

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Authentic Christianity

This week I asked ChatGPT to draw me a picture of what the authentic, fulfilling life looks like?

Based on the entire knowledge of the internet
This is what it generated
A middle-aged woman with a beaming smile
Her clothes are simple, she does not appear to be wealthy
I assume that's her daughter hugging her
It's golden hour,
The sun is setting casting this warm light on open fields
In her hand are the vegetables it seems that she has grown
It's a picture of serenity and peace
Peace with the land and with her relationships.
It's quite compelling isn't it?

It's interesting what AI hasn't generated as authentic and fulfilling
It hasn't generated the opposite
A rich young man in an expensive Italian suit
Sitting in his Maserati in his city penthouse
Making million dollar deals on his phone

Then I asked ChatGPT the same question but for a Christian
And all ChatGPT did
Was to exchange the home-grown veggies in her hand for not one but two bibles
At that point I thought AI was either really lazy
Or just making fun of me.

But the question is real
What does the authentic fulfilling life look like for a Christian?
You see in the context of the Corinthian church
This is what they were pursuing
Except the apostle Paul is trying to persuade them in this letter that
Their version of the authentic Christian life was wrong headed.
They valued eloquent words over substance
They valued outward appearance over love
They preferred powerful leaders rather than faithful ones
They valued social status rather than servanthood
They valued strength and success over weakness and humility

All of us in this room desire an authentic, fulfilling life
And in the passage we're going to look at today,
Paul is going to shed light on what this looks like for followers of Jesus

Authentic Christianity means
Real perspective

Real power
Real peace

Firstly Authentic Christianity means real perspective

Real perspective means fearing the Lord not people

Verse 11

¹¹ Therefore, since we know the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade people. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your consciences.

Many of us fear the opinions of people
What they think of us can make or break our self-identity
How many of us are enslaved by whether or not we are liked by others?
How many of us are crippled by the criticism of others?
But this fear does nothing to liberate us to live a selfless, courageous life.
Paul talks about a better fear
The fear of the Lord - grounded in the reality of the day of Christ's judgement
Here is the previous verse – verse 10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Ultimately, the opinion of people will not matter on that day of judgement
Only the opinion of Jesus will matter
The authentic Christian is motivated by a healthy fear of Christ her Lord
And when we talk about fear here, it's not a cowering terror as though Jesus is a short-tempered bully
For those who trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour
Fear is an awe, a holy reverence,
To fear the Lord is to recognize Jesus as our good Creator and Righteous Judge
He has given us life and we need to account for that life
We answer to Him and not the other way round.

This fear means that we are plain to God
He sees us exactly for who we are
We are not hidden before Him so we don't need to put up a pretense
And if we don't need to pretend before God
Why should we pretend before others in order to gain their approval
In fact in Paul's mind,
Fearing God frees you up to love people.
That's why he says, that we should persuade people when we fear God
More on this later.

Real perspective is not focused on outward appearances.

Verse 12

¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to be proud of us, so that you may have a reply for those who take pride in outward appearance rather than in the heart. ¹³ For if we are out of our mind, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you

Despite their criticism of Paul in turning to the false apostles
Paul still has deep affection for the Corinthians
He wants them to be proud of him
But he is not desperate for their approval like a needy friend
Instead he wants them to be proud of the content of his heart
And not what appears on the outside like the false apostles.
And the content of Paul's heart is love for the Corinthians
He seeks their good, he doesn't seek their boosting of his ego.
People like the false apostles might think Paul is crazy, out of his mind
But from God's perspective, the authentic Christian,
The one who is in their right mind
Is the one who does things out of loving concern for others
Authentic Christianity is not impressing people with outward appearances
But a heart that is driven by love

Real perspective means not looking at people and Jesus in a worldly way.
Verse 16

¹⁶ From now on, then, we do not know anyone from a worldly perspective. Even if we have known Christ from a worldly perspective, yet now we no longer know him in this way.

Prior to meeting Jesus on the Damascus road
Paul could have been described as a Jesus hater
He made it his mission to destroy the church
To imprison and destroy the followers of Jesus
The worldly perspective is kill and destroy your enemies
We see this playing out everyday in the news as nation seeks to destroy nation

And then Paul met Jesus
Instead of the judgement that Paul deserved for killing his followers
Jesus showed him mercy and opened his eyes to a new perspective
Jesus became His Lord
The same Jesus who said love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you
And Paul was radically transformed from someone who was feared by Christians
To someone who was a Jesus lover and a people lover
What consumed Paul was no longer zealous hatred
But a compelling love as we are about to see.

In your quest to lead an authentic, fulfilling life
What is your perspective?
Every morning you wake up
Are you ruled by the fear of people?
Whether they like you, approve of you,

Whether they are angry with you, or are disappointed by you.
Are you ruled by outward appearance?
Do you long to be perceived by others in a certain way?
Fear of people is a cage we build for ourselves.

And here's the great mystery right
The one fear that you should have
The Fear of the Lord on the day of judgement
Is the fear that could liberate you from the cage that you've built yourself
That could be the fear that means you can look in the mirror
And not care about anyone's opinion, not even your own
That could be a fear that could lead you to courageous, selfless love
Even of the people you fear the most.
Is that even possible?
Keep listening and you will find out.

