

## 2

# THE REAL THING

---

It has always seemed unfair to me that many churches (and some individual Christians) keep careful records on how many converts they make to Christianity, but never keep any record of how many they drive away from Christ! Fairness would seem to dictate that both sides of the ledger should be maintained! The fact is, many churches turn far more people from Christ than they ever win to him--and frequently the most zealous and orthodox Christians are the very ones who drive the most people away! The reason, as we have seen, is that while they may indeed be true Christians themselves, the life manifest is false Christianity--as phony as a three-dollar bill.

True, there is a false Christianity which is practiced by those who aren't Christians at all. There are many religious frauds who have *never* been real Christians, and there are apostates who give every appearance of being Christian for awhile, then throw the whole thing over. But surely the most subtle stratagem ever devised by Satan to deceive and mislead people is that of leading genuine Christians to practice a sham Christianity before the world. You can't detect and guard against this kind of sham Christianity by making people sign a doctrinal statement or by having them recite a creed. This type of phony Christianity is always orthodox. It is frequently very zealous and feeds upon consecration services and dedication meetings. It uses all the right terms and behaves in the proper, orthodox manner, but the net result is that it repels people from Christ rather than attracting people to Christ.

In sharp contrast to this is the Real Thing--authentic Christianity as its founder, Jesus Christ Himself, intended it to be. Authentic Christianity never needs advertisement or publicity. It gives off a fragrance and a fascination that attracts people like flies are attracted to honey. Is *everyone* attracted to authentic Christianity? Absolutely not! Many people are antagonized and even outraged when they discover what Christianity is truly about. But in general, the initial character of authentic Christianity is one which attracts crowds and compels admiration.

### **The Christianity of Jesus and Paul**

There is, of course, no clearer demonstration of real Christianity than Christ Himself. Today, there are many brands and varieties of Christianity, but the most attractive form of Christianity of all is the *original*--the Christianity of Jesus Christ. This was the authentic Christian life in its purest, most consistent form. Many people have a problem understanding, applying, and identifying with the Christianity of Jesus because they feel He, being the Son of God, had an edge over the rest of us. "Not fair, comparing me to Jesus!" they protest. "Sure, Jesus was undoubtedly human--but He was also God. From His divine side, He drew supernatural power to resist evil and achieve great things in a way I could never do."

Yes, Jesus was fully God--but we must never forget that He was also fully human, with all the limitations that go with our humanity. We can live our lives as He lived His. We can base our lives on the model He has set before us. This is practical, livable truth, and the Scriptures are very clear on this point. Here are a few passages which commend Jesus to us as an example we *can* and *should* follow on a practical, daily basis:

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21).

How is this possible? How can we hope to pattern our lives after the life of a perfect Person who was God in the flesh? Isn't that like trying to high-jump over the Empire State Building or broad-jump over the Pacific Ocean? Isn't that asking the impossible? Well, yes and no. Yes, it is impossible for us to live perfect, sinless lives, but no, it is not impossible for us to set a *goal* of Christlikeness. Every time we fail in our pursuit of that goal, we simply go back to God for forgiveness and restoration, and He puts us back on the road to our goal once again. The key principle is found in Philippians 2:5-8, which I've quoted here from the New Revised Standard Version (emphasis added):

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross.

Note that key phrase: *Jesus emptied Himself!* He set aside the prerogatives and powers of Godhood in order to identify fully with us. He lived the same kind of life we live, facing temptation, suffering pain and sorrow, enduring frustration, just as we do. He approached life the same way you and I must approach life: living in dependence on God the Father, seeking guidance and strength through continual prayer, trusting God and listening to His leading, and being humbly obedient--"Not My will, but Yours." That is why we are to "let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus." That is authentic Christianity, the Christianity of Christ, Christianity in its truest, purest, most distilled form. That is the Christianity which you and I are to follow, the only Christianity worthy of the name.

The apostle Paul lived his life by the same principle, patterning his life after the example of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, he writes, "Follow my example, *as I follow the example of Christ.*" That is why the apostle's ministry was so attractive to the people around him. That is why his preaching was so effective in changing hearts and minds. He was an imitator of Christ. As we examine a selection from Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth--one of the most biographical of all Paul's letters--we will gain insight into Paul's own experiences as an imitator of Christ and of His ministry. There, Paul reveals to us in the clearest terms the secret of his own great ministry.

