

LIVING AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIFE

by Ray Stedman

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What does it mean to live a real Christian life? According to pastor and author Ray Stedman, it isn't about about trying to live up to the teachings and example of Jesus. It's about a life-changing relationship with Christ—at the very core of our being.

In this excerpt of his classic bestseller *Authentic Christianity*, Stedman reflects on how the apostle Paul relied on such a heartfelt awareness for his own strength, and how he used it to encourage others.

This is the spiritual secret that can renew and refresh any of us as we also learn that we are not sufficient, in ourselves, for the real challenges facing us.

Mart De Haan

Managing Editor: David Sper

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THE REAL THING

It has always seemed unfair to me that many churches (and some individual Christians) keep careful records of 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 is that while they may be true Christians themselves, the life they manifest is false Christianity—as phony as a \$3 bill.

True, there is a false Christianity that 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 abandon the whole thing. But surely the most subtle stratagem ever devised by Satan to deceive and mislead people is that of causing 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 that 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 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:

Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted (Heb. 2:18).

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 (Heb. 4:15). To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps (1 Pet. 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 the Empire State Building or broad-jump 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,

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 (NRSV).

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” (NRSV). 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. He wrote, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”

(1 Cor. 11:1). 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 his 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 1½ 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) some of his teachings 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 OF AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

Paul's response to these charges is to describe for us the nature of his ministry. As we shall see, Paul's ministry bears five unmistakable qualities of Christianity that cannot be successfully counterfeited. These qualities have nothing to do with personality or temperament, so anyone who discovers the secret of authentic Christianity can attain them. They are timeless, so they are just as genuine now as in Paul's day.

We begin our journey of discovery in 2 Corinthians 2:14. Here we find the first three marks of authentic Christianity: "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." Let's examine the marks of authentic Christianity.

Mark #1: Unquenchable Optimism

The first mark is found in the very first phrase: “Thanks be to God.” One unmistakable evidence 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 resounds 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 evident in these passages is genuine and profound. 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 to paste 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 find any pleasure in them. But authentic Christianity does see the result being produced—not only in heaven someday, but right now here on earth. That result is so desirable and glorious, it is worth all the pain and heartache. That is why

it can do nothing *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 in 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 marks of authentic Christianity: unquenchable optimism and thanksgiving.

Mark #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 2:14, “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, struggles 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 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 every day for the cause of Christ. 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, we can never fail. Our will, our dreams, our goals, our desires may be thwarted—but God’s will and plan? Never! He can even weave our apparent 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.

The unquenchable optimism of genuine Christianity shines through chapter 1 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 to answer Jewish charges that could 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 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” (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” (v.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 handpicked 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 choosing 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 to get 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!

In this case, Nero had given orders that his imperial bodyguard should have charge of the apostle Paul. Every 6 hours, one of the future leaders of the Roman

Empire was brought in, chained to 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 was happening, 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" (Phil. 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 God's strategy—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 and totally unexpected.

Aided By Opposition. The strategies of God are so powerful, compared with human plans and strategies, that He is able to take 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.

I have learned to glimpse God's hand in these acts of opposition, and I now read missionary reports from a different perspective. 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 20 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 that 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” (Phil. 1:14). *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 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 20 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 that 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 always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ." It is an unmistakable mark of authentic Christianity.

Mark #3: Unforgettable Impact

The third unmistakable mark follows immediately. After saying, "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 Cor. 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?" (vv.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. Authentic Christianity leaves an *unforgettable impression* on those who encounter it. Christians are responsible for the enduring impact they make. As Paul suggests, the impact may be in one of two directions. Christians either increase opposition to Christ (death to death) or they lead toward faith and life (life to life). If your life is one that reflects radical, authentic Christianity, people become either bitter or better through 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 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 to 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's just a bad smell! You've certainly heard the old 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 #4: Unimpeachable Integrity

The fourth mark of genuine Christianity is found in 2 Corinthians 2:17: "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 that he considers attractive and that 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. I am troubled by anyone who is known only as a prophetic teacher, for that person 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.

Our integrity as authentic Christians is characterized by four qualities, according to this passage.

