

Reborn Participants in Christ: Recovering the Importance of Union with Christ in 1 Peter

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Abstract: *The important NT theme of union with Christ has inspired numerous studies by Pauline scholars in the twentieth century following the pioneering work of Adolf Deissmann. Yet only recently have scholars begun to address the potential significance of the believer's union with Christ in texts outside of the Pauline corpus. Building on this recent expansion yet acknowledging oversights in existing studies, this paper looks to highlight the prominence of union with Christ in the epistle of 1 Peter. Its prevalence throughout the epistle and the nuances of its application suggest that it is both essential to the Petrine attempt to form the identity of his readers, and the basis from which he presents his ethical exhortation—including the explicit call to imitate Christ.*

Key words: *1 Peter, union with Christ, ethics, imitatio Christi*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the immensely popular novel *In His Steps*, originally published in 1897, American pastor Charles Sheldon raised the following challenge to his congregation. He stated, "I want volunteers from the First Church who will pledge themselves earnestly and honestly for an entire year not to do anything without first asking the question, 'What would Jesus do?'"¹ After courts declared the copyright on the original manuscript invalid, publishers around the world printed the book, making generations of Christians familiar with this stock phrase and with contemplation of the imitation of Christ. It should not surprise us that Christians received the focus on imitation so favorably. The concept of imitation provides both a tangible object and a goal, and thus an accessible framework from which to approach Christian ethics. Sheldon drew his titular phrase from 1 Peter, where *imitatio Christi* language is as prominent as anywhere in the NT (see esp. 2:21–25; 3:16–18; 4:1). This prominence has led at least one NT scholar to declare that imitation provides the foundation for the theology of the whole epistle.²

Yet a singular focus on the concept of the imitation of Christ is not without its problems, as has been noted by exegetes t...

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