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## Imitating God: Impossible or Essential?

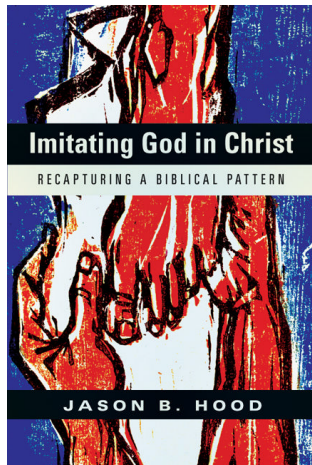
*In his new book, **Imitating God in Christ**, Jason Hood examines what it really means to follow after Christ's image. The concept "imitating God in Christ" is a complex idea and Christians no longer are confident in what it means. As a result, pastors and believers tread lightly around the idea, and imitation tends to be soft-pedaled at best, and avoided at worst. But we cannot treat imitation like a leper. Healthy, robust Christianity does not happen unless imitation has a prominent place in every aspect of our lives. It's an essential aspect of our humanity that informs our sense of identity, shapes our disciple-making mission and teaches us about our destiny. **Imitating God in Christ** helps us recover what the Bible says about this vitally important topic.*

**Why is the concept of "imitating God" so difficult to understand in today's culture? How do we approach these challenges?**

**Jason Hood:** There's a massive amount of confusion regarding imitation. It's often cheaply used in evangelicalism and in liberal circles; as a result, many [Christians] are highly suspicious of it, downplaying or ignoring what the Bible says about imitation. We can contrast these failures with the way in which the Old Testament and New Testament embrace imitation as part of God's design for humanity. The imitation of the Father, the Son and the saints lies at the heart of what it means to be a disciple and what it means to be human as God intended. Imitation should play a central role in our self-understanding and our application of the Bible.

**What does it mean to "imitate God in Christ" and from what are you drawing your knowledge?**

**Jason:** When we think of imitation, we typically think of a process that involves precise copying. And there is a good bit of rote mimicry in the Bible. God's people rehearsed creeds, prayers, songs, proverbs, stories, rituals and laws with precision. But because there is very little precise copying of Jesus in the Bible, we sometimes downplay the importance of imitation, pointing out how little we can duplicate the actions of Jesus or other biblical characters with precision. But that is a mistake. In the Bible imitation is rarely about precise copying. Consider how Paul uses imitation. He does not imitate the Messiah by fishing, wearing his hair in a particular fashion, fasting forty days in the wilderness or collecting precisely a dozen disciples. He rarely speaks Jesus' native language, Aramaic. Even when he recommends celibacy (1 Cor 7), Paul does not appeal to Jesus' celibate lifestyle as a model. And in turn, when Paul tells the Corinthians to "imitate me as I imitate the Messiah," he does not mean that they should duplicate his sufferings and sacrifice. Successful imitation of Jesus does not depend on literal crucifixion, and the Corinthians are not failures if they are



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never shipwrecked like the apostle they have been instructed to imitate. So apparently Paul does not think that *imitate* means “copy precisely in every instance” or “copy the specific details of my life.” When Paul speaks of imitation, he has in mind the duplication of a pattern, particularly a pattern that conforms to Jesus’ self-denial and crossbearing. He teaches all of his churches to take his cross-shaped mindset and put it to work. [Adapted from the introduction]

#### **What made you want to delve deeper into these somewhat muddy waters?**

**Jason:** I’m asking the question “What does the Bible say about imitation?” I try to answer by canvassing the Bible’s teaching in order to build a biblical theology of imitation. Most works on imitation address a tiny fragment of the biblical data, which leads to ignorance of the biblical framework for imitation and a failure to link imitation (an “imperative”) to the gospel (“indicatives”). In other words, we’re often missing important foundations for imitation. I note that these emphases fit with the best efforts in church history to put imitation to work.

#### **Who do you think needs to read this book?**

**Jason:** In the introduction I cite three audiences: liberal left, muddled middle, reformed right; I don’t pick fights with them explicitly, but I do mention them on occasion, and I argue that the book has a fresh perspective to offer all three camps. Pastors and seminarians in all three of these camps will find direction for a healthy approach to “imitation” as they preach through a particular section of Scripture.