The first one and one-half chapters of 2 Corinthians indicate that Paul was being challenged by certain Christians at Corinth. They had been affected by some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who suggested that Paul was not a genuine apostle at all because (1) he was not one of the original twelve, and (2) he taught certain things that went beyond the law of Moses. Claiming he was not a real apostle, they insisted his brand of Christianity was not real Christianity. One of the Devil's favorite tricks is to brand the truth as a big lie, and that's exactly what was happening at Corinth.

### **Five unmistakable marks**

Paul's response to these charges is to describe for us the nature of his ministry. As we shall see, the ministry of Paul bears five unmistakable marks or qualities which cannot be successfully imitated or counterfeited. These qualities are always present whenever real Christianity is being practiced. No matter how cleverly false Christianity may try to copy them, it can't be done. These marks or qualities are inimitable. They have nothing to do with personality or temperament, so anyone who discovers the secret of authentic Christianity can attain them. They are not limited to one period of time, so they are just as genuine in the twenty-first century as in the first.

We begin our journey of discovery in 2 Corinthians 2:14. In this verse, we find the first three marks of authentic Christianity embedded (the remaining two qualities are found in the verses that follow): "But thanks

be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him" (2 Corinthians 2:14). Let's examine the marks of authentic Christianity, one by one.

### *Mark No. 1: Unquenchable optimism*

The first mark is found in the very first phrase: "thanks be to God." One unmistakable mark of radical Christianity is a spirit of thankfulness, even amid trial and difficulty. It is a kind of *unquenchable optimism*. The world operates by the gloomy principle of Murphy's Law: Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. Authentic Christians operate by a belief in God's grace, love, and ultimate control. You can see the unquenchable optimism of authentic Christianity clearly in the Book of Acts, where a note of triumph runs right through from beginning to end despite all the dangers, hardships, persecutions, pressures, and perils that the early Christians experienced. The same continual note of thanksgiving is reflected in all of Paul's letters as well as those of John, Peter, and James.

The attitude of thanksgiving displayed in these passages is genuine, heart-felt, and sincere. There is nothing artificial about it. It is a far cry from the imitation thanksgiving often seen in Christians today. Some people think they are expected to repeat pious and thankful words, even when they don't feel thankful. They assume that's the way Christians are supposed to act. Many have settled for a form of Christian stoicism, a grin-and-bear-it attitude which even a non-Christian can adopt when there's nothing much he can do about a situation. But that is a long way from true Christian thankfulness. To listen to some Christians today, you would think God expects us screw on a smile and go around saying, "Hallelujah, I've got cancer!" That's not what our unquenchable optimism is all about.

Authentic Christianity is rooted in reality. It feels all the hurt and pain of adverse circumstances, and does not enjoy them in the least degree. But authentic Christianity does see an end result being produced--not only in heaven, someday, but right now, here on earth. That end result is so desirable and glorious, it is worth all the pain and heartache. That is why it can do nothing else but rejoice! An authentic Christian is confident that the same Lord who permitted the pain to come will use it to bring about a highly desirable end. That is why we can be genuinely thankful--even in the midst of perplexity and sorrow.

There is an outstanding example of the unquenchable optimism of authentic Christianity in Acts 16. There, Paul and Silas find themselves at midnight, thrust into an inner dungeon in the city jail of Philippi. Their backs are raw and bloody from a terrible flogging received at the hands of the Roman authorities. Their feet are fastened in stocks. The future is uncertain and frightening. Anything could happen to them in the morning--even torture and death. There is no one around to be impressed by a show of courage, and no one to intervene and rescue them. Yet, despite all these reasons for pessimism and hopelessness, *Paul and Silas literally break into song!*

No one could accuse them of being phony or of putting up a good front just to keep up their spirits. They were genuinely thankful to God. They began to praise him at midnight because they knew that, despite the apparent rebuff and lack of success, their objective had been accomplished. Now, the church they longed to plant in Philippi *could not be stopped!* That fact inspired them to break out in praise and thanksgiving. How could they have known what God had planned for them--an earthquake that would jar their chains loose, topple their prison walls, and set them free? They couldn't! They had no premonition at all of being set free. They were simply manifesting the mark of authentic Christianity--unquenchable optimism and thanksgiving.

