

Authentic Religion

by J.C. Ryle

Authentic religion is genuine, sincere, and thorough, not mere show or pretense, and we must be careful lest our Christianity turn out to be merely nominal, formal, unreal, and inferior.

Scripture: Jeremiah 6:30, Matthew 7:22-23, Matthew 23:33, Mark 11:13, Luke 8:13, Acts 8:21, Romans 10:10, Philippians 2:12, 1 John 3:18, Revelation 3:1

Topics: "Authenticity in Faith", "True Christianity"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the critical need for authenticity in religion, warning against the prevalence of hollow and counterfeit faith in contemporary society. He defines authentic religion as genuine, sincere, and deeply rooted in the heart, contrasting it with superficial expressions of faith that lack true substance. Ryle provides tests to evaluate the authenticity of one's faith, urging believers to examine their feelings towards sin, Christ, and the fruits of their lives. He concludes with a call to action, encouraging individuals to seek a true relationship with Christ and to be authentic in their Christian walk, as only genuine faith will endure the test of time and judgment.

Transcript

"Rejected silver" (Jeremiah 6:30)

"Nothing but leaves" (Mark 11:13)

"Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth"

(1 John 3:18).

"You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:1)

If we profess to have any religion at all, let us be careful that it is authentic. I say it emphatically, and I repeat the saying: Let us be careful that our religion is authentic.

What do I mean when I use the word "authentic." I mean that which is genuine, and sincere, and honest, and thorough. I mean that which is not

inferior, and hollow, and formal, and false, and counterfeit, and sham, and nominal. "Authentic" religion is not mere show, and pretense, and skin-deep feeling, and temporary profession, and works only on the outside. It is something inward, solid, substantial, intrinsic, living, lasting. We know the difference between counterfeit and authentic money--between solid gold and tinsel--between plated metal and silver--between authentic stone and plaster imitation. Let us think of these things as we consider the subject of this paper. What is the character of our religion? Is it authentic? It may be weak, and feeble, and mingled with many defects. That is not the point before us today. Is our religion authentic? Is it true?

The times in which we live demand attention to this subject. A want of authenticity is a striking feature of a vast amount of religion in the present day. Poets have sometimes told us that the world has passed through four different states or conditions. We have had a golden age, and a silver age, a brass age, and an iron age. How far this is true, I do not stop to inquire. But I fear there is little doubt as to the character of the age in which we live. It is universally an age of cheap metal and alloy. If we measure the religion of the age by its apparent quantity, there is much of it. But if we measure it by its quality, there is indeed very little. On every side we want MORE AUTHENTICITY.

I ask your attention, while I try to bring home to men's consciences the question of this paper. There are two things which I propose to do:

I. In the first place, I will show the "importance of authenticity in religion."

II. In the second place, I will supply "some tests by which we may prove whether our own religion is authentic."

Does any reader of this paper have any desire to go to heaven when he dies? Do you wish to have a religion which will comfort you in life, give you good hope in death, and survive the judgment of God at the last day? Then, do not turn away from the subject before you. Sit down, and consider calmly, whether your Christianity is authentic and true, or counterfeit and hollow.

I. I have to show "the importance of authenticity in religion."

The point is one which, at first sight, may seem to require very few remarks to establish it. All men, I am told, are fully convinced of the importance of authenticity. But is this true? Can it indeed be said that authenticity is rightly judged among Christians? I deny it entirely. The greater part of people who profess to admire authenticity, seem to think that everyone possesses it! "They tell us that all have got good hearts," and that all are sincere and true for the most part, though they may make mistakes. They call us unchristian, and harsh, and censorious, if we doubt anybody's goodness of heart. In short, they destroy the value of authenticity by regarding it as a thing, which almost every one has.

This widespread delusion is precisely one of the causes why I take up this subject. I want men to understand that "authenticity" is a far more rare and uncommon thing than is commonly supposed. I want men to see that "unreality" is one of the great dangers of which Christians ought to beware.

What does the Scripture say? This is the only judge that can try the subject. Let us turn to our Bibles, and examine them fairly, and then deny, if we can, the importance of authenticity in religion, and the danger of not being authentic.

