



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

Christ-likeness:

The Whole Image of Christ upon You

Colossians 3:1-17

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If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Introduction

We're now seven weeks into our series on *Real: Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits*. And I trust you realize by now how relevant the question of real Christianity really is.

Perhaps you saw the recent firestorm that encircled Senator Rick Santorum. He claimed President Obama's policies were motivated by "a different theology." This was red meat to the media, who pounced on it and pressed hard for an explanation from Santorum. Was the Senator calling into question the President's claim to be a Christian? Santorum's response was a simple one: "If the president says he's a Christian, he's a Christian."¹

Now, for those of you who've been tracking with this sermon series over the past several weeks, I trust you heard Santorum saying this: If you say you're real, then you're real; or, authentic Christians are those who claim to be Christians. That's what the Senator in effect said; and that's what millions of Christians and non-Christians believe about real Christianity.

But is this what Jesus believes? Would Jesus say what Santorum said? Is this what it means to be a real Christian: to say that you are a Christian; to identify with the church or affirm the truths of the Christian faith? Or is there something more to being real?

A Whole New Man

Certainly, if you look closely at what Paul says in Colossians 3:1-17, you'd have to agree that there's a whole lot more to being real than simply saying you're real. The Apostle Paul describes real Christians as those who've had something pretty remarkable happen to them; in fact, it almost sounds science-fiction it's so dramatic: real Christians have been raised with Christ (v. 1); they've already died with Christ (v. 3); their lives are now hidden with Christ (v. 3); and when Christ appears sometime in the future, they too will appear with him in glory (v. 4). It's as though the Bible describes a real Christian as *a radically new person*.

Little surprise, then, that Paul says to these real Christians this very thing just a few verses later: "*you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*" (vv. 9-10). If you're real, something dramatic has happened to you. You're no longer you—you're entirely new. And even though you continue to wrestle with the old you, you're nevertheless being transformed into a new you—a new image. You're being reformed, recreated, refashioned into someone else's image.

Whose image? Your Creator's image, who is Christ Jesus himself. "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (v. 11). A real Christian, then, is someone who's being molded into the image of Christ; so if you're real, you're going to look like Christ, be like Christ, have *Christ-likeness*.

The Whole Image upon You

Christ-likeness is one of the marks of a real Christian. Remember, you become real by receiving Christ. But you receive not part of Christ, but *the whole of Christ*. When you embrace Christ by faith, you receive the whole of who Christ is: not 20% or 80% but 100%. No one gets only a part of Christ; you either have him whole, or you don't have him at all.

¹ Chicago Tribune, Sunday, February 19, 2012, "Santorum bashes public schools," p. 25.

That's what Christ-likeness means: having *the whole image of Christ upon you*.² So, then, if you have all of Christ, you have his entire life living within you. Every grace that is his is now yours. Everything you see in him, you will see increasingly in you. Every grace he has, the fullness of his life, his whole image will be upon you, if you're real.

Real Christians are Christ-like: well-rounded, well-balanced. Just as we see in the life of Christ, so too you see in the life of a real Christian a beautiful symmetry and proportionality to their lives. They're not lopsided. When a real Christian looks at himself in the mirror, he doesn't see a grotesque and distorted figure whose life is all out of proportion or way off balance.

All the Graces in Perfect Harmony

Not-real Christians, on the other hand, tend to be strong in one or two of the Christian graces, but completely unfamiliar with the rest. They are morally and spiritually off-balance or lopsided. If you look closely at their life, it doesn't reflect the beautiful or well-balanced image of Christ; instead, what you see is something you'd find in a carnival mirror: a badly distorted image of the Savior, not the real thing.

We've all had the amusing experience of looking at ourselves in one of those carnival mirrors that distorts our appearance with its combination of concave and convex sections. It's an amusing experience and good for a few laughs—but only because you know it's not real. If it were real, you'd no doubt be crying rather than laughing.

Not-real Christians may feel strongly about God's justice and judgment, but care little about his mercy and grace. They may boast of having a strong assurance of God's salvation, yet have no hunger for more of God himself. They may claim to enjoy great intimacy with Christ, yet have no sense of the fear of the Lord. They may be passionate about the pursuit of holiness, yet know nothing of spiritual happiness. They may have zeal for the things of God, yet no patience for the ways of God. They may be bold in their crusade for Christ, yet indignant—rather than meek—at any affront to their own character. They may fiercely decry the moral ills of our world, yet fail to grasp the waywardness of their own heart. They may be incensed over hypocrisy in the church, yet harbor bitterness toward another Christian for months, or even years. They may be skilled at pointing out the idols in everyone else's life, yet hard pressed to admit the presence of a single idol in their own.

