

AN EVALUATION OF THOMAS À KEMPIS' *THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*

LORNE ZELYCK

I. INTRODUCTION

Originally named Thomas Hemerken, Thomas à Kempis (1379/80–1471) joined the Brethren of Common Life in 1392. The monastic order had been founded eighteen years earlier by Gerard Groot¹, a lay preacher who adamantly spoke out against the corruption and declining spirituality of the Roman Church.² After being ordained in 1413, à Kempis spent his entire monastic life at the monastery of Mount St. Agnes at Zwolle, except for a three-year exile. The Brethren devoted themselves to doing charitable work, nursing the sick, studying and teaching the Scriptures, as well as copying religious and inspirational works. Their undogmatic form of piety became known as the *devotio moderna*.³

The works of à Kempis exemplified the ideas of the *devotio moderna*, and stressed the example of Christ in seeking a spiritual lifestyle.

¹ Groot's teaching was highly influenced by Johannes Eckhart. Eckhart was a German mystic and theologian who taught that the true goal of contemplation was absorption into the Divine Unknown. He wrote a large number of works dealing with man's inner spirituality and the ability of the individual to develop this spirituality. These ideas diminished the importance of the clergy and the sacraments of the Church. In 1327, Pope John XXII summoned Eckhart to defend himself against charges of heresy which he did by recanting many of his propositions.

² I believe it is for this reason that Protestants accepted the teachings of à Kempis. While they may not have agreed with everything he wrote, the Reformers were desperate for witnesses who agreed to some extent with their doctrines and provided them with some ammunition against the erroneous teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

³ Modern Devotion. This included a return to the simplicity of the Christian faith which included: clergy living a holy life, valuing the internal life and internal piety, lack of stress on the Church's institutionalized aids to salvation, an insistence that the knowledge of God lay open to scholar and illiterate peasant alike, intense and emotional meditation to the suffering of Christ, and an interpretation of the Eucharist that stressed the sacrament as mediator of an intimate relationship with Christ. See <http://www.ucalgary.ca>.

While writing several literary works, he is best remembered for one devotional: *The Imitation of Christ*. The four sections which comprise the book were written sometime between 1420 and 1427. Immediately, the book experienced success within the Christian community, and printing began in 1472. Prior Pirkhamer enthusiastically commended its publishing in 1494 by claiming: "Nothing more holy, nothing more honorable, nothing more religious, nothing more profitable for the Christian commonwealth can you ever do than to make known these works of Thomas à Kempis."⁴ Throughout the years, this book has been translated into over fifty languages. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was so certain that this book was the best summary of a disciplined Christian life that he translated it for his followers.⁵ The popularity of *The Imitation of Christ* has remained throughout the centuries. One recent edition even considers it, "the best-loved book of Christianity, after the Bible."⁶

It has widespread popularity in Christendom. However, Protestants have accepted à Kempis' teachings without regard for his mystical and unorthodox doctrine.⁷ He has perpetrated and sustained doctrinal errors which deviate from the teachings of Christ on four important issues: 1) the value of a disciple, 2) the call to discipleship, 3) the possibility of perfection, and 4) the assurance of eternal life.

II. THE VALUE OF A DISCIPLE

A. JESUS' IMPARTATION OF VALUE THROUGH LOVE

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus bestows value upon humanity through extending His unmerited love in three concrete ways: His teaching, His attitude and His ministry.⁸

Numerous teachings of Jesus spoke about the value of people in the sight of God. Jesus taught that God cares for people so much that even

⁴ See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14661a.htm>.

⁵ J. H. Chadwick, *The Imitation of Christ: Rewritten and Updated by Harold Chadwick* (New Jersey: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999), xviii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, front cover.

⁷ These problems are usually dismissed on grounds that the book is to be read as a devotional classic which addresses relational aspects of the Christian walk, rather than doctrinal issues.