(1) Let us look then, for one thing, at the parables spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ. Observe how many of them are intended to put in strong contrast the true believer and the mere nominal disciple (in name only). The parables of the sower, of the weeds, of the net, of the two sons, of the wedding garment, of the ten virgins, of the talents, of the great banquet, of the ten minas, of the two builders, all have one great point in common. They all bring out in striking colors the difference between authenticity and unreality in religion. They all show the uselessness and danger of any Christianity which is not authentic, thorough, and true.

(2) Let us look, for another thing, at the language of our Lord Jesus Christ about the scribes and the Pharisees. Eight times in one chapter we find Him denouncing them as "hypocrites," in words of almost fearful severity--"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33). What can we learn from these tremendously strong expressions? How is it that our gracious and merciful Savior used such cutting words about people who at any rate were more moral and decent than the tax collectors and prostitutes? It is meant to teach us the exceeding detestableness of false profession and mere outward religion in God's sight. Open wickedness and willful submission to fleshly lusts are no doubt ruinous sins, if not given up. But there seems nothing which is so displeasing to Christ as hypocrisy and unreality.

(3) Let us also look at the startling fact, that there is hardly a grace in the character of a true Christian of which you will not find a counterfeit described in the Word of God. There is not a feature in a believer's countenance of which there is not an imitation. Give me your

attention, and I will show you this in a few examples.

Is there not a false "repentance?" Without a doubt there is. Saul and Ahab, and Herod, and Judas Iscariot had many feelings of sorrow about sin. But they never really repented unto salvation.

Is there not a false "faith?" Without a doubt there is. It is written of Simon Magus, at Samaria, that he "believed," and yet his heart was not right in the sight of God. It is even written of the devils that they "believe and shudder" (Acts 8:13; James 2:19).

Is there not a false "holiness." Without a doubt there is. Joash, king of Judah, appeared to everyone very holy and good, so long as Jehoiada the priest lived. But as soon as he died the religion of Joash died at the same time (2 Chronicles 24:2). Judas Iscariot's outward life was as correct as that of any of the apostles up to the time that he betrayed his Master. There was nothing suspicious about him. Yet in reality he was "a thief" and a traitor (John 12:6).

Is there not a false "love and kindness?" Without a doubt there is. The is a love which consists in words and tender expressions, and a great show of affection, and calling other people "dear brethren," while the heart does not love at all. It is not for nothing that John says, "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

It was not without cause that Paul said: "Love must be sincere." (1 John 3:18; Romans 12:19).

Is there not a false "humility?" Without a doubt there is. There is a pretended meekness of demeanor, which often covers over a very proud heart. Paul warns us against a "forced humility," and speaks of "having an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility" (Colossians 2:18, 23).

Is there not a false "praying?" Without a doubt there is. Our Lord denounces it as one of the special sins of the Pharisees--that for a "show make lengthy prayers" (Matthew 23:14). He does not charge them with not praying, or with praying short prayers. Their sin lay in this, that their prayers were not authentic.

Is there not a false "worship?" Without a doubt there is. Our Lord said of the Jews: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8). They had plenty of formal services in their temples and their synagogues. But the fatal defect about them was want of authenticity and heart.

Is there not a lot of false "talking" about religion? Without a doubt there is. Ezekiel describes some professing Jews who talked and spoke like God's people "but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain" (Ezekiel 33:31). Paul tells us that we may "speak in the tongues of men and of angels," and yet be no better than a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. (1 Corinthians 13:1).

What shall we say about these things? To say the least they ought to set us thinking. To my own mind they seem to lead to only one conclusion. They show clearly the immense importance which Scripture attaches to authenticity in religion. They show clearly we need to be careful lest our Christianity turn out to be merely nominal, formal, unreal, and inferior.

The subject is of deep importance in every age. There has never been a time, since the Church of Jesus Christ was founded, when there has not been a vast amount of trivial and mere nominal religion among professing Christians. I am sure it is the case in the present day. Wherever I turn my eyes I see abundant cause for the warning, "Beware of inferior

religion. Be genuine. Be thorough. Be authentic. Be true."

How much religion among some members of the Church consists of "nothing but churchmanship!" They belong to the Established Church. They are baptized in her baptistery, married in her sanctuary, preached to on Sundays by her ministers. But the great doctrines and truths preached from her pulpits have no place in their hearts, and no influence on their lives. They neither think, nor feel, nor care, nor know anything about them. And is the religion of these people authentic Christianity? It is nothing of the kind. It is a cheap imitation. It is not the Christianity of Peter, and James, and John, and Paul. It is "Churchianity," and no more.