### *Mark No. 2: Unvarying success*

The second mark of authentic Christianity is closely linked to the first. It is found in the next phrase in 2 Corinthians and is found in the next phrase, "who *always* leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. Note how strongly Paul puts it: Jesus "always leads us" in triumph. Not occasionally. Not sometimes. *Always*. The apostle makes perfectly clear that the Christianity he has experienced presents a pattern of unvarying success. It never involves failure but invariably achieves its goals. It involves, as we have seen, struggle and hardships and tears. Sometimes, as on the cross at Calvary, the moment of triumph may even look like complete failure. But our triumph is always assured. Though the struggle may be desperate, it is never serious. It issues at last

in the complete achievement of the objectives God has set for us. Even the opposition we encounter is made to serve the purposes of victory.

We must remember that these high-sounding words of Paul's are not mere evangelical pep talk. They were not uttered by a well-paid, highly respected pastor to a well-dressed suburban congregation in a modern American megachurch. These words were not given to thrill and entertain the Sunday morning audience, but to embolden and encourage those who were literally risking their lives and their families' lives for the cause of Christ on a daily basis. These words were written by a man who bore on his body the wounds of a servant of Jesus. He had endured much difficulty, endless disappointments, and bitter persecution with great pain. Yet he could write with rugged truthfulness that Jesus always leads us in triumph.

This certainly does not mean that Paul's plans and goals were always realized, for they were not. He wanted to do many things that he was never able to accomplish. In Romans 9:3, Paul describes how he hungered to be used as a minister to Israel--"my brothers, those of my own race." He even expressed the willingness to be cut off from Christ if only the Israelites would be delivered. But he never achieved that objective. It is not his plans that are in view here, but God's. The triumph is Christ's, not Paul's.

The invariable mark of authentic Christianity is that, once we have discovered its radical secret, there is never a failure. Our will, our dreams, our goals, our desires may be thwarted--but God's will and plan? Never! He can even weave our seeming failures into His overall design for ultimate triumph. In the life of an authentic Christian, every obstacle becomes an opportunity. Success is inevitable.

## **The liberty of prison**

One of the most powerful statements of the unquenchable optimism of genuine Christianity is found in the first chapter of Paul's letter to his friends at Philippi. Writing as a prisoner in the city of Rome, confined to a private, rented home but chained day and night to a member of Caesar's Imperial Guard, Paul faces a very bleak future. He must soon appear before Nero Caesar to answer Jewish charges that result in his death. He is no longer allowed to travel freely about the empire, preaching "the inexhaustible riches of Christ." He cannot even visit his beloved friends in the many churches he has founded.

What a time for discouragement! Yet no New Testament letter reflects greater confidence and rejoicing than the letter to the Philippians. The reason for this confidence, Paul says, is twofold. He writes, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (Philippians 1:12). Then he lists two evidences to prove his point.

First, he says, "As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (Philippians 1:13). The palace guard (or, in some translations, the praetorian guard) is the imperial bodyguard. Since he is a prisoner of Caesar's, he must be guarded by Caesar's own hand-picked guard. The guard was largely made up of sons of noble families who were commissioned to spend a few years in Nero's palace guard. Later on, this select group would become the kingmakers of the empire, responsible for the choice of several succeeding emperors. They were impressive young men, the cream of the empire, in training for future positions of power and leadership.

Anyone who can read between the lines a bit will see what is happening here. It is clear that the Lord Jesus, in His role as King of the earth, has appointed Nero to be the chairman of the Committee for the Evangelization of the Roman Empire. Nero doesn't know this--but then emperors seldom know what is really going on in their empires. Remember that when the time came for the Son of God to be born in Bethlehem, his mother and her new husband were 70 miles away, living in Nazareth. So God commissioned Emperor Augustus with the task of getting Joseph and Mary down from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Augustus felt strangely moved to issue an Imperial Edict that everyone should go to his hometown to be taxed--and that did the trick!

So in this case Nero has given orders that his imperial bodyguard should have charge of the Apostle Paul. Every six hours, one of the future leaders of the Roman Empire was brought in, chained to the Apostle Paul, and forcibly exposed to the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ!

I suggest that if you want to feel sorry for anyone, don't feel sorry for Paul. Feel sorry for the young Roman bodyguard. Here he is, trying to live a quiet, pagan life and every so often he is ordered out and chained to this disturbing man who says the most amazing things about someone called Jesus of Nazareth, who has risen from the dead. As a result, one by one, these young men were being won to Christ. It is what you might call a chain reaction!

If you doubt that this is what was taking place, just look at the next to the last verse of the Philippian letter: "All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22). Here is a band of young men, the political center of the empire, being infiltrated and conquered for Christ by an old man in chains who is awaiting trial for his life. It is not at all unlikely that some of the young men who accompanied Paul on his later journeys came from this very band.

