

Authentic Christianity

Introduction

Welcome once again to The Little Church World! By now some of you may have broken your New Year's resolutions and that may not be too serious, but for those of you still considering whether to make one or looking for a replacement for the one you've broken, let me suggest one; resolve to be an authentic Christian. With God's help, you can succeed. First, however, let's explore what it means to be 'authentic'. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary¹ defines authentic in the following way: "*real or genuine: not copied or false*".

Now this is not a minor issue in the Christian faith because Jesus had a particular dislike of anything not authentic, especially amongst those who were the acknowledged theologians and church leaders of the day. A particular aspect of falseness that he railed against was hypocrisy in the sense of, to use modern language, 'talking the talk but not walking the walk'. We can actually define hypocrisy more accurately than this loose catchphrase and the following definition conveys nicely why Jesus was so much against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of the day. Hypocrisy is defined by the Dictionary.com² website as follow: "*a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess*".

Now, it's fair to assume that Jesus' dislike of anything not authentic in the Christian faith is not confined to the religious leaders of his day and the following passage and verses from the Bible, which are Jesus' own words, reinforce the need for all Christ followers to avoid hypocrisy.

This is what Jesus had to say in Matthew 23 verses 1-4 (NIV) *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.*

In Matthew 12:34 (NIV) Jesus says this: *You brood of vipers how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth*

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic>

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hypocrisy>

speaks... and he's talking to the Pharisees. Again in Matthew 23 verse 33 (NIV), again to the religious leaders of the day: *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?*

These are strong words from the Creator of the Universe himself and we ignore them at our peril. By the way, as a side comment, let me just add that any view of Jesus Christ as some form of weak, feminine character as often depicted in artistic impressions of Jesus, is called seriously into question by his statements such as those just presented.

What Not to Do

What then should we avoid in order to be authentic? First, we should avoid what I call 'show without substance'.

Show without Substance

When I first began my Christian walk, even though I was over 40 years old, I felt like a baby. My upbringing had given me no foundational knowledge or experience to draw upon. Exposure to Christianity had been confined to school assemblies which, at that time and sensibly, the UK did not feel to be culturally insensitive!

I was impressed by people who could spontaneously go into long eloquent prayers, talk in tongues, find bible passages quickly, quote scripture or give a powerful sermon. Such people impressed me as 'advanced Christians'.

Now there's nothing wrong with any of these things, and I am not criticizing these aspects of Christian life, but let me tell you, unless these actions are supported by absolute reliance and trust in Jesus Christ, they are no more than filthy rags and they amount to pointless window dressing!

There's a recognition of the emptiness of these things in the book of Amos. The first passage gives the context for the second.

Here's the first message. This is Amos 5 verses 11-12 (NIV) *You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.*

The result - this is Amos 5 verses 21-22 (NIV) *I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings*

and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

Unless Jesus is fully in the driver's seat, whatever show of Christian competence may be displayed by seemingly pious individuals is totally worthless. It's also notable that you cannot hide from God private practice that is inconsistent with public display!

Ritual without Righteousness

A second practice to avoid is what I call 'ritual without righteousness'. Now, to be sure that righteousness means the same today as it meant in the Hebrew context, the relevant Hebrew word is tzedek (tseh'-dek) meaning, in addition to righteousness, integrity, equity, justice, straightness. The root of tzedek is tsadaq (tsaw-dak) also meaning upright, just, straight, innocent, true and sincere. In other words, the point I am making today had the same relevance in Biblical times so it is a universal truth for Christians.

In the Book of Job, Job is described as a person who was 'perfect' in righteousness. This does not mean that he was sinless; 'perfect' in the sense it is used here means that his righteousness permeated every relationship in his life as his working principle. After all, righteousness is a matter of relationship - with God and with other people.

All things considered then, it's fair to say that no amount of walking majestically, dressing up in ceremonial clothes, worshipping in a marvelous Church building or adhering to a strict order of doing things in the Church are of any value unless those engaged in these activities are in a right relationship with God.

Now, this is not just a standard set for the everyday Christian, but also for those in leadership positions. Matthew 23 verse 27 (NIV) presents the view of Jesus with regard to the religious leaders of the time: *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

Status rather than Service

Similarly the Christ follower should avoid seeking status and power in a Church or fellowship setting for its own sake. Christian leadership is not about having status in society, a position in the community or being some sort of wise oracle imparting biblical wisdoms to eager ears that are tickled by nice sounding words. It is about servant leadership; that is the use of leadership gifts to serve those being led. Christ modelled servant leadership in John 13 verses 3-5 (NIV)

capture: *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

Now having modelled the behaviour, he describes servant leadership in Matthew 20 verses 26-28 (NIV) *...whoever wants to become great amongst you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

The Christian leader puts his flock before himself; he is not concerned with status but sees his role as enabling, encouraging, counseling, that means 'loving not lording'.