How much religion among some Independents consists of "nothing but disagreement!" They pride themselves on having nothing to do with the formal denomination church. They rejoice in having no ritual, no forms, no bishops. They glory in the exercise of their private judgment, and the absence of everything ceremonial in their public worship. But all this time they have neither grace, nor faith, nor repentance, nor holiness, nor spirituality of conduct or conversation. The experimental and practical piety of the old Separatist is a thing of which they are utterly destitute. Their Christianity is as sapless and fruitless as a dead tree, and as dry and marrowless as an old bone. And is the Christianity of these people authentic? It is nothing of the kind. It is cheap imitation. It is not the Christianity of the Reformers of the past. It is "Nonconformity" and nothing more.

How much Ritualistic religion is utterly false! You will sometimes see men boiling over with zeal about outward expressions of worship such as church music and order of service, while their hearts are manifestly in

the world. Of the inward work of the Holy Spirit--of living faith in the Lord Jesus--of delight in the Bible and religious conversation--of separation from worldly silliness and entertainment--of zeal for the conversion of souls to Christ--of all these things they are profoundly ignorant. And is this kind of Christianity authentic? It is nothing of the kind. It is a mere name.

How much Evangelical religion is completely make believe? You will sometimes see men professing great affection for the pure "Gospel," while they are, practically speaking, inflicting on it the greatest injury.

They will talk loudly of soundness in the faith, and have a keen nose for heresy. They will run eagerly after popular preachers, and applaud evangelical speakers at public meetings. They are familiar with all the phrases of evangelical religion, and can converse fluently about its leading doctrines. To see their faces at public meetings, or in church, you would think they were eminently godly. To hear them talk you would suppose their lives were tied up all kinds of religious activity. And yet these people in private will sometimes do things of which even some heathens would be ashamed. They are neither truthful, nor sincere, nor honest, nor just, nor good-tempered, nor unselfish, nor merciful, nor humble, nor kind! And is such Christianity as this authentic? It is not. It is a worthless fake, a wretched cheat and farce.

How much Revivalist religion in the present day is utterly false! You will find a crowd of false believers bringing discredit on the work of God wherever the Holy Spirit is poured out. How many people today will profess to be suddenly convinced of sin, to find peace in Jesus--to be overwhelmed with joys and ecstasies of soul--while in authenticity of religion they have no grace at all. Like the "rocky-soil" hearers, they

endure but for a short time. "In the time of testing they fall away" (Luke 8:13). As soon as the first excitement has passed, they return to their old ways, and resume their former sins. Their religion is like Jonah's gourd, which came up in a night and perished in a night. They have neither root nor vitality. They only injure God's cause and give occasion to God's enemies to blaspheme. And is Christianity like this authentic? It is nothing of the kind. It is a cheap imitation from the devil's mint, and is worthless in God's sight.

I write these things with sorrow. I have no desire to bring any section of the Church of Christ into contempt. I have no wish to cast any slur on any movement which begins with the Spirit of God. But the times demand very plain speaking about some points in the prevailing Christianity of our day. And one point, I am quite sure demands attention, is the abounding lack of authenticity which is to be seen on every side.

No reader, at any rate, can deny that the subject of the paper before him is of vast importance.

II. I pass on now to the second thing which I propose to do. "I will supply some tests by which we may try the reality of our religion."

In approaching this part of my subject, I ask every reader of this paper to deal fairly, honestly, and reasonably with his soul. Dismiss from your mind the common idea--that of course all is right if you go to church. Cast away such vain notions forever. You must look further, higher, and deeper than this, if you would find out the truth. Listen to me, and I will give you a few hints. Believe me, it is no light matter. It is your life.

(1) If you want to know whether your religion is authentic, try it by

"the place it occupies" in your inner man.

It is not enough that it is in your "head." You may know the truth, and assent to the truth, and believe the truth, and yet be wrong in God's sight. It is not enough that it is on your "lips." You may say "Amen" to public prayer in church, and yet have nothing more than an outward religion. It is not enough that it is in your "feelings." You may weep under preaching one day, and be lifted to the third heaven by joyous excitement another day, and yet be dead to God. Your religion, if it is authentic, and given by the Holy Spirit, must be in your heart. It must hold the reins. It must sway the affections. It must lead the will. It must direct the tastes. It must influence the choices and decisions. It must fill the deepest, lowest, inmost seat in your soul. Is this your religion? If not, you may have good reason to doubt whether it is "authentic" and true. (Acts 8:21; Romans 10:10)

(2) If you want to know whether your religion is authentic, try it by the "feelings towards sin" which it produces.

