

January 8, 2017

Authentic Christianity
Authentic Christianity
Acts 2:37-42

Opening Words: My nephew Aaron lives in the Seattle area. He is bi-vocational. He manages a coffee shop and he pastors a church that he founded several years ago. His church is called *The Table*. It is not a large membership church. It is a small membership church. It is a "house church." They meet in one another's homes weekly. On an average Sunday, they have approximately twelve worshippers. The goal of his church is not to become a megachurch. The goal of his church is to produce authentic Christian people. Much like early Methodism, the members of *The Table* hold one another spiritually accountable. Once a month, instead of worshipping, the church helps the needy in their area. It is their way of living out the faith. I am proud of Aaron because he is following God's calling.

My conversation with Aaron made me think about us. Webster defines authentic as: genuine or real; not false or copied. The issue of being authentic is important. Our world will tolerate many things, but our world will not tolerate a fraud. It is true in the secular world and it is true in the church. It is not enough to know the words of the creeds; we must live a life worthy of Jesus. In the life of the church, there is no room for hypocrites. We must be authentic Christians. This is my question for you: How authentic are you?

Today, I begin a new eight-part sermon series called *Authentic Christianity*. True Christianity is life-altering. It should be affecting your behavior and opinions. Each week we will look at a different Christian characteristic that should be present in your life. At the close of this series, you will be able to answer the question, how authentic are you? This morning's message is an overview of the seven messages to come. Let me call this message, *Authentic Christianity*. Our scripture reading is Acts 2:37-42.

Acts 2:37-42 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Yesterday, I received a sad email. It was written by a high school friend, who also went into the ministry. He wanted me to know our former pastor had died in Richmond, Kentucky. His name was Jim Cox. I remember him as being a tall thin man with an Adam's apple sticking out over the knot of his tie. He was born and raised in Paint Lick, Kentucky and had a wonderful accent from that corner of the world. I don't remember him as a great preacher or leader. I don't remember him as a great visionary or administrator. However, I will always remember him as the finest pastor I have ever known. Dr. Cox had an authentic Christian faith. He had all the fruits of the spirit. He was just so kind, patient and genuine. Jim Cox taught me how to be a pastor. I called his daughter, who graduated from high school with me. I told her what I should have told him: "He changed my life." He changed my life because he was so authentic. Pope Francis once said, *"Authentic faith has a deep desire to change the world!"* This is my question for you today: How much is your faith changing you? I find some truth in that quote. If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Our sermon series begins in the second chapter of Acts. You know that chapter. It is one of the great chapters in the Bible. Fifty days earlier, Jesus was resurrected. For the next forty days, he proved to the world that his was a bodily resurrection and taught about the Kingdom of God. At the close of that forty-day period, He ascended into heaven. However, before he left, he instructed the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came to them. Jesus's words came true. On the day of Pentecost, the Hebrew holiday to celebrate the harvest, the Holy Spirit did come and transformed the disciples. Once clueless and confused, the disciples were transformed into spiritual lions. Peter, The Rock, became the leader of the twelve. It was he who preached the first sermon and told the onlookers about God's plan of salvation for the world. The pivotal person in that plan was Jesus. His death on the cross made it possible for all to be saved. When Peter completed his first sermon, the people were overwhelmed. They were not sure how to respond to this message, so Peter told them what to do. They must repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. Doing so, two things will happen. First, their sins will be forgiven. Second, they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter's altar call was successful. Three thousand were added to God's movement, the church, that day. Each one of them devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread (Communion), and to prayer. The world would never be the same again. If any of that sounds familiar, say, **"Amen!"**

Peter was the perfect messenger on that day because he was so authentic. Because of his passion for Jesus, he had the right words and behavior. No one could question his authenticity. Two-thousand years later, much has changed, but one thing remains the same. The Holy Spirit is still using authentic Christian people to change the world. Authentic Christian people are still God's greatest witnesses in the world. Our society will tolerate many things, but it will not tolerate a hypocrite. That is especially true in the life of the church. You know it is true. In our time, the institutional church has been crippled by spiritual hypocrites. We have come to the point in history where we must be

on guard. Every day is a test. The world is watching us. They are both listening to and watching everything we do. They want to know if we are spiritual frauds, or truly authentic. Let me ask you this question:

Your Words

If you were evaluated only on your words, would you be judged a spiritual fraud, or an authentic Christian? On the day of Pentecost, Peter was a powerful, effective, convincing witness because of what he said. We have spoken about this in the past. Words are important! Words can excite or depress. Words can make us glad, mad or sad. Words can motivate us or crush us. Words are important! How many examples do you need?