This incident is a magnificent revelation of the strategy of God--and, by contrast, of the weakness of human strategy. No human mind could have conceived this unique approach to the very heart of the empire. We humans are forever planning strategies for fulfilling the Great Commission, but what we come up with is usually banal, routine, unimaginative, and relatively ineffective. The noteworthy thing about God's strategy is that it is ingenious, surprising, and totally unexpected.

### **Aided by opposition**

The strategies of God are so powerful, compared with human plans and strategies, that He is able to turn man's most vicious opposition and turn it to His own advantage. That is what is recorded in the early chapters of Acts. The church in Jerusalem was growing by leaps and bounds. Some 2,000 to 5,000 Christians were gathering together weekly and enjoying the tremendous fellowship and excitement. Yet it was all contained within the city walls. When God wanted to spread these good things among the nations, he permitted sharp opposition to arise. As a result, the early Christians were driven throughout the empire--all except the apostles.

Since having learned to glimpse God's hand in these acts of opposition, I have begun to read missionary reports in a different light. In recent years, I have seen many reports in missionary magazines saying in one way or another, "Terrible things are happening to our country. The doors are closing to the gospel. Opposition is rising. The government is trying to suppress all Christian witness. Our missionaries must soon pack up and get out." Without question, these missionaries and the national Christians in these countries are being oppressed and threatened, and they greatly need our prayers and support. Yet, when I read such reports, I have learned to say, "Thank God. At last the missionaries are being forced to relinquish control of the churches and the national church is taking over."

In Ethiopia, before World War II, the missionaries were driven out for twenty years, but when they came back in they found that the gospel had spread like wildfire, and there were far more Christians than if the missionaries had been allowed to stay. We have seen similar stories in other trouble spots around the world, notably China.

Paul makes a second point in his letter to the Philippians to support his claim that the things which happened to him had only served to advance the gospel. He says, "*Because of my chains*, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (Philippians 1:14, emphasis added). Because Paul was a prisoner, the Roman Christians were witnessing far more freely throughout the city than they would have done otherwise.

It was at this time that the first official Roman persecution against the Christians was beginning. Many, therefore, were afraid to speak of their faith. But then they saw that God--not Nero, not the Jewish leaders--was in complete charge of matters. With God in charge, they became emboldened to proclaim the gospel. As a result, there was far more effective outreach going on in Rome than even if Paul had been free to preach at will. This fact has always suggested to me that perhaps the best way to evangelize a community would be to start by locking all the preachers up in jail! Other Christians might then begin to realize that they, too, have gifts for ministry, and would begin to exercise them in effective ways!

### **Living letters**

Looking back on this incident with the benefit of twenty centuries of hindsight, we see a third proof of Paul's claim--a proof that even he could not have seen at the time. If we had been with Paul in that hired house in Rome and had asked him, "Paul, what do you think is the greatest work you have accomplished in your ministry through the power of Christ?" what would he have said? I feel sure his answer would have been, "The planting of churches in various cities." It was to these churches that his letters were written, and it was for them that he prayed daily. He called them "my joy and crown" and spent himself without restraint for them.

But now, looking back across the intervening centuries, we can see that the planting of these churches was not his greatest work after all. Every one of the churches he planted ceased its testimony long ago. In most cases, the very cities in which they existed lie in ruins today. The work of Paul which has persisted to this day has been the letters that he wrote when he was locked up and could do nothing else! Those letters have changed the world. They are among the most powerful documents known to men. No wonder Paul could write, "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph." It is an unmistakable mark of authentic Christianity.

### *Mark No. 3: Unforgettable impact*

The third unmistakable mark follows immediately. After saying, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ," Paul continues with this beautiful statement of the impact we have as authentic Christians: "and through us spreads everywhere *the fragrance of the knowledge of him*" (2 Corinthians 2:14). God tells us that our lives should be spent giving off a fragrance, a perfume, a pleasing bouquet--not only to other people, but to God. Enlarging on this thought, Paul adds: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Most men have had the experience of being in a room when a strikingly beautiful woman enters. Before she came in, she applied a touch here and there of White Diamonds, and as she passes through the room, she leaves behind a lingering fragrance. Consciously or unconsciously, all the males in the room are affected by that fragrance. Weeks or months later, they may catch a wisp of that fragrance again--and immediately, the image of that beautiful woman flashes into their minds. The fragrance has made her unforgettable.