The Christianity which is from the Holy Spirit will always have a very deep view of the sinfulness of sin. It will not merely regard sin as a blemish and misfortune, which makes men and women objects of pity, and compassion. It will see in sin the abominable thing which God hates, the thing which makes man guilty and lost in his Maker's sight, the thing which deserves God's wrath and condemnation. It will look on sin as the cause of all sorrow and unhappiness, of strife and wars, of quarrels and contentions, of sickness and death--the curse which cursed God's beautiful creation, the cursed thing which makes the whole earth groan and struggle in pain. Above all, it will see in sin the thing which will ruin us eternally, unless we can find a ransom,--lead us captive, except

we can get its chains broken,--and destroy our happiness, both here and hereafter, except we fight against it, even unto death. Is this your religion? Are these your feelings about sin? If not, you should doubt whether your religion is "authentic."

(3) If you want to know whether your religion is authentic, try it by the "feelings toward Christ" which it produces.

Nominal religion may believe that such a person as Christ existed, and was a great helper to mankind. It may show Him some external respect, attend the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and bow the head at His name. But it will go no further. Authentic religion will make a man glory in Christ, as the Redeemer, the Deliverer, the Priest, the Friend, without whom he would have no hope at all. It will produce confidence in Him, love towards Him delight in Him, comfort in Him, as the mediator, the food, the light, the life, the peace of the soul. Is this your religion? Do you know anything of feelings like these toward Jesus Christ? If not, you have every reason to doubt whether your religion is "authentic."

(4) If you want to know whether your religion is authentic, try it by "the fruit it bears in your heart and life."

The Christianity which is from above will always be known by its fruits. It will produce in the man who has it repentance, faith, hope, love, humility, spirituality, kindness, self-denial, unselfishness, forgiving spirit, moderation, truthfulness, hospitality, and patience.

The degree in which these various graces appear may vary in different believers. The germ and seeds of them will be found in all who are the children of God. By their fruits they will be known. Is this your religion? If not, you should doubt whether it is "authentic."

(5) If you want to know whether your religion is authentic, try it by

"your feelings and habits about means of grace."

Prove it by the Sunday. Is that day a time of fatigue and pressure, or a delight and refreshment, and a sweet anticipation of the rest to come in heaven? Prove it by the public means of grace. What are your feelings about public prayer and public praise, about the public preaching of God's Word, and the administration of the Lord's Supper? Are they things to which you give a cold assent, and tolerate them as proper and correct? Or, are they things in which you take pleasure, and without which you could not be happy? Prove it, finally, by your feelings about private means of grace. Do you find it essential to your comfort to read the Bible regularly in private, and to speak to God in prayer? Or, do you find these practices boring, and either slight them, or neglect them altogether? These questions deserve your attention. If means of grace, whether public or private, are not as necessary to your soul as food and drink are to your body, you may well doubt whether your religion is "authentic."

I press on the attention of all my readers the five points which I have just named. There is nothing like coming to particulars about these matters. If you want to know whether your religion is "authentic," genuine, and true, measure it by the five particulars which I have now named. Measure it fairly: test it honestly. If your heart is right in the sight of God, you have no cause to flinch from examination. If it is wrong, the sooner you find it out the better.

And now I have done what I proposed to do. I have shown from Scripture the unspeakable importance of authenticity in religion, and the danger in which many stand of being lost forever, for want of it. I have given

five plain tests, by which a man may find out whether his Christianity is authentic. I will conclude all by a direct application of the whole subject to the souls of all who read this paper. I will draw my bow and trust that God will bring an arrow home to the hearts and consciences of many.

(1) My first word of application will be "a question."

Is your own religion authentic or false? genuine or fake? I do not ask what you think about others. Perhaps you may see many hypocrites around you. You may be able to point to many who have no "authenticity" at all. This is not the question. You may be right in your opinion about others. But I want to know about yourself. Is your own Christianity authentic and true? or nominal and counterfeit?

