

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

What Would Jesus Do?

A popular book entitled *WWJD?: The Question Everyone Is Asking* proclaims the “What would Jesus do” movement to be “a phenomenon that is sweeping the nation” (134). Even more popular are bracelets embroidered with the acronym. These are “a phenomenal best seller...intended to remind wearers to act as Christ would in their day-to-day lives,” according to the youth magazine *Group*, which also reports that “teenagers and children are the biggest buyers of the bracelets” (59). The acronym (WWJD) can now also be found on T-shirts, license plates, paperweights, backpacks, infant wear, and an array of other products. There is even a WWJD devotional Bible entitled *Youthwalk*. Young Christians are clearly being sold on this merchandise as a technique for enhancing their Christian walk.

Its Origin and Methodology

The imitation of Christ, the concept on which the WWJD approach is based, is not a new one. It dates from as long ago as 1427, with Thomas à Kempis’s classic *The Imitation of Christ*. It has resurfaced at intervals, repackaged for contemporary consumption, as it did in 1896 with Charles Sheldon’s fictional work *In His Steps*. This novel, in fact, inspired the most recent resurgence of this concept in bracelet form, as reported in *World*: “The fad began in 1989 when [a] youth leader” designed the bracelets. Her intention was “to motivate students to ask themselves the question author Charles Sheldon posed in his best-selling novel *In His Steps*” (17).

The originator of the WWJD bracelets is quoted as saying, “I wanted them to be a personal reminder that they [the young believers] had made a conscious decision to live life by a new standard” (17). *WWJD?* explains the method further: “Here’s how it works: When faced with a dilemma, you can compare your initial reaction to the way Jesus would respond. If there is a similarity—great! If your response differs, then you have a guide for change” (7). The book assures the reader that this is “a very effective technique” (7), since even though Jesus lived 2,000 years ago, He was still confronted with personal choices similar to those of our modern times. The book’s back cover directs, “When you are dealing with any situation, problem, or emotion, just ask yourself: ‘WWJD?’ That may be all the help you need!” As one advocate explains, “The bracelets

set you apart. It’s like Stop, Look, and Listen....You stop, look at the bracelet, and listen to what you think Jesus would do” (*World* 17). *Group* implies that this approach, based on the imitation of Christ, may be “worth trying even though you know you’ll often fail” (60).

It is hard to fathom why so many adult believers are promoting a spiritual technique among young believers which requires so much effort with so little result. Even more serious is the fact that this mnemonic device distracts them from the pulse of the Christian life, which is to contact the indwelling Christ who is very real, present, and eager to be their moment-by-moment salvation. Significantly, the verb tense in the question “What would Jesus do?” is the present unreal conditional. In other words, leading young people to imagine what Jesus would do is teaching them to consider Jesus solely in the past tense, far removed from them—a remote historical role model. When faced with a temptation, the young Christian, prompted by his bracelet asks himself, “What would Jesus do if He were here?” instead of turning his heart to the ever-present Lord and asking *Him*, “Lord Jesus, what *are* You doing *in me* right *now*?” He is thus defrauded of his “prize” (Col. 2:18), the present, experiential Christ. It is the very presence and indwelling of the resurrected Christ that gives vitality to the Christian faith and distinguishes it in essence from ethics-based religions. WWJD robs young believers of that essential vitality.

Another flaw in this method is that it trains young believers to use the Bible as a manual for behavior modification. Having relegated Christ to a historical figure who is no longer here but far away in heaven, the believer is left to do his best to imitate Christ and advised not to give up because it takes time to change bad habits. The Bible then becomes a lifeless collection of guidelines for ethical Christian living, an inanimate compass for steering the believer through today’s moral fog. Instead, we should instruct our young people that the Gospels not only show them the highest pattern of a God-man living on this earth, but even more are a description of the Christ who actually and presently indwells them. It would be more truthful and faithful to help them approach their Bible as the portrayal of the incarnated God who now wants to become their life (Col. 3:4) and living (Phil. 1:21). Without the Bible, it would be very difficult for the believer to understand the Lord’s

speaking and moving both within himself and in his environment. The Bible is the most reliable interpreter of the present activity of Christ within His believers.