That is the picture Paul gives here. There is something about authentic Christianity that leaves an *unforgettable impression* when it is encountered. The Christian who has discovered this secret makes an enduring impact; he is never taken for granted by anyone. As Paul suggests, the impact may be in one of two directions. He either increases opposition to Christ (death to death) or he leads toward faith and life (life to life). If your life is one that reflects radical, authentic Christianity, then you are making people either bitter or better by contact with you. But one thing cannot happen: people will never remain the same. Those who are determined to die are pushed on toward death by coming into contact with authentic Christianity. Those who are seeking to live are helped on into life. Jesus certainly had this quality about Him. No one ever came into contact with him and went away the same.

Many commentators on this passage conclude that Paul had in mind here a typical Roman triumph. When a Roman general returned to the capital after a successful campaign, he was granted a triumph by the senate. A great procession passed through the streets of Rome displaying the captives which were taken in the course of the conquest. Some people went before the chariot of the conqueror, bearing garlands of flowers and pots of fragrant incense. They were the prisoners who were destined to live and return to their captured country to govern it under Roman rule. Other prisoners followed behind the chariot dragging chains and heavy manacles. These were doomed to execution, for the Romans felt they could not trust them. As the procession went on through the cheering crowds, the incense pots and fragrant flowers were to the first group a fragrance from life unto life while the same aroma was to the second group a fragrance of death to death.

This is the effect of the gospel as it touches the world through the life of an authentic Christian. Authentic Christianity leaves a lingering fragrance to God of Jesus Christ, no matter what--but to human beings, it is either a fragrance of death to death or of life to life.

But what about phony Christianity? That's another matter altogether--it just a bad smell! You've certainly heard

the only one-liner--"Old fishermen never die--they only smell that way." The same can be said for false Christianity. It never dies; it only smells that way.

#### *Mark No. 4: Unimpeachable integrity*

The fourth mark of genuine Christianity is found in 2 Corinthians 2:14: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God." Remember, that is not a description of Christian pastors but of all Christians. It has great application to pastors and others in the ministry, but its primary reference is to common, ordinary Christians who have learned the secret of authentic Christianity.

Christians can be described in two ways, negatively and positively. Negatively, they are not peddlers. The word means a huckster, a street salesman. Occasionally I hear Christian witnessing described as "selling the gospel." I cringe when I hear that because I don't believe Christians are meant to be salespeople for God. The idea here is that of a street hawker who has certain wares which he feels are attractive and which he peddles on the corner as people are passing by. He makes his living by peddling his wares.

Much Christian preaching and witnessing can be described that way. People select certain attractive features from the Scriptures and use these as "selling points." Healing is a case in point. It is a legitimate subject for study and practice, but when singled out and harped on continually, especially when a pitch for large, sacrificial offerings is linked to it, healing can quickly lead to hucksterism. Prophecy can serve the same purpose. If a man is known only as a prophetic teacher, I am troubled about him, for he has picked out something that is attractive (and even sensational) from the Word. If that is all he ever teaches, he is not declaring the whole counsel of God. He is a peddler, making a living by hawking certain wares from the Scriptures. Paul says authentic Christianity does not hawk its truth like a peddler selling goods in the street.

#### **Four qualities of integrity**

Our integrity as authentic Christians is characterized by four qualities, according to this passage. First quality: we speak "with sincerity." In other words, we are to be honest people. We must mean what we say. Sincerity marks the highest demand of the world upon people. The world admires sincerity and feels it is the ultimate expression of character--but according to Paul, sincerity is just the beginning of character, God's bare-minimum expectation of authentic Christians. The very least we should expect from ourselves as Christians is that we thoroughly believe and practice what we say.

Second quality: Paul says we are "sent from God" (or, as the Revised Standard Version renders it, "commissioned by God"). This speaks of our *purpose* as authentic Christians. We are not to be idle dreamers with no definite objective in view. We have been commissioned as military officers are commissioned. We have been given a definite task and specific assignments which constitute our purpose in life and in ministry. We are purposeful people with an end in view, an object to attain, a goal to accomplish, and we do not merely preach or witness as though that were a goal in itself.

Third quality: Paul says we do all this "before God" (or, in the RSV, "in the sight of God"). This indicates an attitude of transparency, of openness to investigation. To walk in the sight of other people permits us to hide our sins and contradictions behind a facade. But to walk in the sight of God requires total honesty with Him and with ourselves, because nothing can be hidden from God's sight. This does not mean we can live sinlessly, but rather that there must be no cover-up or evasion of the facts of our sin when it occurs. It means there are no areas of denial. All is evaluated and tested by the purity and knowledge and wisdom of God--and what is sinful, we confess and we repent of before God. A man who walks in the sight of God is more interested in his inner reality than his outer reputation. He can be completely trusted. You can even believe his golf score and the size of the trout he caught. If you can teach your young people to live in the sight of God, you will even be able to trust them in the back seat of a car.