First Quality Of Integrity:

We speak “with sincerity.” In other words, we are to be honest

people. We must mean what we say. 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 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 Of Integrity:

Paul says we are “sent from God” or “commissioned by God” (RSV). This speaks of our *purpose* as authentic Christians. We are not to be idle dreamers with no definite objective in view. Like military officers, we have been commissioned. We have been given a definite task and specific assignments that 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 Of Integrity:

Paul says we do all this “before God” or “in the sight of God”

(RSV). 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 backseat of a car.

Fourth Quality Of Integrity:

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 that 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 chapters that belong together. The apostle has not finished his line of reasoning, so it's best to ignore the 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 Cor. 3:1).

Mark #5: Undeniable Reality

Paul is aware that he is beginning to sound arrogant. 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 because they saw him as continually praising himself, no one would believe him without 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 Cor. 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 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 (vv. 9-11). But now they had been washed, sanctified, and justified by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These changes validated Paul's message.

The Corinthians had written to Paul about their newfound joy and the hope and meaning that had been brought into their lives. They described to him their deliverance from shame and guilt, their freedom from fear and hostility, from darkness and death. 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 that cannot be explained by 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.

I once heard of a man 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 occurs only under the impulse of a powerful relationship that substitutes the love of Christ for the love of drink.

These 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 exposed as 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 all have

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 section.

THE SECRET

Turn on the radio or TV, and within minutes you'll be bombarded with advertising. Each of these commercials has a different look or a distinct sound, but all of them promise essentially the same thing: the secret of fulfillment, satisfaction, success, or happiness. You won't find the secret, however, by purchasing a product at the department store, taking a cruise, or calling a number at the bottom of your TV screen.

Don't despair! The secret *can* be found. It truly is available to

you. Paul talks about it in 2 Corinthians 2—and it's not for sale at any price. It is absolutely free!

THE SOURCE OF OUR SUFFICIENCY

Remember the five marks of authentic Christianity we just examined: unquenchable optimism, unvarying success, unforgettable impact, unimpeachable integrity, and undeniable reality. These marks came into focus for us as we read Paul's description of his own experience and ministry in 2 Corinthians 2. Yet Paul also raised an important question in that chapter—a question I deliberately bypassed in order to save it for now. After listing those marks of an authentic Christian, Paul asks the reader, “And who is equal to such a task?” (v.16).

Let's take that question very seriously. Try to answer it! Who, indeed, is equal to such a task? Who among us demonstrates the kind of unquenchable optimism, unvarying success, unforgettable

impact, unimpeachable integrity, and undeniable reality that is supposed to mark the life of an authentic Christian? Who is a consistent model of these qualities? Am I? Are you?

Are you equal to the task of continually, unfailingly, consistently manifesting a cheerful, confident spirit? An ability always to come out on top? A powerful, positive influence on others? Complete trustworthiness? And such a reliable, realistic demonstration of these qualities that no one is ever in doubt about them? Who is equal to such a task?

The question hangs in the air, waiting for an answer. Paul, however, does not leave us groping for an answer to his searching question. In 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 he gives us his forthright answer:

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a

new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

He puts the great secret before us in unmistakable terms: “This confidence is ours through Christ! Our sufficiency is from God!” Lest anyone miss the implications of that, he puts the same truth negatively: “Not that we are competent or sufficient in ourselves! No, our sufficiency comes from God alone.” Nothing coming from us; everything coming from God! That is the secret of secrets—the secret of true fulfillment, satisfaction, and success.

LIVE IT—DON'T WASTE IT

To live in this way, drawing our sufficiency from God, is what it means to be “competent as ministers of a new covenant.” He sharply contrasts this way of life with the old covenant, the dead written code, the “letter” that “kills.” To live with nothing coming from us and everything coming from God is to live in the

Spirit. The Spirit continually gives Life with a capital L. This is the secret that produced the confident spirit that characterized Paul and empowered him to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere he went. The language he uses reminds us immediately of the words of Jesus to His disciples: "I am the vine; you are the branches. . . . Apart from Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Neither Jesus nor Paul means to imply that no human activity is possible without reliance upon God. Both the world and the church are full of examples to the contrary.