⁸ John Stott, "Am I Supposed to Love Myself or Hate Myself?" *Christianity Today* (April 20, 1984): 28.

the hairs of their head are numbered (Luke 12:7). In the Sermon on the Mount, He contends that people are much more valuable than the birds of the air or the grass of field (Matt 6:26, 30). The Father is portrayed as so charitable that He desires to give good gifts to His children who ask in prayer (Matt 7:11) and promises to reward those who obey His precepts (Matt 6:4, 6, 18). The paramount example of the Father's love is that He even extends goodness towards the evil and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45).

Jesus' attitude towards people also gave them value. He went out of His way to honor the dishonored, and to accept those the world rejected. He spoke courteously to outcast women (Mark 5:25; John 4:7-26; 8:11), and He invited simple children to come to Him (Matt 19:13-15). He spoke words of hope to Samaritans. He allowed lepers to approach Him (Mark 1:40-45) and a prostitute to kiss his feet (Luke 7:37-39). He ministered to the poor and hungry (Matt 14:21; 15:38), ate with tax collectors (Mark 2:15-16), and was even accused of being a friend of sinners (Matt 11:19). It was this loving attitude of Jesus which transformed people's lives. When Jesus told Zaccheus that He wanted to stay with him ("a great sinner" Luke 19:7), Zaccheus responded by extending love to Jesus by receiving Him gladly (19:6), and then he showed love to others by repaying all that he had defrauded (19:8).

Lastly, Jesus' ministry is a clear example of the value He placed on humanity. Examples of this are seen in His ministry of healing, exorcism, and His death. Jesus was moved with compassion by the infirmities of people (Matt 9:36, Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13), and He healed them and made them whole. He was the Good Shepherd who cared so much that He came to seek and to save the one lost sheep (Matt 18:14) and to lay down His life for it (John 10:11). At the cross, we see the ultimate value and worth of humanity. The Son of Man showed the greatness of the Father's love by laying down His life for His friends (Mark 10:45; John 15:13).

B. À KEMPIS' CONCEPT OF UNWORTHINESS

Within *The Imitation of Christ*, à Kempis portrays the disciple to be without value and worthless in the eyes of God. The inevitable result of this attitude is self-scorn and depreciation.

He considers himself and other believers as, "unworthy of divine solace and deserving of much tribulation," (I 21:4) "unworthy of any benefits," (III 8:3) "poor and unworthy," (III 10:2) and an "unworthy sinner who am [sic] but dust and ashes" (IV 4:1). We should not think that we have made any spiritual progress unless we feel that we, "are inferior to all others," (II 2:2) and the most perfect wisdom is, "To think

of oneself as nothing, and always to think well and highly of others” (I 2:4). The only way to enjoy peace on earth is to, “come to the place of complete contempt for yourself” (III 25:3). It is only those who, “consider themselves the most wicked of all people, and judge themselves to be the most unworthy, who are the most fit to receive the greater blessings” (III 22:2). à Kempis says that a disciple should come before the Lord saying, “I am nothing, I have nothing, and I can do nothing” (III 3:5). The consequence of this attitude is that we should confess our unworthiness and our “extreme unworthiness should always displease us” (III 4:3).

à Kempis believes that humanity is not only worthless, but also states that we are to despise ourselves: “Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel” (I 2:4). He concludes by saying that, “I am the poorest and meanest servant, a vile worm, much more poor and contemptible than I know or dare to say” (III 3:5).

While Jesus bestowed unmerited value upon humanity by extending love in His teaching, attitude and ministry, à Kempis seems to bestow shame and dishonor.

III. THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

A. JESUS’ CALL TO FOLLOW HIM

In Mark 8, Jesus clearly tells His disciples what it means to “follow Him.” Within the context, Peter has just made the great confession that, “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29). Jesus then clearly states what will soon happen to Him: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed” (Mark 8:31). In response to this, Peter took Jesus aside and censured Him, yet Jesus rebuked Peter for he was not setting his mind on God’s interests, but man’s (Mark 8:33). Jesus said to them, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Wessell states, “By denial of self, Jesus does not mean to deny oneself something. He means to renounce self—to cease to make self the object of one’s life and actions. This involves a fundamental reorientation of the principle of life. God, not self, must be at the center of life.”⁹

⁹ Walter W. Wessell, “Mark,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 697.