Fourth and final quality: we speak "in Christ." What quality does that indicate? *Authority!* Paul states it clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:20--"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." Ambassadors are authorized spokesmen. They have power to act and make covenants on behalf

of others. Authentic Christians are not powerless servants. We speak words and deliver messages which heaven honors.

All of these qualities add up to unimpeachable integrity. People of sincerity, purpose, transparency, and authority are utterly trustworthy. You can ring a gold coin on their conscience. Their word is their bond, and they can be counted on to come through. They are responsible and faithful individuals. That is the fourth great mark of real Christianity.

At this point in the Scripture text, we come to a chapter division. This is unfortunate, because it divides two which belong together. The apostle has not finished his line of reasoning, so it's best to ignore the chapter division and read right on, to find the fifth mark of authentic Christianity: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?" (2 Corinthians 3:1).

#### *Mark No. 5: Undeniable reality*

Paul is aware that he is beginning to sound highly complimentary to himself. He knows there are some in Corinth who will immediately take these words in that way. Indeed, it is obvious from his words that some had even suggested in previous correspondence that the next time he came to Corinth he bring letters of recommendation from some of the Twelve in Jerusalem! They were thinking of Paul as though he were a man entirely like themselves: so continually praising himself that no one would believe him until he had confirmation from more objective sources. But Paul says to them, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

He is saying, in effect, "You want letters of recommendation to prove I have authority as a messenger of God? Why, you yourselves are all the recommendation I need! Look what has happened to you. Are you any different? Have there been any changes in you since you came to Christ through my word? Your own hearts will bear witness to yourselves and before the world that the message you heard from us and which has changed your lives is from God." In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul made reference to "the sexually immoral ... idolaters ... adulterers ... male prostitutes ... homosexual offenders ... thieves ... greedy ... drunkards ... slanderers ... [and] swindlers" he had found in Corinth. "And that is what some of you were," he added (verses 9-11). But now they had been washed, sanctified, and justified by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. These changes were proof of reality.

The Corinthians had written to Paul about the joy they now had and the hope and meaning which had been brought into their lives. They described to him the deliverance from shame and guilt they had experienced, the freedom from fear and hostility, from darkness and death, which was theirs. So he says to them, in effect, "This is your confirmation. You yourselves are walking letters from God, known and read by all men, written by the Spirit of God in your hearts." Here is the final mark of genuine Christianity: undeniable reality, a change which cannot be explained on any other terms than God at work. Paul did not need letters of recommendation when this kind of change was evident in the lives of his hearers.

Once I heard of a Christian who had been an alcoholic for years and then was converted. Someone asked him, "Now that you are a Christian, do you believe the miracles of the New Testament?" He answered, "Yes, I do." The other man said, "Do you believe that story about Jesus changing water into wine?" He said, "I sure do." The other said, "How can you believe such nonsense?" The Christian replied, "I'll tell you how; because in our house Jesus changed whiskey into furniture!" That is the mark of authenticity. Such a marked change cannot occur except under the impulse of a powerful relationship that substitutes the love of Christ for the love of drink.

There are the five unmistakable signs of genuine Christianity: unquenchable optimism, unvarying success, unforgettable impact, unimpeachable integrity, and undeniable reality. They are always present whenever the real thing is being manifested. Mere religion tries to imitate these marks, but is never quite able to pull it off. By comparison with these marks, phony Christianity is always shown up to be what it is--a shabby, shoddy

imitation that quickly folds when the real pressure is on. The remarkable thing is not that men seek to imitate these genuine graces, for we have all been hypocrites of one kind or another since our birth. The truly remarkable thing is that becoming a Christian does not of itself guarantee that these Christian graces will be manifest in us. It is not being a Christian that produces these, but *living* as a Christian. There is a knowledge we must have and a choice we must make before these virtues will be consistently present. The secret awaits us in the next chapter.

---

[Authentic Christianity, Table of Contents](#) | [Next Chapter](#) | [The Ray Stedman Library Index Page](#) | [Biography of Ray Stedman](#) | [Peninsula Bible Church](#)

Copyright 1996 by Elaine C. Stedman. All Rights Reserved. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery House Publishers, Box 3566, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.