But both Jesus and Paul teach that activity dependent upon human resources for its success will, in the end, accomplish nothing. It will have no permanent value. Men may praise it and emulate it, but God will count it for what it is—wasted effort. Just such a life is described in the plaintive question of T. S. Eliot:

All our knowledge brings us
nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance

brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death
no nearer to God.

Where is the life
we have lost in living?

Where, indeed? We are forced to honestly admit that we deliberately waste a good deal of our life in useless dreaming and profitless activity. But not all of it! At times we give it the old college try, sometimes we are earnest and serious and do our level best to act as we ought and do what we should. The results often appear very impressive to us, and even to others, but when we think of our approaching death, it all seems rather vain and futile. That's when we ask, "Where is the life we have lost in living?"

The apostle indicates that the secret of an effective, meaningful life lies in what he calls "the new covenant." Jesus referred to this "new covenant" when He passed the cup to His disciples at the institution of the Lord's Supper: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you" (Lk. 22:20). This cup, taken

with the bread, is to remind us of the central truth of our lives: Jesus died *for* us in order that He may live *in* us. His life in us is the power by which we live a true Christian life. That is the new covenant.

It is important to understand the meaning of the word *covenant*. There are, according to Paul, two covenants at work in human life. One is the new covenant, which Paul would describe as “nothing coming from me, everything from God.” This is in direct contrast to the old covenant, which could be described as “everything coming from me and nothing coming from God.” The root idea of covenant, both in Paul’s day and ours, is that of an agreement essential to all further relationship.

If two men go into business together, they form a partnership. The terms of their relationship are carefully spelled out so they will have a framework within which to work. Marriage is also a type of covenant in which a man and a woman agree to share all they have and to stick together against

all obstacles till death. Nations sign treaties with one another to determine the conditions under which they will work together. All these examples are forms of covenants, and it is apparent from these that a covenant is fundamental and essential to all human endeavor.

But the most fundamental covenant of all is the one that forms the basis of human life itself. We may not often think of it in this way, but no activity is possible to us that does not rest upon an underlying covenant. We could not talk, sing, walk, speak, pray, run, think, or breathe without that covenant. It is an arrangement made by God with the human race, whereby we are furnished the life and energy we need to perform what God wants us to do. We do not provide our own energy. We are dependent creatures, needing a constant supply from God the Creator in order to live and breathe.

Now the great thing that Paul declares to us in this passage—confirmed in both the Old and

the New Testaments—is that this fundamental arrangement for living comes to us in one of two ways. There is an “old” way that is linked inextricably with the Old Testament law of Moses—the written code, the “letter” which kills.

But through Jesus Christ, there is a “new” way that results in life that is unquenchably optimistic, is characterized by unfeigned success, makes an unforgettable impact, operates with unimpeachable integrity, and confronts the world with a testimony of undeniable reality. Having discovered the implications of this new covenant, the apostle finds himself qualified to live as God intended him to live, and it is through discovering these same implications for ourselves that we shall find ourselves qualified by God to live as God intends us to live today.

HOW PAUL FOUND THE SECRET

Since the apostle uses his own experience as the example of the

kind of life he has in view, it will be helpful to trace how he came to learn this transforming truth for himself. If you think it all came to him in that one dramatic moment in the dust of the Damascus Road when he discovered the true identity of Jesus Christ and yielded himself to His lordly claims, then you are far from the truth. It is true that Paul was born again at that moment; it is true that he understood for the first time that Jesus was indeed the Son of God; it is true that the center of this ardent young Pharisee’s life was forever changed from living for his own advancement to desiring the eternal glory of Jesus Christ. But it may be of great encouragement to many of us who struggle in the Christian life to learn that Paul also went through a period of probably 10 years after his conversion before he began to live in the fullness of the new covenant. And it was during this time that, from God’s point of view, he was an abject failure in living the Christian life!

We can piece together

from Acts 9 and several other Scriptures the full account of Paul's conversion experience and what happened to produce the tremendous change in his life. Here is a description of what took place after the experience of the Damascus Road:

Saul [Paul] spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" (Acts 9:19-21).

It is clear from these words that it all happened within a very few days after Paul's conversion and his baptism at the hands of Ananias. Paul began immediately, with characteristic vigor, to *proclaim* (herald, announce) the deity of Jesus ("He is the Son of God"). This truth he had learned in the glory of the light that flamed about him on the road to

Damascus. Then Luke, without giving any indication in the text whatever, goes on in his account to something that did not take place for at least several months after the above events and which may not have occurred for as long as 3 years afterward: "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ" (v.22).