Last Sunday, I was in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I had officiated at a wedding on New Year's Eve. The bride was Donna Blyler's granddaughter, Carly. It was a wonderful weekend. The venue was wonderful. The people were wonderful. The weather was even wonderful. We didn't just celebrate the union of Carly and her husband Brian. It was a celebration of family and lives well-lived to this point. I guess there are not any ministers in Michigan ☺, so the family arranged for Kathryn and me to come. The wedding started at 5:30 and was completed by 6:00. It was only thirty minutes, but it was an important thirty minutes to Carly and Brian. They said *words* that changed their lives. Ask the bride and groom, Carly and Brian. They will tell you words are important!

On January 20, President-Elect Donald Trump will be sworn into office. I don't know how you feel about Donald Trump, but one thing is true. When you go to bed on January 20, Donald Trump will be your President. The highlight of the day is not the parade and the parties. It is not the entertainment or the celebrities. The highlight of the day is the oath. With those *words*, Donald Trump will become the forty-fifth President of the United States of America. Don't tell me words aren't important!

Words are important to your Christian witness too. I am not just talking about your ugly profanity. Those words only make you look small and ignorant. I am talking about your words and what they communicate about your feelings about other people. Do your words push people away and belittle? Or, do your words encourage and welcome? Authentic Christians pick their words carefully. Authentic Christians know words are important. Authentic Christians select words that bring the best out of everyone.

When Catherine Booth, the co-founder of the Salvation Army, died, her body was taken to a large auditorium in London. For hours, people passed by her casket to pay their final respects. One man spoke for many. He said, *"She spoke to me like no other. I knew she cared for me in the way she spoke to me. I was an outcast, lonely and lost and she accepted me. You could feel the spirit and love of Christ in her words."*

The world is listening to your words. What are you saying about your authenticity? Never forget it - words are important! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Let me ask you a second question:

Your Behavior

If you were evaluated only on your behavior, would you be judged a spiritual fraud, or an authentic Christian? When the Holy Spirit came it fell on many different kinds of people. In the part of the chapter that precedes our reading, the different nationalities are listed. If you had a map, then you would discover the nations mentioned were scattered throughout their world. All of them were there. All of them were welcomed. All of them were included. Not one nation was excluded. Authentic Christian people include everyone. Do you include everyone?

Several years ago, Lois Wyse wrote an article for *Good Housekeeping* magazine. She wanted to help women who were looking for a potential husband. She said you should consider these six things when looking for a mate:

1. Watch him drive in heavy traffic
2. Play tennis with him
3. Listen to the way he talks to and about his mother
4. Notice how he treats those who serve him (waiters, ushers, maids, etc.)
5. Notice how he spends his money
6. Look at his friends

There is a common thread that runs through all six. Each one has to do with how we treat other people. I have said it a million times. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Everyone has been made in the image of God. Nothing else matters. Age doesn't matter. Income doesn't matter. Race doesn't matter. Nationality doesn't matter. Sexuality doesn't matter. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. The point is simple, but many struggle with it. Authentic Christians get it. They treat everyone with dignity and respect. If you were evaluated only on your behavior, would you be judged a spiritual fraud, or an authentic Christian? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

On November 7, 2016, Billy Graham celebrated his ninety-eighth birthday. He has had an incredible life. He is an ordained Southern Baptist preacher, who reached celebrity status back in 1949. His messages resonated with middle-class moderately conservative Protestants. My grandmother and father agreed on nothing, but they both admired Billy Graham. Until Graham retired in 2005, he hosted the annual Billy Graham Crusades, proclaiming the Gospel to the multitudes. I have no clue how many souls were enlightened during his crusades. Yet, he didn't stop there. He was the spiritual adviser to American presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon.

He also became friends with Martin Luther King. He insisted on integration at his crusades. He invited King to preach at his New York crusade in 1957. Several years later, he bailed King out of jail after he was arrested at a demonstration. Still later, Graham became friends with Robert Schuller, of Crystal Cathedral fame. He encouraged him to try television. Billy Graham has lived an incredible life in the spotlight. Yet, he has escaped controversy. There is no other way to say it. Billy Graham, 98 years young, is an authentic Christian man. Everyone knows his passion, Jesus! The Master influenced Graham's words and his behavior. Let me ask you the question one more time.

How authentic are you? How much of a difference has Jesus made in your life? Is he influencing your words? Remember, words are important! Is he influencing your behavior? God loves and includes everyone. Don't forget the words of Pope Francis, "*Authentic faith has a deep desire to change the world!*" How much is your faith changing you?