The Genuine Imitation of Christ

In His Steps bases its WWJD question on verses which stress imitating Christ and following His example. One key verse cited is 1 Peter 2:21: "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered on your behalf, leaving you a model so that you may follow in His steps." While there is no doubt that the Lord Jesus provided His living as an example for us (John 13:15), the question here is, "How does the New Testament direct us to follow Christ and to imitate Him?" The context of 1 Peter 2:21 helps to clarify how we are meant to follow in His steps: In both verses 19 and 20, to walk in His steps is to endure suffering, which we are enabled to do by the grace of God. In fact, grace is mentioned twice here before we are instructed to follow "in His steps." In other words, following Christ as our model is very much the result of enjoying Him as grace, rather than mustering our self-will to do the right thing. To Peter, following Christ had nothing to do with asking what Jesus would do if He were here, but rather, with being an active participant in the personally present Christ who supplies us with Himself and operates within us.

The Greek word for *model* is *upogrammon*, which literally means "a writing copy, an underwriting (used by students to trace letters and thereby learn to draw them)" (Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 2:21, note 2). Its meaning here connotes much more than the creation of a replica of Christ through our attempts to imitate His life. Rather, the word implies that we become a genuine living reproduction of Christ as a result of our enjoying Him as grace. The "model" has now been resurrected, and in resurrection He has become the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) who now indwells us (Rom. 8:9-10) as the constituting element to bring forth His reproduction in us. The more we enjoy this indwelling person and participate in the riches of His life and nature, the more we are "transformed into the same image" (2 Cor. 3:17-18) to become a reproduction of the original copy, not only in outward form, but also in inward essence. To the New Testament apostles, following "in His steps" was a matter that was very organic, rather than merely ethical.

A second verse featured in *In His Steps* is 1 John 2:6: "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk even as He walked." Here John echoes the organic theme which consistently contextualizes our imitating of Christ. To John, "to walk even as He walked" is not an unreal conditional behavior extrapolated from a historical character, but rather, an experience in the present tense, one of abiding in the Christ who is now. First Corinthians 1:30 tells us that God put us into Christ (a thoroughly organic experience)

at the beginning of our Christian walk. To the apostle John, walking as Christ walked is an immediate, moment-by-moment experience of abiding in Christ, that is, remaining in Him throughout our days. John is clearly stating that the evidence and result of abiding in Christ is a walk like that of Christ. Did John direct young believers to hypothesize "What would Jesus do?" No. He repeatedly directed them to "abide in Him" (1 John 2:6, 24, 27-28).

A third verse invoked by *In His Steps* is Ephesians 5:1: "Be therefore imitators of God, as beloved children." The context preceding Ephesians 5:1 also reveals a strong organic emphasis. Chapter four refers to "a full-grown man" (v. 13), "little children" (v. 14), "grow up into Him" (v. 15), "the growth of the Body" (v. 16), "the life of God" (v. 18), being "taught in Him" (v. 21), "be renewed" (v. 23), "the new man" (v. 24), and being "members one of another" (v. 25). In Ephesians 5:1 the apostle Paul also reinforces the organic context of this imitation by directing the believers to imitate God "as beloved children." The imitating here is that of children possessing the same life and nature as their parents. In other words, we believers have been regenerated with the Father's divine life and nature to the extent that we have become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). While we have His outward, objective example in the Gospels, we also have His life within us which, as it grows in us, enables us to express Him—not just to be *like* Him, but to grow up *into* Him, and thus become His corporate Body. This fulfills Galatians 2:20 which declares, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

Though Christ is certainly our marvelous example, He is even the more our very life. Without question, His life on earth set up the most excellent pattern for us, but it is His crucifixion, resurrection, and transfiguration into the life-giving Spirit which have made Him available to become our life, the unique means by which we are enabled to follow His pattern organically, consummating in our becoming thoroughly "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29).

by Gary Evans

Works Cited

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