ

Galatians 3:27 – "put on Christ"

Ephesians 4:15-16 – "grow up every way...into Christ"

Philippians 2:3-8 – "have [Jesus] mind among yourselves"

Colossians 1:28 – "present everyone mature in Christ"

1 Peter 2:21 b – "you have been called...[to] follow in [Jesus'] steps"

- The early church's focus on being like Jesus resulted in Jesus, for example, becoming:

¹ Romans 8:29. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- The source of their identity (*Colossians 2:9-12; 3:1-11*).
- The model for their relationships (*Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Philippians 2:1-8*).
- The way to understand and relate to God (*1 Corinthians 2:6-16; John 14:1-6*).
- The key to understanding the scriptures (*Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:44-48; John 5:39*).
- The template for their response to things like suffering (*1 Peter 2:21; 4:1-2*), wealth (*Acts 20:35; Philippians 3:7-11*), and status (*Matthew 20:20-28; John 13:3-17, 34-35; Philippians 2:1-8*).
- While the early church believed they had to be like Jesus, they did not reduce Christlikeness to a formula. Christlikeness, instead, involved the adoption of Jesus' overall lifestyle.
 - Jesus condemned people who merely obeyed the details of God's law while failing to cultivate within themselves the character the law sought to create (*cf. Matthew 12:1-7; 23:23*).
 - Unlike those he condemned, Jesus acted out of his character that was both submitted to God and shaped by God (*Matthew 5:17-19; 26:39, 42; John 8:28; 12:49; 14:8-9*).
 - The early church thus believed that to "put on Christ" (*Galatians 3:27*) meant adopting his values, his beliefs, his goals and allowing them to reshape their character so that they learned to think and act in ways that reflected Jesus' character (*cf. Romans 12:1-2; 15:1-3*).

Applications

I sometimes hear people say they want to recapture the simplicity of New Testament Christianity, the Christianity of the first century church. Recapturing it begins by embracing the early church's wisdom of making Jesus the center on one's life. But making Jesus the center of our lives involves:

- Avoiding the tendency to become church-focused people rather than Jesus-focused people, or even Bible-focused rather than Jesus-focused people (*cf. John 5:39-40*).
- Using Jesus as the interpretive filter to understand God (*John 14:6*), the Bible (*Matthew 5:17*), and the church (*Ephesians 4:15-16*).
- Resisting the tendency to reduce Christlikeness to merely law-keeping. We must instead seek to cultivate within ourselves a character that mirrors Jesus' own character so that we learn to act instinctively in ways like mirror Jesus' behavior (*cf. Matthew 7:21-23; Ephesians 5:22-6:9*).
- Rejecting our culture's emphasis upon individuality by adopting Jesus' character as our own identity (*Galatians 3:27-28*).

While the early church had its struggles, it did grasp an important truth – it understood the need to make Jesus the center around which it revolved everything, including their identities. As people who claim to follow Jesus today, we need to follow the example of the early church, we need to be people who commit ourselves to becoming more and more like Jesus.