

Authentic Christianity

Modern Christianity is a smorgasbord of conflicting doctrines, rituals, and bureaucratic machinery. Is it even possible to go back to a more pristine version?

“You are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:9-11).



In the first century, Jesus and His apostles warned of deceivers who would subvert their message of salvation (Matt. 7:15-16; Ac. 20:29-30; 2 Pet. 2:1). The history of Christianity over the last two thousand years has provided ample evidence of this corrupting process. One author lamented that our problem today “isn’t too much religion, or too little of it. It’s *bad* religion: the slow-motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of destructive pseudo-Christianities in its place” (Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, p. 3). Unbelievers see the disarray in modern Christianity and despise us for it.

Somehow the pristine simplicity of early Christianity needs to be reclaimed. But how do we go about that? Some have sought to accomplish this by mimicking the external machinery of the early churches. That’s a noble quest, but those early churches struggled with their own share of doctrinal corruptions and poor performance.

At best they are an imperfect model to follow. “Restoration” is a worthy goal, but only if we’re restoring the right thing.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians (one of those churches that was doing a poor job of living up to its commitment) provides clues to how we can approach this endeavor. Notice three characteristics of authentic Christianity that Paul lays out here.

First, authentic Christianity is *personal*. Its foundation is Jesus Christ, not party affiliation. It is defined by a relationship between each individual and Jesus, speaking through His word. Stones in the temple...sheep in the flock...branches on the vine—these Biblical metaphors (and others) point to the cardinal relationship upon which the religion of Christ is built. Much of modern Christianity, unfortunately, is bogged down in institutional machinery of human origin, with Jesus serving as little more than a figurehead. Having my name on the membership roll of a church means nothing if my heart and life are not totally invested in the pursuit of a closer *personal* connection with Jesus the Savior.

But authentic Christianity is not manifested in isolation. It is also *communal*. When Paul said of the Corinthians, “you are God’s building,” he used the plural “you.” When we individually enter this relationship with Jesus, we become brothers and sisters in a great family, with a unique set of privileges and responsibilities that the rest of the world cannot comprehend. When we live out our discipleship in a community of fellow believers, the world will look upon us with awe. Here are people who have learned how to live together in harmony, despite their wide-ranging diversity.

Finally, authentic Christianity is *transformative*. Paul cautioned his readers to “take heed” how they build on the foundation—and spent the rest of the book explaining how our hearts and lives are reconstructed by our relationship with Christ and with each other. The purpose of this enterprise is not to make us *feel* better, but to help us *be* better. In Christ, we learn the wisdom, self-discipline, and grace that will make us more humble, more patient, more joyful, more confident, and more content. We will make mistakes along the way, but the journey is one of constant improvement.

The pursuit of this kind of “mere Christianity” (as C. S. Lewis called it) is a tall challenge, but it is possible—if we’re willing to build carefully on the right foundation.

— David King