Therefore, what disciples need to deny is every “interest of man” which would hinder them from following Jesus. These may include: fear of persecution (Mark 8:38), family commitments (Matt 8:22), job security (Matt 4:19; 9:9) possessions and greed (Luke 14:33; 19:21), jealousy and selfishness (John 21:19, 21). The description of following Jesus is further expounded by the metaphor, “take up his cross.” Criminals condemned to death by crucifixion were forced to carry their cross to the scene of their execution (John 19:17). The picture is of a man, already condemned, required to carry his cross on the way to the place of execution, as Jesus was required to do. Consequently, for a disciple to bear his cross is synonymous with following Jesus.

The reason for a disciple to deny their self is so they can follow Jesus’ self-sacrificial example. Self-denial is not for Jesus, so much as it is with Jesus. The goal of self-denial is not to impress God, but rather to follow Jesus example more closely.

B. À KEMPIS’ CALL TO SELF-MORTIFICATION

The Imitation of Christ is best known for its uncompromising stance on discipleship. Throughout the book, à Kempis quotes the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34, “If you will be my disciple, deny yourself,” and encourages others to, “take up your [their], therefore, and follow Jesus.”

Sadly, à Kempis, at times, loses sight of the goal of self-denial. Instead of a fundamental reorientation of one’s desires and identity with Christ’s sufferings, the object of self-denial has become “perfect (self) mortification” (III 31:3). This mortification and self-denial results in “true (spiritual) progress,” (III 39:3) and meritorious grace. “A man makes the most progress and merits the most grace precisely in those matters wherein he gains the greatest victories over self and most mortifies his will” (I 25:3). Further, “the desire to die to all things of this world so that He may be despised and unknown in this life, and the ability to be transported from vanity to truth and from flesh to spirit” (III 34:2) is another mark of spiritual progress. In my opinion, this radical mortification seems to be feasible within a monastery only, for it includes keeping oneself, “free from all temporal cares” (II 5:3), “free from any external affection” (II 6:4) and the desire to “seek no solace from any other creature (but) relish God completely” (I 25:9).¹⁰

¹⁰ Notably, the Second Vatican Council denied this claim and said that spirituality is not for priests and religious alone. “The Lord addressed all His disci-

Furthermore, à Kempis suggests that the motivation behind self-denial is to acquire the love of God. Disciples are to, “subject themselves wholeheartedly for the love of God” (I 9:1). The disciple will gain much more merit if they, “accept another’s opinion for love of God” (I 9:2). The love of God demands that we “part with an intimate and much-needed friend” (II 9:2) because, “the further you withdraw from human consolation, the nearer you come to God” (III 29:3). For the love of God, the disciple is also compelled to undergo all things cheerfully, all labors and sorrows, temptations and trials, anxieties, weaknesses, necessities, injuries, slanders, rebukes, humiliations, confusions, corrections, and contempt.

While Jesus taught that discipleship involves a reorientation of one’s desires to those of God, à Kempis views discipleship as a mortification of all desires, even the desire for human relationships. In addition, Jesus sees following Him as a willingness to endure suffering as He did, while à Kempis views it as a way to obtain the love of God. à Kempis’ teachings will inevitably lead to self-sufficiency, works righteousness, and hypocrisy. The paradox is that this radical aestheticism can only be achieved by a true disciple of Christ, while at the same time it is viewed as a way to obtain a relationship with Him.¹¹

IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF PERFECTION

A. JESUS’ CONCEPT OF WHOLENESS

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus exhorts His disciples to be perfect. “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In both instances, the word translated “perfect” is *telios*. The semantic range of *telios* as defined by BDAG means, “having attained the end or purpose,

ples in Matt 5:48. Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” “Each must adapt the call to perfection to his or her own situation. What will always be common to all is love of God and of neighbor.” Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1970), 1078.