Note that Paul's (or Saul's) message is here said to be in the form of "proving" that Jesus is the Christ. There is a great difference between *proclaiming* Jesus as the Son of God and *proving* that He is the Christ. Luke only hints at what made the difference in his phrase, "Saul grew more and more powerful," but Paul himself tells us in more detail what happened in his life. We find his description of that time in his letter to the Galatians.

FROM PROCLAIMING TO PROVING

Many scholars consider the Galatian letter to be the earliest

of Paul's epistles. Whether it is or not is uncertain, but it is clear that in it Paul defends his apostleship and describes what happened to him after his conversion. He writes:

When God, who set me apart from birth and called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus (Gal. 1:15-17).

We learn from this account that what served to greatly strengthen young Saul at this time was that he went away into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. What did he do in Arabia? Scripture doesn't tell us, but I don't think it is difficult to figure out. We need only imagine the shock to this young man's life that his conversion produced to realize that he desperately needed time to go back through the Old Testament Scriptures and learn

how his discovery of the truth about Jesus of Nazareth related to the revelation of the prophets which he had trusted ever since he was a child.

As a Pharisee and based on what he knew of the Scriptures, he had been convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a fraud. Now he knew better—yet somehow, somewhere, he must work out the mental confusion this new discovery produced in him. Arabia supplied the opportunity. So into Arabia he went, the scrolls of the Old Testament tucked under his arm. As we might well surmise, he found Jesus on every page. How the old, familiar passages must have glowed with new light as, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the Spirit of God interpreted to him the things that belonged to Jesus. It was no wonder that when he returned to Damascus he came “greatly strengthened.” And no wonder too that Paul went into the same synagogues, armed with his newfound knowledge, and began proclaiming for the first time that

Jesus is the Son of God. In the Jewish houses of worship, he turned from passage to passage of the Jewish Scriptures and “proved” (Greek: “to knit together”) that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah foretold by the Old Testament.

A BASKET CASE

Then things took a turn for the worse. To young Saul’s chagrin, the Jews of Damascus were not at all responsive to his powerful arguments. Luke tells us what happened:

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall (Acts 9:23-25).

What a burning humiliation to this dedicated young Christian! Paul had become—quite literally—a basket case! How confused and puzzled he must have been as all his dreams of

conquest in the name of Jesus were brought to this sudden and degrading halt. How humiliating to be let down over the wall in a basket like a common criminal escaping from the reach of the law! How shameful, how discouraging! Once over the wall, he slips off into the darkness of the night, bewildered, humiliated, and thoroughly discouraged. He stated later that it was both the lowest point in his life and the beginning of the greatest discovery he ever made.

Where does he go from there? Luke tells us immediately, “When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (v.26). Paul’s own account agrees with this exactly: “Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:18-19). How he managed to break through the fear barrier to see these two men is given us by Luke:

Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him (Acts 9:27-29).

It is a familiar pattern. Once again the ardent young Christian is determined to persuade the Greek-speaking Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Once again a plot against his life is set in motion. It is the Damascus story all over again.

GET OUT!

At this point there occurs another gap in Luke's account that we must fill in from Paul's own account elsewhere. Luke does not tell us young Saul's reaction to the opposition he received when he

preached to the Jerusalem Jews. But knowing his ambitious and dedicated heart, it must have been one of severe discouragement. Years later, he mentioned this event in his great defense to the Jerusalem mob when he was arrested in the temple precincts and saved from certain death only by the timely intervention of the Romans. In Acts 22 he tells us, "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' He said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about Me' " (vv.17-18).

It is surely understandable that young Saul would seek the comfort of the temple at this discouraging moment. Again his efforts to bear a convincing witness for Christ had failed, once again men were seeking to find an opportunity to kill him, and he had no positive results with which to encourage himself. No wonder he went into the temple to pray. And there, to this discouraged disciple, the Lord

Jesus appeared—yet His message was anything but encouraging. “Get out of Jerusalem,” said Jesus. “They will not receive your testimony concerning Me.” At this point Saul began to argue with Jesus: “ ‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him’ ” (Acts 22:19-20).

