

***The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis: A New Reading of the 1441 Latin Autograph Manuscript.* By William C. Creasy. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989, 169 pp., hardcover.**

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Born in Germany around 1380 and died in the Netherlands in 1471, Thomas à Kempis is one of the most well known medieval Catholic devotional writers. His *Imitation of Christ*, composed in Latin in the Netherlands between 1420 and 1427 has become a classic favorite to many.

Originally, the *Imitation* was written anonymously. Thomas probably did this in order to direct his readers' attention to the subject of the book, rather than to himself as the author, as indicated in his advice to his readers about reading holy writings: "Do not let the writer's authority or learning influence you, be it little or great, but let the love of pure truth attract you to read. Do not ask, 'Who said this?' but pay attention to what is said" (Book 1, Chap. 5).

The *Imitation* contains four small books. According to William C. Creasy, who has done a critical introduction to this volume (xiii-xliv), all these "four books were written independently, each intended as a separate work: they were circulated separately; they appear in separate manuscripts; they do not carry a single title (the *Imitation of Christ* is the title of the first chapter of book 1); and the four books appear in different sequences within manuscripts" (xlv). Although each of these four books is designed as a separate discourse, Creasy encourages the crowd to read the *Imitation* as a single work: "we shall learn more from it if we read it and discuss it as a whole" (xlvi).

There are many good moral lessons that we can learn from the *Imitation*. And at the heart of these lessons is a strong emphasis on the imitation of Christ, an emphasis that is central to Christian life. However, already in Book 1, a careful look at the *Imitation* shows some flaws. In

the first place, as typical of other medieval Catholic devotional authors, Thomas teaches the fundamental error of the Roman Catholic Church—salvation by holy living. This teaching is implicit in the following expressions: “direct all your effort toward achieving the kingdom of heaven” (Book 1, Chap 1); “The present time is very precious... But how sad that you do not spend this time well while you have strength to gather the merit which will allow you to live forever” (Book 1, Chap 23). Ultimately then, the whole point of the book is to imitate Christ in order to earn merits for salvation. This is the problem of medieval Catholic spirituality. In contrast, biblical spirituality imitates Christ not as a means of salvation, but as a fruit of it, for salvation is by faith *alone* in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9).

Another evident error of the book is its monastic spirituality that imitates Christ by withdrawing from the world (see Book 1, Chaps. 17 & 20). Thomas says, “It is praiseworthy for a person under monastic vows to stay in his monastery, to avoid to being seen, and to keep to himself” (Book 1, Chap. 20). This praiseworthiness should not surprise the readers, for Thomas himself was a monk. In fact, “he lived ninety-two years, seventy-two of them in the monastery, and he only ventured outside the walls twice” (xliii). But true spirituality does not praise abstinence from the world; it does not seek spirituality by monastic seclusion. Rather, it calls for abstinence not from the world but from the sins that are in the world. It calls for an active imitation of Christ in the world.

In addition to the above mentioned errors, the *Imitation* contains other beliefs that are not scriptural such as purgatory (Book 1, Chaps. 21 & 24) and praying for the dead (Book 1, Chap. 23). Therefore, with these serious errors, despite the many good moral lessons that readers can find in the *Imitation*, I cannot recommend this volume for Christian living.