Real Christians, on the other hand, reflect the whole image of Christ in their lives and with their character. And remember how balanced Jesus was, how his life was filled with the full range of graces and virtues. He was meek before his accusers yet bold before Pharisees; he was compassionate toward the hurting yet forthright with the crowds; he was patient with his disciples yet turn tables over in the temple; he blasted hypocrisy yet humbly received scourging; he was eaten up with zeal for God yet would often slip away quietly to pray. Jesus Christ is both the lion and the lamb; you see in him a perfect combination of all moral virtues and excellencies. Not a single grace is missing; everything is there in the character of Christ.

So it will be for you, if you're real, if you have the *whole* image of Christ upon you. Not that you'll have every grace to the degree to which Christ had it; he was, of course, the *perfect* God-man, sinless in every respect. But nevertheless every grace you see in Christ, you will see at

² I owe this particular phrase to Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*.

least in seed-form in your own life precisely because, if you're real, Christ himself lives within you.

Different Issues

Real Christians reflect Christ-likeness not only in their character, but also in their thinking. They have the whole image of Christ not only upon their heart, but also upon their mind. There's a symmetry and balance to how they live and to how they think: what they think about, what concerns them, what they care about.

We've all heard of single-issue voters. But did you know there's such a thing as *single-issue Christians*? These are professing Christians who think there's only one—or at the most two—issues that any good Christian should care about; everything else is optional, if not able to be ignored. They've found some particular sliver of Christian truth and that's all they ever talk or think about; they've discovered the doctrine of election, or spiritual warfare, or speaking in tongues, or the love of God, and now they find that one truth under every single rock—and they want you to do the same too! If the Christian faith were like sixty-six keys on the piano, these types of not-real Christians only ever strike a single note, or at the most two. And, as you know if you've been around them, those one or two notes get not only old, but obnoxious after a while, if that's all you ever hear.

Are you a single-issue Christian? Do you care about one thing—and one thing only? Or at the most two? If so, you're probably lopsided, not reflecting the whole image of Christ with your mind.

Of course, there's a place for prioritizing Christian truth; and some of the Bible's teachings are more important than others. But if you're real, then you will have the mind of Christ in an ever-increasing way. And this means a mind submitted to the whole of Scripture, or what Paul calls "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Not this part only or that part only, downplaying or ignoring the rest; not so rightly dividing the word that you leave half of it on the cutting room floor. But you'll follow Charles Spurgeon's sound advice: "All revealed truth in harmonious proportion must be your theme."³

Different People

Having a balance to your character and to the ideas you grapple with and the issues that concern you—these are Christ-like qualities. But so, too, is being balanced with regard to your relationships: the people you interact with and relate to.

Real Christians aren't tribal; they're not cliquish; they don't show favoritism; they don't associate with only certain types of people, leaving aside the rest. That's a mark of not-real Christianity.

Some only like to spend time with other Christians; they don't have much of a heart for non-Christians. Some only like to be with the people they know—whether Christian or non-Christian doesn't much matter, as long as you know them; strangers are just that: strange! Others only like to be around people who look like them, or talk like them, or act like them;

³ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures*, "Sermons—Their Matter," p. 77-78.

sometimes Christians only connect with people who are the same age or the same background or share a similar life-stage.

You'll have to look long and hard to find anything like a tribal mentality in Jesus of Nazareth. He was a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19). He welcomed the poor and the needy; he invited children into his midst; he went out to heal the demon-possessed and yet could be found consulting with religious scholars. He gladly conversed with a Samaritan woman when no one else would (John 4). You see, you can't pigeonhole Jesus as someone who conversed with or cared about certain types of people. In this sense, his relationships were very unpredictable; he couldn't be pigeonholed.

How predictable are your relationships? Of course, there's nothing wrong with enjoying connecting with people similar to you; but that's a problem—and reveals a lack of Christ-likeness—when you relate *only* or *exclusively* to the same sorts of people.