¹¹ Furthermore, it also seems possible for unbelievers to obtain this standard of aestheticism through rigid self-denial. Again, I believe the fundamental flaw with this teaching is that it emphasizes self-mortification over an intimate relationship with Jesus where the disciples seek to follow Him and identify themselves with His sufferings.

complete, or perfect.”¹² This word describes a person who is “fully developed in a moral sense.” This is contrasted with “persons who are fully up to standard in a certain respect, perfect, complete, expert.” Therefore, it appears that the perfection which Jesus desires of His disciples is total moral maturity, versus flawless perfection.

Jesus uses the word *telios* in Matthew 19:21. It is translated by the NASB as “complete.” I believe that this passage helps explain the meaning of perfection. The Rich Young man, while keeping the commandments, serves two masters – God and wealth. Wholeness (or perfection) meant for him a willingness to give up his wealth, yet he was unwilling and left Jesus’ presence incomplete. Therefore, it seems that Jesus does not use *telios* to mean “sinless perfection”, rather a complete, undivided devotion to God which expresses itself through acts of love. Also, after the antithesis statements of Matthew 5:21-47, I believe it is impossible for any disciple to perfectly achieve these standards on an ongoing basis. The fact that we are unable to attain this standard does not mean that it will be lowered; rather, it means that we need God’s grace and forgiveness to overcome our remaining sin.

B. À KEMPIS’ CONCEPT OF ATTAINING SINLESS PERFECTION

à Kempis suggests the disciple is to press on to perfection through, “persevering in seeking perfection” (I 17:1), being “diligent to desire perfection” (I 19:2) and living perfectly for Jesus (I 19:1). Beyond this, I believe Jesus and à Kempis would disagree.

While Jesus understood wholeness to be devotion to God which expresses itself through acts of love, à Kempis believes perfection can be obtained through a nebulous, subjective, mystical experience. à Kempis encourages the disciple to be like the saints who were able to “attach themselves to God.” The saints were able to obtain perfection because “they tried to mortify entirely in themselves all earthly desires, and thus they were able to attach themselves to God with all their heart and freely to concentrate their innermost thoughts” (I 11:2). We, as disciples, are able to experience something of heavenly contemplation, “if we mortify

¹² *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

our bodies perfectly and allow no distractions to enter our minds” (I 11:3). This can be achieved through abandoning self to God (III 31:1), perfectly mortifying the body and “offering [our] heart completely to God, uniting it with Him; a soul perfectly united with God” (IV 13:3). Therefore, perfection negatively signifies freedom from grievous sin, and positively, a permanent supernatural attachment to God.¹³

à Kempis offers more concrete ways for a disciple to attain perfection, such as “not believing every talebearer,” (I 4:1) nor “letting his mind relax in attention to heavenly things,” (III 26:1) “selling all” (III 56:2) and submitting to superiors (I 18:5). Partaking of the Eucharist is also seen as the perfect source of freedom from sin: “You must often return to the source of grace and divine mercy, to the fountain of goodness and perfect purity, if you wish to be free from passion and vice, if you desire to be made stronger and more watchful against all the temptations and deceits of the devil” (IV 10:1).

The most troubling aspect of *The Imitation of Christ* is à Kempis’ belief that a disciple may obtain sinless perfection. This view is evident when he says, “we become perfect through uprooting one vice each year” (I 11:5) and we are to, “strive earnestly for perfection for in a short time [we] will receive the reward of [our] labor” (I 25:1).¹⁴ à Kempis believes

¹³ This is strikingly similar to the traditional Catholic view of self-denial and the attenuation of divine perfection. “It is a firm conviction of the Fathers that God became man so that man might become God, that is, be deified.” This must not be conceived of as pantheism, neither as moral communion with God, but rather a physical communion of man with God. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 4th ed. (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1960), 256-57. Post-Vatican II dogma would also agree with the mystical nature of perfection. McBrien quotes Thomas Merton from *Life and Holiness*: “Spiritual perfection is available not to those with superhuman powers but to those who, though weak and defective in themselves, trust perfectly in the love of God, who abandon themselves with confident joy to the apparent madness of the cross (119). R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1075.

