

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY THE EMERGENT CHURCH (PART 1)

Sunday June 29, 2008

Reading: Titus 1:1-2:2

The post-modern church is in search of authenticity. It seems an authentic encounter with God is something our contemporary culture is searching for and the church in our culture is no exception. Many of those who call themselves Christians in our society are finding it difficult to nail down a process for evangelizing and for organizing in such a rapidly changing world. In fact, it is precisely this need to 'nail down' anything that is being tossed. We have come to a place where many will query truth itself as though absolute truth cannot be known, it can only be interpreted from the subjective standpoint from which an individual was brought up, the experiences and education he has had, and the intellectual compartment he now resides in. I remember Machen's assessment of the difference between what we might call genuine Christianity and Liberalism in regards to how we regard truth itself. He said essentially, challenging the Christian claim that revealed truth can be known, and lived, and taught, that the opinion of the liberal interpreter of the Bible is that we cannot know truth - we can only know what we think about the truth. One leader in the so-called emergent church movement says that we must strive from the absolute to the authentic. Authenticity is approached, in the words of one author on the subject as, "taking into account contemporary emphases on tolerance; it means not telling others they are wrong." I, for one, am prompted to ask of him, "Are we to presume then that the Apostle Paul should take back his words to the pagan Athenians where he preached: "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent"? (Acts 17:30).

For many of these post-modern thinkers who for any number of reasons have rejected traditional forms of churches and worship, even some of the most recent seeker-friendly approaches to these things, there is a new reformation afoot. For them it is increasingly necessary to protest existing methods of evangelism, existing beliefs regarding order and morality in the church and in society at large. They query everything from gathering in church buildings to preaching as the primary form of disseminating spiritual truths, to churches being led by pastors, as though every member's intellectual understanding of Christ and salvation is equally valid, and given equal time to be heard. Indeed every liturgical form, even order itself among people gathered for worship is troubling for them and deemed somehow too subjective, too autocratic, too hierarchical, too passe, and therefore inauthentic.

Worship meetings must be multi-sensory because that is the way to engage new converts who have been raised on searching the Web. There is a not so new emphasis on individuality and individual expression, expression of doubts, fears, anger, and acceptance. And though the emergent spokesmen would be reluctant to admit it, there seems to be a newer, stronger emphasis on a me-centered gospel that is not so different from its predecessor the 'seeker friendly' movement, both which seem to presume that God is there to respond to me, to respond primarily to my felt needs, but also to my moods. There is a curious implication that an authentic Savior must take me as I am, and be concerned about the very specific things with which I am now concerned, even if it is my habit to drastically change concerns often. One such leader wrote this: "And yet as I sat there fuming, a strange thing happened. I felt like I could see Jesus standing there asking to come and be with me. In my anger I refused. I could barely even look at him. Still, there he stood. When I finally relented, he sat down next to me and gently wrapped his arms around me. He didn't say anything; he just held me in my pain. In that moment, I realized that God could handle severe honesty. Authenticity, in all its messiness, is not offensive to him. there is room for doubt and anger and confusion. There was room for the real me." Spencer Burke

quotations from D.A. Carson, *Conversant with the Emergent Church*

"He didn't say anything," he writes. So the incarnate Word, in the estimation of these innovators, had nothing to say. I would point out here that though I believe that God can "handle" "authenticity" in any of its forms, that what the writer is here expressing is his sin. It is sin not to want God near, even though many of us in a moment of anger may feel such a thing. However, sin is always offensive to God, even though our doctrine will confirm that He can and did handle it. He describes a closeness with Jesus that is non-

verbal, a strange new attribute of the Savior that is described as the Word become flesh, and who said such things as My word is life, My word is truth, My word is health to the bones and healing to the flesh, My word is a lamp unto the feet and a light unto your path. What we are seeing is an exchange here. We might go so far as to say exchanging the truth for the lie, but certainly we can go as far as to say that this new brand of Christianity is saying that we are now the ones who need to put forth our words, and Jesus is the one who needs to listen - if he intends to make himself authentic.