You see, what Christ-likeness calls for is *hospitality toward others*. But, listen, it only becomes genuine *biblical hospitality* when you welcome people into your life who are *different from you*—for whom it's a bit of a stretch to enfold them graciously into your life. This was Paul's great burden for the church in Rome; it was on the verge of splintering into two groups because of a disagreement over cultural issues. He thus challenges them with the call to Christ-like hospitality: "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). Christ-likeness means being balanced in regard to the people you relate to—welcoming all kinds of different people into your life, even as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Different Circumstances

Finally, Christ-likeness means there's a beautiful symmetry and proportionality to who you are in different situations in life. You don't change with the changing of the seasons or the changing of the circumstances of your life.

I'm afraid Christian churches can be easily filled with fair-weather fans. These are Christians that act toward Christ like fair-weather fans act toward a particular team: they show up for the really big games like Christmas or Easter or a relative's baptism; and when God is doing well in their life, they're all on board. But when God is not delivering for them as they think he should, well, they then get off the bandwagon, and may even join another team.

Certainly, in sports, no one likes fair-weather fans; they're opportunistic; there's no loyalty. And to real fans, who are loyal and faithful through thick and thin, in the good seasons and the bad, those fair-weather fans aren't fans at all. They're groupies, not fans. They wear a Cubs baseball cap, but only because they live in Lincoln Park or on the North Shore.

Fair-weather Christians are precisely whom Jesus is talking about in his Parable of the Sower, when he describes both the second and third seeds that were sown. Both had the appearance of being real, but neither of them were. And how did it become evident that they weren't real? When the seasons or circumstances of life changed: when persecution and tribulation came for the one; or when the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches came for the other, they both fell away.

One of the beautiful things about Christ is that he doesn't change with the change of seasons or circumstances; he's no fair-weather fan. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and

forever” (Heb. 13:8). Nor are real Christians, who have the life of Christ living within them, fair-weather fans either. They don’t simply jump on the Jesus-bandwagon when it’s cool or convenient; or put on a God-jersey when they’re looking for a big win in life.

Instead, real Christians faithfully follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev. 14:4). They’re like that tree described in Psalm 1: “planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (vv. 3-4). They’re steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord their labor is not in vain, even when it feels or appears to be vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

Christ-likeness means saying with the Apostle Paul: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (Phil. 4:12). For you will have learned the secret to contentment in Christ, which also happens to be the key to Christ-likeness: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

Maturity in Christ Means Progress, Not Perfection

The burden of this message is to persuade you that real Christians are well-balanced. There’s a beautiful symmetry and proportionality to their moral and spiritual lives. They’re not lopsided, super-strong in one area, completely lacking in all the others.

But we need to remember that real Christians are also real people, with unique gifts and backgrounds and experiences and education and personalities and challenges and struggles and all the rest. And all of these different factors will inevitably make even a real Christian stronger in one way than another. The point is this: real Christians are balanced and well-rounded, but not perfectly so. Even if you’re real, you’re still a work-in-progress.

Conclusion

But remember, finally, that Christ-likeness is not about *you striving* to make it happen; it’s about *Christ living in you*, bringing his life to life within you. It’s about learning to say with the Apostle Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

It’s not about trying to live a good Christian life; it’s about *embracing by faith the exchanged life*—the life of Christ in you. Hudson Taylor understood this truth very well. He grappled with the secret of the exchanged life, until eventually spiritual light dawned in his heart and the Lord gave him insight into what became his spiritual secret:

As I thought of the Vine and the branches, what light the blessed Spirit poured direct into my soul! How great seemed my mistake in wishing to get the sap, the fullness out of him! I saw not only that Jesus will never leave me, but that I am a member of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. The vine is not the root merely, but all—root, stem, branches, twigs, leaves, flower, fruit. And Jesus is not that alone—he is soil and sunshine, air and showers, and ten thousand times more than we have ever dreamed, wished for or needed. Oh, the joy of seeing this truth! I do pray that the

eyes of your understanding too may be enlightened, that you may know and enjoy the riches freely given us in Christ.⁴

Jesus Christ died for your sins, and was raised for your salvation. He gave his life for you. And now you, with humble faith, can embrace this good news—his life in exchange for your life. And him then living within you: giving a beautiful symmetry and balance to your life, as you bear Christ's image and reflect Christ-likeness.

Amen.

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⁴ Taylor, *Spiritual Secret*, p. 136.