¹⁴ à Kempis’ view of perfection is comparable to that of Wesley who believed that the perfect man was not free from temptation, but rather free from giving in to temptation. Perfectionists maintain that it is possible for a believer to arrive at a state where they no longer sin. Wesley notes that this does not mean “the inability to sin, rather the ability to not sin.” He also refutes the idea that there is no longer a need for grace or the Holy Spirit, or the cessation of temptation or struggle with the tendency toward evil, or that there is no room for further spiritual growth. “It is to have ‘the mind which was in Christ,’ and to

sinless perfection is attainable because of the example of the saints. These are holy persons who were “given to contemplation, able to mortify entirely all earthly desires, and attach themselves to God” (I 11:2). They were also “free from passions and lusts” (I 11:3), “possessed the light of true perfection and religion” (I 18:1), and their lives bore witness that they were “holy and perfect men who conquered the world” (I 18:5).

In response to such a high standard of perfection, à Kempis ironically reassures his readers that the way of the perfect should not make us downcast, but spur us on to “*seek perfection*” (III 32:2). In possibly the darkest passage of the whole book, à Kempis reveals the turmoil of a man who knows of the sinless perfection which he is supposed to obtain, yet he is sadly unable. “I know the way of perfection, but because of corruption, do not rise to more perfect things” (III 55:3). “I have always been prone to sin and slow to amend. That is true. I cannot deny it” (III 52:2).

While Jesus’ view of perfection was moral maturity which evidences itself in God-like acts of love, à Kempis viewed perfection as a mystical attachment to God which was possible through spiritual exercises, such as partaking of the Eucharist. Moreover, while Jesus did not expect His disciples to reach perfection, à Kempis’ teachings contradict this by insinuating that they could achieve sinless perfection like the saints.

V. THE ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

A. JESUS’ TEACHING ON ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Apostle John states the evangelistic aim of his gospel in John 20:31, “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” Therefore, it seems natural that this gospel would describe how someone can have spiritual, eternal life. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus states that the only requirement for obtaining eternal life is to believe in Him: “...whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (John 3:15), “...whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16), “He who believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36),

‘walk as He walked’; to have all the mind that was in Him, and always to walk as He walked: in other words, to be inwardly and outwardly devoted to God; all devoted in heart and life.” See www.wesley.nnu.edu/Wesleyan_theology quoting J. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfectionism* (IV, 4, 15:1-6).

“he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life” (John 5:24), “he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47), and “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:26).¹⁵ These passages testify that the sole condition for eternal life is belief in Jesus.

Throughout the gospel, it is also evident that anyone who believes in Jesus is eternally secure – they are unable to lose eternal life. Jesus assures believers that they have irreversibly passed from death to life: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). Believers currently possess eternal life, they will never be condemned, and they have already passed from the sphere of death into life. Jesus also completely fulfills the will of the Father and doesn’t lose even one believer: “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:39-40). Jesus has never lost a believer and He never will. What He will do is raise up every person who believes in Him for eternal life. Lastly, Jesus assures believers that no one is able to snatch them out of God’s hand: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:27-30). Therefore, eternal security is based on the veracity of Jesus. Since He will prevent believers from being snatched out of the Father’s hand, they will always possess eternal life.¹⁶

B. À KEMPIS’ TEACHING ON ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

Thomas à Kempis believes people can obtain eternal life through experiencing an infusion of grace from God. “Have mercy, O Lord, have mercy on those who ask Your mercy, give grace to those who need it, and make us such that we may be worthy to enjoy Your favor and gain

¹⁵ Within the Gospel of John, other words besides belief are used in correlation with eternal life. Words such as “drink” (John 4:14), “eat” (John 6:54) and “know” (John 17:3) are synonymous with “belief.”

¹⁶ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 94.

eternal life” (IV 9:6).¹⁷ The way to receive this infusion is through removing obstacles to grace and participating in the Eucharist. “Cast away all obstacles to grace, therefore, if you wish to receive its infusion” (III 53:1). “I truly believe that You are present here in this Sacrament, God and man... In it greater grace is infused, growing virtue is nourished, faith confirmed, hope strengthened, and charity fanned into flame” (IV 4:2).