What we have here is a disillusioned, perhaps burned out church leader. And though we may have great sympathy for his condition we may also question his conclusions regarding the nature of Christ and his approach to ministry. Another such treatment of the Savior is to say that our relationship with Him is one of mutual edification, He, as well as we are taught, inspired, and edified, in the interchange between us. We read: "In such dialogue we may learn things, as Peter does in Acts 10-11. Similarly Jesus learns from his interchange with the Syro-phoenician woman." Presumably Jesus, as well as Peter, learned that true faith and the gospel are pluralistic - such things are for other than ethnic Jews, and so our pluralistic culture, like the culture of the Syro-phoenician woman has much of which to inform our Savior.

A final characteristic of the new search for authentic Christianity, presumably the authentic Christ, is that it is dedicated to being amorphous, hard to define or pin down, and that is its great strength. It is able to adapt to a constantly changing culture. This characteristic is perhaps best understood by the philosophy behind the creation of Ooze.com, a chat room where "the various parts of the faith community are like mercury. At times we'll roll together; at times we'll roll apart. Try to touch the liquid or constrain it, and the substance will resist. Rather than force people to fall into line, an oozy community tolerates differences and treats people who hold opposing views with great dignity. To me, that's the essence of the emerging church." And yet we read today's text from the inspired prophet of God, His self-described bondservant, who beheld Him in His resurrected state and was given a charge to preach Him to the Gentiles. The Jesus that Paul met on the road did not simply hold him tight and listen to his story, a story which almost certainly would have been about his authoritarian parents who insisted he attend Pharisee school, who determined to teach him to hate his fellow citizens who were pagan, and surely contributed to his hatred of God's elect among the new sect of Judaism called Christians. It wasn't his fault he hated them. It was his parent's fault, his bigoted society's fault. All this poor mass murderer of Christians wanted to do was to kill for God's sake and to be understood by a compassionate, sympathetic, non-judgmental, authentic savior. And yet, what did the Savior do but accuse this poor murderous villain of persecuting Him and then, rather than listen to his life's story the Savior went to another man and said of Paul: "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My sake (Acts 9.16)." What tyrannical person could demand more suffering of such a good man who had already suffered so much at the hands of his demanding parents and an unscrupulous society? And yet we read from Paul to Titus:

v.1.1-3. "Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, but has in due time manifested His word through preaching...." A starting point for understanding the basic truths of these verses would be to agree that such a statement is primarily for those who walk in hope of eternal life with God. We should recognize at the outset that many, multitudes in fact, have had what may be called an authentic encounter with Jesus who neither had, nor attained such a hope. There are many who may be said to have had a relationship with Jesus who will writhe in hell for eternity. I suggest to you that Pilate and Herod are such men. Both had some kind of encounter with Christ which may hardly be termed inauthentic, yet both chose not to let their respective relationships with Him be on His terms, but on theirs, and both have paid the price for their insistence. Judas is such a man. A number of ancient Gadarenes chased this 'pig-hating' Messiah from their land. A rather large and prestigious contingent of Pharisees encountered Him in a very authentic way, and received from Him a new title 'sons of the devil' He called them. There is at least one poor crucified thief who wishes that his authentic encounter had gone differently with the Savior. And I will suggest to you that there are multitudes since who sincerely wish, now that it is too late, that they did not try to mold or redefine the Son of God who incidentally has no stated or implied intention to accept anyone as they are, but blessed those who humbly submitted to receive Him as He is, though they themselves might have been haggard and heinous sinners. He came to redeem them and to remake them. And this process may hardly be improved

upon by man in any age or any culture, by any human scheme, or technological advancement. In fact I grow weary of any new development in ministry that presumes to call itself new, while it is transparently nothing more than a denial of the design and mandate of our Creator for the church, and a willing blindness to seeing ourselves as primarily sinful and self-serving, even while we attempt to hide behind a veil of making Christ more accessible to our poor blind culture that we ourselves may be all too fond of. Sounds like a church led by Lot's wife, you might say a church who's salt has lost its flavor. Personal significance, I suspect, lurks behind almost every protest of traditional norms and practices. The movement has no hope of authentically reaching our culture because it is steeped in defining the whole culture in the terms of a whimsical youthful sub-culture. We still live in a society where 20 percent of our citizens have never logged on to the internet and where a major elderly presidential candidate openly professes computer illiteracy, saying he lets his wife handle those things. Where the spiritual innovators of today are crying "cater to the young the hope of eternity", Paul cries to Titus "appoint elders in every city. Instead of claiming to be the authority on how young people do act, the Word of God proclaims how young people should act. Now we can be sensitive to all these observations and make compromises and changes on how the church should operate, but the question will then become who's church are we? Indeed that is always the question. There have been countless new blueprints and only one and enduring old blueprint, and I am betting that when our Savior comes for us He will not be impressed so much with innovation as with conservation. Which is perhaps why the apostle said to a pagan city "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. Now I praise you, brethren that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you (I Cor.11.1,2)."