In these words Saul gave himself away. We can now see what he was depending on for success in his witnessing efforts. It is apparent that he saw himself as the one person who was eminently qualified to reach the Jews for Christ. His argument says in effect, “Lord, You don’t understand this situation. If You send me out of Jerusalem You are going to miss the opportunity of a lifetime. If anyone understands how these Jews think and reason, it is me. I was one of them. I speak their language. I know how they react.

I understand their background. I too am an Israelite, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin. I was a Pharisee like they are. I walked before the law blameless. I even persecuted the church, as they are now doing. Why, when the martyr Stephen was killed, I even kept the garments of those who murdered him! Lord, don’t send me away. I have what it takes to reach these men. Don’t miss this opportunity!”

Jesus’ answer is abrupt and to the point. Paul tells us himself, “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles’ ” (Acts 22:21). What a shattering blow! How crushed young Saul must have been! But to indicate how the church agreed with the Lord at this point, Luke tells us, “When the brothers learned of this [the plot to kill Saul], they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus” (Acts 9:30).

Tarsus was Paul’s hometown. There is no tougher place to go as a Christian than back home.

Paul had tried his best to serve his newfound Lord with all the ability and energy he could muster. But it amounted to exactly nothing. In fact, at this point, Luke records a rather astonishing thing after Paul's exile to Tarsus: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" (Acts 9:31).

The record shows that at first the apostle Paul was not so much the dynamic history-changing missionary he later became. No, initially the apostle Paul was really something of a "consecrated blunderer"! In his earnest, fervent, good-hearted way, he went about preaching the gospel and stirring up all kinds of anger and hostility among the Jews! When this "dedicated disputer" was eliminated—sent away to his hometown of Tarsus—the church finally had peace! It began to grow! Isn't that amazing?

Saul goes off to Tarsus to nurse his wounds, his ego shattered and

his plans dissolved in despair. For 10 years he is not heard of again—not until an awakening breaks out in Antioch of Syria and the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas down to investigate. When Barnabas finds "a great number of people [are being] brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24), he knows help is needed.

In verses 25-26, we read, "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." It was a different Saul who came to Antioch with Barnabas. Chastened, humbled, and taught by the Spirit, he began to teach the Word of God. And from there he launched into the great missionary thrust that would eventually take him to the limits of the Roman Empire, spreading the gospel with explosive force throughout the world.

ARE YOU A BASKET CASE?

What made the difference? Writing to the Corinthians many years later, Paul makes one brief reference to the event that triggered a line of teaching that would culminate in a clear understanding and acceptance of what he came to call “the new covenant.” The Corinthian church had written to Paul and brazenly suggested to him that he would be more effective if he would boast once in awhile in his accomplishments. To this the apostle replied: “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying” (2 Cor. 11:30-31).

What he is going to say will be such a shock to them that he takes a solemn vow that he is telling them the truth, otherwise they may think he is joking or playing with them. Then he tells them what his boast is: “In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes

guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands” (vv.32-33).

“That,” says Paul, “is my boast. That is the greatest event of my life since my conversion. When I became a basket case, then I began to learn the truth that has changed my life and explains my power.” What was that life-changing truth? Let Paul put it in his own words, from his letter to the Philippians:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I

have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (3:4-8).

The word he uses for “consider them rubbish” refers to common, barnyard dung. What he once regarded as qualifying him to be a success before God and men (his ancestry, his orthodoxy, his morality, and his activity) he now regards as so much manure compared to depending upon the working of Jesus Christ within him. He has learned how to shift from the old covenant (everything coming from me, nothing coming from God) to the new covenant (nothing coming from me, everything coming from God), which gives life. He is no longer highly qualified to be utterly useless but is able to say: “My sufficiency is from God, who has qualified me to be a minister of a new covenant.”

Have you become a basket case yet? Have you reached that place which Jesus described as “blessed”? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” To be “poor in spirit”

is to be utterly bankrupt before some demand of life, and then to discover it to be a blessing because it forced you to depend wholly upon the Lord at work in you. That is where you learn the truth of the new covenant, and nowhere else.



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