If you love life, do not turn away from the question which is now before you. The time must come when the whole truth will be known. The judgment day will reveal every man's religion, of what sort it is. The parable of the wedding-clothes will receive an awful fulfillment. Surely it is a thousand times better to find out "now" your condition, and to repent, than to find it out too late in the next world, when there will be no opportunity for repentance. If you have common sense, reason, and judgment, consider what I say. Sit down quietly this day, and examine yourself. Find out the authentic character of your religion. With the Bible in your hand, and honesty in your heart, the thing may be known. Then resolve to find out.

(2) My second word of application will be a "warning."

I address it to all who know, in their own consciences, that their religion is not authentic. I ask them to remember the greatness of their danger, and their exceeding guilt in the sight of God.

A false Christianity is especially offensive to that Great God with whom we have to deal. He is continually spoken of in Scripture as the God of Truth. Truth is absolutely one of His attributes. Can you doubt for a moment that He detests everything that is not genuine and true? Better, I firmly believe it is better to be found an ignorant heathen at the last day, than to be found with nothing better than a nominal religion. If your religion is of this sort, beware!

A false Christianity is sure to fail a man in the end. It will wear out; it will break down; it will leave its possessor like a wreck on a sandbank, high and dry and forsaken by the tide; it will supply no comfort in the hour when comfort is most needed--in the time of affliction, and on the bed of death. If you want a religion to be of any use to your soul, beware of false Christianity! If you want to avoid being comfortless in death, and hopeless in the judgment day, be genuine, be authentic, be true.

(3) My third word of application will be "advice."

I offer it to all who feel pricked in their conscience by the subject of this paper. I advise them to cease from all dawdling and playing with religion, and to become honest, wholehearted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cry out without delay to the Lord Jesus, and ask Him to become your Savior, your Physician, your Priest, and your Friend. Let not the thought of your unworthiness keep you away: do not let the remembrance of your sins prevent your petition. Never, never forget that Christ can cleanse you from any quantity of sins, if you only commit your soul to Him. But one thing He does ask of those who come to Him: He asks them to be authentic, honest, and true.

Let authenticity be one great mark of your approach to Christ, and there is everything to give you hope. Your repentance may be feeble, but let it be authentic; your faith may be weak, but let it be authentic; your desires after holiness may be mingled with much weakness, but let them be authentic. Let there be nothing of coldness, of double-dealing, of dishonesty, of sham, of counterfeit, in your Christianity. Never be content to wear a cloak of religion. Be all that you profess. Though you may sin, be authentic. Though you may stumble, be true. Keep this principle continually before your eyes, and it will be well with your soul throughout your journey from grace to glory.

(4) My last word of application will be "encouragement."

I address it to all who have courageously taken up the cross, and are honestly following Christ. I exhort them to persevere, and not to be moved by difficulties and opposition.

You may often find few with you, and many against you. You may often hear cruel things said of you. You may often be told that you go too far, and that you are extreme. Don't listen to it. Turn a deaf ear to remarks of this kind. Press on.

If there is anything which a man ought to do thoroughly, authentically, truly, honestly, and with all of his heart, it is the business of his soul. If there is any work which he ought never to slight, and do in a careless fashion, it is the great work of "working out his own salvation" (Philippians 2:12). Believer in Christ, remember this!

Whatever you do in religion, do it well. Be authentic. Be thorough. Be honest. Be true.

If there is anything in the world of which a man need not be ashamed, it is the service to Jesus Christ. Of sin, of worldliness, of flippancy, of

frivolousness, of time-wasting, of pleasure-seeking, of bad temper, of pride, of making an idol of money, clothes, hunting, sports, card-playing, novel-reading, and the like--of all this a man should be ashamed. Living after this fashion he makes the angels sorrow, and the devils rejoice. But of living for his soul--caring for his soul--thinking of his soul--providing for his soul--making his soul's salvation the principal and chief thing in his daily life--of all this a man has no cause to be ashamed at all. Believer in Christ, remember this! Remember it in your Bible-reading, and your private praying. Remember it on Sundays. Remember it in your worship of God. In all these things never be ashamed of being wholehearted, authentic, thorough, and true.

The years of our life are fast passing away. Who knows but this year may be the last in his life? Who can tell but that he may be called this very year to meet his God? If you would be found ready, be an authentic and true Christian. Do not be cheap imitation.

The time is fast coming when nothing but authenticity will stand the fire. Authentic repentance towards God--authentic faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ--authentic holiness of heart and life--these, these are the things which will alone stand the judgment at the last day. It is a solemn saying of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:22-23)

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