The sappy sentimentalism of these poor disillusioned church leaders are little more than the dissatisfied remnants of the 'me generation', and their goal is to inject self importance into salvation. Friends, God does care for our needs so that we who trust in Him ought to be anxious for nothing, but in everything, through prayer and supplication may pour ourselves out to Him. But He is no mere listener. He has spoken. And He tends to speak in commandments. He is big on organization as our text tells us. He majors on organizing the church in direct accord with His design for the human family. He is concerned with gender roles such as mother, wife, and sister. He commands men to selflessness, thinking of others as greater than themselves. We are to organize our lives around the worship of our great God, and we are to worship Him in a way that this great Designer desires to be worshiped. Human innovation, to Him, is usually seen as a statement of our dissatisfaction with His design. He sees our suggestions as implying His inadequacy to design and to demand. Yet when we submit to Him we may expect Him to descend with His spiritual presence upon us. I am at a loss to understand why church order and organization are always at issue when leaders become disillusioned. Rather than question the authenticity of the culture they question the authenticity of the church. I see God's church as inauthentic and insincere as well. But unlike a culture that is addicted to self-esteem, and self-fulfillment, and self-image, and self-improvement, the church has the tools to advance itself in God's sight. When we fail to communicate, fail in compassion, fail in competence, it is because we have given-in to culture not because we need more of it. When we fail in evangelism it because we have failed to affect the culture, to be a light to this dying world, not because we failed to emulate the latest trends and to become part of this amorphous indefinable cultural ooze. How is it that Christianity, which from the beginning was self-described as counter-cultural being persecuted by and an offense to prevailing cultures, now has this new mission to downgrade to cultural standards? What did Peter mean in his time when he said: "Be saved from this perverse generation? (Acts 2.40)" How does any Christian conclude that the latest trends in information gathering and entertainment have much of which to inform the Church who from the beginning has had a divinely appointed access to the Word of God?

The whole concept of Sabbath is that the experience is qualitatively different from the other six days of your worldly experience. If you watch a sunset does it set with greater visual stimuli because we are a new cyber-generation who looks at beauty differently? If you go to the beach does the tide come in with a click of a mouse with the exact intensity that you desire at the moment? When you sit by a brook to pray does it babble at the precise decibel that you desire? Do the birds chirp in more pleasant tones because the culture has changed? No! Yet the heavens still declare the glory of God and the firmament still shows His handiwork. What these pretenders want is a virtual church, a church where what is on the screen is what we have

conjured up in the moment and in the mood with which we desired. All this emphasis on importing cultural trends into worship and teaching is little more than that ancient rebellion against God which exalts the glory of man. It is little more than eating of that which is forbidden, building towers to an imaginary God, claiming that God's appointed authorities do not have our best interest at heart because they will not excuse our latest sin or accept that our latest rant is worthy of their attention.

And then as now the true church of God will conform, not to the latest trend of perverse cultural ignorance, but to the oldest trend, that God in His mercy spoke to us, in words, inspired the prophets to record them, gave gifts to men to impart them, and faith to a dying race to love them and obey them and to know that when they hear them they hear the very voice of omnipotent God and are thankful that they have indeed arrived, and that knowing when they do stray He will gather them again, and they will again be thankful, and again know the truth of today's text which says that God's elect will be found "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict (v.9)."

Lakeville Christian Fellowship
Lakeville, Massachusetts
Daniel Casieri and William Kujanpaa, Elders
Russell Protentis, Deacon