

AUTHENTIC
CHRISTIANITY



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Authentic Christianity

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The desire of believers to display real faith through appropriate action is rooted in the witness of Scripture and exemplified in Christian history. Jesus Christ asked this haunting question of those who wished to identify themselves as His disciples: “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” The Lord proceeded to illustrate the difference between two types of disciples with an architectural metaphor. One disciple comes to Christ, hears His words, “and acts on them.” This one is praised as having penetrated to “the rock”¹ and built his house upon Him. This one is an authentic disciple, manifesting his beliefs in action. The second type, however, hears the Lord’s words, “and has not acted accordingly.” The second disciple is not founded upon the rock, so that when judgment comes, “the ruin of that house was great.”² The second disciple is a hypocrite, a person whose actions do not match his claims. These are the two disparate options present to those who hear Christ: authentic discipleship or hypocrisy.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus employs an agricultural metaphor to make a similar point, proceeding one step further by demonstrating that the ability to be authentic is itself grace in action. The Father is the “vinedresser,” His Son is the “vine,” and the Son’s disciples are the “branches.” If a disciple would live, he must abide in communion with the vine, for love, the divine gift of life, moves through Him. The vinedresser will prune His branches to help them grow properly and produce good fruit. The production of fruit, or good works, naturally occurs as part of the flow of life from within the vine. If a branch does not abide in the vine and produce the fruit of loving obedience, it will be treated appropriately as refuse for condemnation.³ Divine love, expressed in the flood of divine grace through Christ, has determined human fruitfulness in good works to be the proper expression of the faithful reception of divine grace. In Christ’s theological system, if we dare describe Jesus’ teaching thus, there is no contradiction between grace and good works, for divine love empowers human obedience.

The authentic Christianity that Jesus taught has often had to reassert

¹A prophetic reference to the Messiah; Isa 8:14.

²Luke 6:46–49. Unless otherwise noted all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

³John 15:1–11.

itself against deceptive alternatives in the history of the churches. One major theological error that has opposed itself to authentic Christianity is works-righteousness. This error seeks not so much the exhibition of good works as a result of salvation, but the identification of those good works as the basis for justification before God. A second major theological error that has opposed itself to authentic Christianity is antinomianism. This error seeks to preserve the basis of justification in grace, but through the denial that good works are a necessary fruit of the Christian life. Each error originates in a theological shortcoming. Works-righteousness forgets that salvation is by grace through faith apart from good works. Antinomianism forgets that justification must be accompanied by regeneration, the divine transformation of human life that issues forth in good works. If works-righteousness is the besetting error of medieval Christianity with its sacerdotal economy of salvation, antinomianism in its doctrinal and ethical forms is the insidious error lurking at the door of evangelical Christianity.

Outstanding exemplars of authentic Christianity may be found in every period of Christian history, perhaps most poignantly in the lives of many martyrs in the early church, of many so-called “heretics” in the Middle Ages, and of the biblicistic Anabaptists in the Reformation. However, authentic Christianity is not the preserve of the distant past, as seen in the thought and life of the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the twentieth century or in the rising desire for “radical” Christianity today. Expressions of authentic Christianity in both Scripture and history are considered in the following essays, but we focus here upon an English Reformer.

In his groundbreaking study of Thomas Cranmer, Ashley Null treats the sixteenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury and author of the Book of Common Prayer as a major theologian in his own right, who should not be overshadowed (as is too often the case with elementary histories) by Martin Luther or the continental Reformed. Drawing from the medieval scholastic and liturgical tradition, as well as Renaissance humanism and the writings of the continental reformers, Cranmer wrestled with the problem of grace and good works. Cranmer fully embraced the Reformation understanding of justification as the extrinsic righteousness of Jesus Christ that is applied to the believer through the gift of faith apart from works. However, he did not stop with that essential truth. Rather, in “the moment” in which God applies the righteousness of Christ in justification, His Holy Spirit renovates the human being. “Through the gift of saving faith, the ungodly received pardon. However, concomitant with pardon, the justified received a renewed will to love which enabled them to lead a new life pleasing to God.”⁴

In other words, the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone may not be sundered, theologically or

⁴Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 178–79. Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996) will long remain the standard theological biography.

experientially, from the biblical doctrine of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, which entails a transformed will that ensues in good works. Cranmer holds at bay the pernicious errors of works-righteousness and antinomianism simultaneously through recognizing that salvation is the concurrent work of the one God through His Son and His Spirit in the distinct but contemporaneous acts of justification and regeneration. Justification no longer remains alone as the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. Rather, “if the profession of our faith of the remission of our own sins enter within us into the deepness of our hearts, then it must needs kindle a warm fire of love in our hearts towards God, and towards all other for the sake of God.”⁵ Luther’s necessary claim for justification is balanced by Cranmer’s equally necessary claim for repentance through a life of true discipleship.

This volume is dedicated to a biblical, historical, and systematic presentation of such expressions of authentic Christianity. Five young theologians were commissioned to write the following essays, and each expresses a profound desire to live for Christ genuinely. Their superb contributions include a theological interpretation of suffering in Hebrews, a historico-systematic presentation of radical voices from the Anabaptists to Bonhoeffer to today, an evangelical-free church critique of emerging church hermeneutics, a call to entertainment-soaked Christians to recover a biblical approach to recreation, and a dynamic sermon on seeing Jesus clearly from the Gospel of Mark. In addition to these younger theologians, we have included a profound review essay, on God’s “abandonment” of His Son at the cross, from a mature hand. Gerardo Alfaro demonstrates how theological interpretation should read Scripture subtly and the history of interpretation critically. Gratitude is expressed to Madison Grace particularly for helping commission the essays below and generally for his expert assistance in the continual production of this journal.

⁵Thomas Cranmer, “Corrections of *The Institution of a Christian Man*, by Henry VIII,” cited in Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance*, 25.