In this paradigm, there is no assurance of eternal security. First, no one can ever know if they have removed all of the obstacles which would hinder an infusion of grace (unless, of course, they have reached sinless perfection),¹⁸ and second, even if they have received a grace infusion, this grace can be lost through sin.¹⁹ “They who follow their own evil passions stain their consciences and lose the grace of God” (I 1:5). “Cleanse my conscience of every fault, and restore to me Your grace which I lost in sin” (IV 9:2). It is also possible to lose Jesus and His grace, “You may quickly drive Him away and lose His grace, if you turn back to the outside world” (II 8:3) and “He who finds Jesus finds a rare treasure... whereas he who loses Him loses more than the whole world” (II 8:1). There is clearly no assurance to be found in à Kempis’ theology.

¹⁷ This keeps with traditional Catholic teaching. “In regard to the increase of the state of grace, the Council of Trent declared against the Reformers, who asserted that good works are only a fruit of the achieved justification, that the justice already in the soul is increased by good works. The various good works are rewarded by different grades of grace.” Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic*, 262.

¹⁸ This is in accordance with traditional Catholic beliefs. “Against the teaching of the Reformers, that the justified possess certainty of faith which excludes all doubt about their justification, the Council of Trent declared: ‘If one considers his own weakness and his defective disposition, he may well be fearful and anxious as to his state of grace, as nobody knows with the certainty of faith, which permits of no error, that he has achieved the grace of God.’” *Ibid.*, 261-62.

¹⁹ This is also central to Catholic teaching. “The Council of Trent declared that the state of grace is lost, not by unbelief alone, but also by every mortal sin.” *Ibid.*, 263. “The moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost are, according to the general teaching of theologians, lost when grace and charity are lost.” *Ibid.*, 26.

VI. CONCLUSION

I do not believe that every component of *The Imitation of Christ* is erroneous; I appreciate his attempt to take discipleship seriously. Yet I do believe that there are enough problematic statements which cause me to question its benefit to the Christian community. While Jesus bestows value upon humanity, à Kempis seems to eradicate it. While Jesus calls us to follow Him, à Kempis calls us to mortify ourselves. While Jesus calls us to complete, undivided devotion to God which expresses itself through acts of love, à Kempis calls us to sinless perfection, and views it as attainable. Moreover, while Jesus assures His followers of eternal life through believing in Him, à Kempis provides no assurance of eternal life, for the infusion of grace can be lost.

In conclusion, I believe *The Imitation of Christ* was simply a product of its times.²⁰ Honorably, à Kempis sought to understand God the best he could, and apply his knowledge to his context. McBrien notes that the Middle Ages were, "...wrought with mysticism. The lack of intellectual and theological substance produced numerous problems: superstition, ignorance of the Bible, fascination with reports of visions, exaggeration of the value of relics, emotionalism, inordinate fears of the after-life and of God's judgment, and devotional excesses unrelated to the central mysteries of Christian faith."²¹ Whether or not the Christian community has made any progress in these areas, I can not say. What does seem apparent is this: the Christian community needs to be diligent in reading its authors carefully, filtering everything through the clear teachings of Jesus as found in the Scriptures, and applying it to our lives with the help of the Holy Spirit. I believe that in doing this, we would truly imitate Christ.

²⁰ A possible contemporary of à Kempis, Walter Hinton alludes to the spiritual mindset at this time. He became a hermit before joining the Augustinians at the Priory of Saint Peter in Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire, where he composed a devotional. This book was first printed in 1494. It was written to a "ghostly sister" who is presumed to be a solitary nun, living alone in a cell, seeking to pray, to contemplate God and to live solely for his glory. In it, he wrote that, "Through humility and love, the soul is mounting the spiritual ladder rung by rung until it reaches perfection. It is the highest state attainable in this life, but it can only be reached by the grace of God." Walter Hilton, *The Ladder of Perfection*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1988), xxv.

²¹ R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1065.