Consumerism not Commitment

Authentic Christians do not go to Church to be a consumer of entertainment just like going to the cinema to see a good movie. They go to Church to participate, to commit to the body, to use their gifts to glorify God and to benefit others. This is the serving aspect of being a Church member that is the equivalent of the servant leadership. Paul elaborates on what it means to commit to service in a Christian community by using the gifts God has given us. This is what he says in 1 Corinthians 12 verses 4-7, and I'm using The Living Bible because this seems to convey it very well. *Now God gives us many kinds of special abilities, but it is the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service to God, but it is the same Lord we are serving. There are many ways in which God works in our lives, but it is the same God who does the work in and through all of us who are His. The Holy Spirit displays God's power through each of us as a means of helping the entire church.*

What to Do

So what do you have to do to be authentic? Now, for the purpose of this message I want to focus on three factors that facilitate authenticity.

Be a Be-er Before a Do-er

Now we've stated more than once in our messages that we should put Jesus in the driver's seat of our lives. He does not want or need a co-driver sitting at the side of Him; He wants you to be a 'be-er'. What do I mean by this? You have to 'be' before you can 'do'. You have to spend time in getting to know Jesus personally through prayer, experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, and reading the Bible, this is what I mean by 'being'. God has a plan for your 'doing' and He will make this clear provided you are 'being' a Christ follower and

not doing what you think a Christian should do! If you are a 'be-er' first and then 'do', as a result, you will be authentic; alternatively 'doing' and not 'be-ing' is the essence of hypocrisy.

Furthermore, we need to consider the nature of the doing for an authentic Christian. If this is not your first visit to The Little Church World, you will be aware that I often use the term 'Christ follower'. This means we do not run ahead of God – we follow Him. Of course, this is not to suggest that we do nothing because we are called upon to take action. The Great Commission is a very real call to action, but the driving analogy, which I use, should be seen like a tandem rather than the car. Christ followers are in right relationship with the Lord when they are peddling behind the Lord who peddles and steers the bike at the front; both are taking action and headed in the same direction!

The Message version of the Bible captures this point very clearly in the following words summarized from Matthew 16 verses 24-26 *Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am"* All Christ followers are His disciples and this principle applies just as much to us today as it did to Christ's very first disciples.

Believe God Don't Just Believe in God

Authentic Christians do not just believe in God, but they believe God and there is a difference. My view of belief 'in God' represents a general view that He exists, but the personal relationship with him is just not there. The test of the personal relationship is whether God is actually believed. Believing God means that, for example, even in the midst of trouble, the Christ follower will fully believe God's promise conveyed through Paul in Romans 8:28 (NIV). This is it: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Be Obedient to God's Word:

Associated with this is the need to be obedient. It's not enough to just believe God's word; it is also important to be obedient to it. Authentic Christians know the importance of obedience and understand what a mistake we make if we become disobedient. In effect, a lack of obedience means that we push the Lord out of the driver's seat of our lives and take back the controls. He'll allow us to do this, but with this comes uncertainty and fear because this is what happens when we have moved out from under the Lord's protective canopy. Obviously disobedience is totally at odds with authenticity.

Walking in obedience to God's word when desire or circumstances suggest we shouldn't, not only represents believing God, but it also represents a level of faith and trust that brings Him great joy, and of course, it also heralds the eventual 'good'.

Summary

Now obviously, there's so much more that could be discussed, but I've been concerned to hopefully tackle the core of the issue. Giving priority to 'being' rather than 'doing', believing God not just believing 'in' God and emphasizing obedience to the word all go a long way to ensuring authentic Christianity and avoiding 'show rather than substance', 'ritual rather than righteousness', 'status rather service' and 'consumerism rather than commitment'. Now I am mindful that this message seems to be preaching to the converted so to speak, meaning it's addressed to those who have already made a commitment to the Lord.

However, to those who have not put Jesus in the driver's seat of their lives, I want to say that we generally live in a superficial world; more often than not, what you see is not what you get. As you will have gathered from this message, becoming a Christ follower demands authenticity not pretence and on this basis, I want to also say, please don't make the mistake of judging and dismissing Christ because of the action of someone you know who goes by His name but falls short by your assessment because you may just be watching a Christian who still has much growing to do. We don't become perfect examples overnight and neither will you, but what I can guarantee is that with Christ, you will be on the journey He created you to walk and that alone is a great place to be! Why not base your life on a solid foundation rather than a temporary façade which will certainly turn out to be phony and superficial. If you wish to do so, just call or email - we are ready to give you full support.

Well, this completes the message for this week. I'm glad you could join me and I look forward to you doing so next week for another look at fundamental Christian issues. Until then, have a very good week. Goodbye and Godbless.

Discussion Questions

1. If Jesus returned today would he have cause to criticize the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of our day as he did 2000 years ago?
2. Why has Jesus been depicted in many artistic impressions as a weak, feminine looking character given the verses mentioned in the message e.g., Matthew 23: 1-4, Matthew 12:34 and Matthew 22:33?

3. What is the difference between servant leadership and weak leadership?
4. Why is it so difficult for new Christians and some older ones, to allow Jesus to take the 'driving seat'?
5. What part does Satan play in the 'what not to do's'?

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