Here's the second point Authentic Christianity means real power

We all desire to live our best lives don't we?
And so often that involves change
Changing perspective
Changing habits.
Dealing with addictions.
Finding powerful motivations to put good, life-giving habits in place.
Authentic Christianity is based on real power to make changes.

Verse 14

¹⁴ For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion, that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.

The love of Christ compels Paul.
Once Paul was driven by the hatred of Christ
But what a complete transformation
The person he once dedicated his life to hating
Is now the person he has dedicated his life to serving.
Because he came to understand the love of Christ
And the great expression of the love of Christ is his death on the cross for sinners like Paul and you and me
This is Paul in Romans 5 verse 8

⁸ But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

It's interesting that Paul has now talked about two motivating forces in his life
The Fear of the Lord
And the love of Christ
Both meet together in the death of Christ
To truly fear the Lord is to recognize your sin before your Creator and Judge
To know that you have not lived your life to please Him

And the only thing you are entitled to is His judgement of eternal death
But then to know the love of Christ is to understand that Jesus died in our place
He took our judgement for sin
He died for sin as our representative, our substitute
And in this way, all who trust in Jesus have also died with him
For the authentic Christian
The cross not only killed Jesus
The cross kills the old life of living to please self
And the resurrection of Jesus breathes a new life into us

Verse 15

And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.

The death of Jesus is God's power to transform people.
How they see themselves and how they see others.
How they love and serve
And when Paul says that *Jesus died for all* he doesn't mean that everyone is a Christian
But rather the death of Christ is open to all
And the death of Christ is sufficient for all
but only those who receive his offer of love
Will find this new life

This is how Paul talks about it in verse 17

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!

You must be "*in Christ*"
Someone who trusts "*in Christ*"
Someone whose identity is bound together with that of Jesus
That after all is the very definition of a Christian
Someone who is "*in Christ*"
And for those "*in Christ*"
God is in the business of *recreating* people
Not just improving them.
We are new creations.
He gives us new hearts,
he doesn't just patch up old hearts
He transforms us so that we can live for Him and for others

What is it that compels you?
What is it that burns in you and controls your decisions?
Pain
Anger
Loneliness
Fear
Pride

Jealousy
Hatred
Insecurity
Guilt
Shame

As a boy, George Palmer grew up with anger burning in his heart
In 1949 his father died unexpectedly when he was just 7 years old
That day he screamed at God
“You’ve got no right to take my dad! I need him, and now he won’t be here for Christmas. And because of that, I hate you. With all my heart, I hate you.”
From that point on George was driven by violence
At age 8 he knocked out a boy’s teeth
He killed a litter of kittens in his mother’s washing machine
He joined a gang in Melbourne as a teenager and became their leader
George recounted a time when they captured the leader of a rival gang
And held his hand to the ground so that a car could drive over it back and forth five times

In March 1959, the preacher Billy Graham came to Melbourne
And George and 9 of his friends went to the MCG with more than a hundred thousand other people
Except these 10 young men had the intent to kill Billy Graham
They had guns that George had made, hidden in their clothes
And their plan was to assassinate Billy Graham when he made the appeal to come forward to the stage
Billy Graham represented everything that George hated
A God who took his Dad
During the sermon,
George heard a voice saying to him “What are you doing George?”
He turned around and no one was there.
And he said “okay God I know this is you, you took my dad, you hurt me so much”
“Why should I love you? Why should I care about you?”
Then George recounted God saying to him
“I didn’t take your dad to hurt you. I would never hurt you full stop”.
George hadn’t cried for years, and then when Billy Graham made the appeal to come forward
George began to weep and weep
And then he put the gun on the ground and ran to the front of the stage and gave his life to Christ
Eight of the nine other members of his gang were converted that same night.
The next day, George went to apologize to the leader of the gang he had hurt so badly
After this George felt so convicted by God
That he become a salvation army officer to love and serve people.
George met his wife in the Salvos and together they served for over 30 years until their retirement.
In an interview George said.
“God took a person who hated Him with every part of his being, and He loved him,”
“It’s amazing how God can take a situation like we were in, and change your life completely. And I thank Him every day for that—I really do.”

In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, Paul Barnett says

There is no power so great, no motivation as strong, as the knowledge that someone loves me. Paul's understanding that Jesus, in his death, loved him, was now the controlling force in the apostle's life.

Could this real power that transformed Paul's life
And George Palmer's life
Also transform your life?

Thirdly, authentic Christianity means real peace

From verse 18 onwards there is one idea that keeps jumping out at you
And that is reconciliation

Verse 18

¹⁸ Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ...

¹⁹ In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...

²⁰ "Be reconciled to God."

Do you think Paul wants to make a point here?
Reconciliation matters in life
To be reconciled means to restore a broken relationship
To bring back peace and harmony
Where there was once conflict and division
Our sin tears apart our relationship with God
Our sin means that we have declared war with God
Whether we feel it or not
And our sin against God leads to broken relationship with others

All of us long for peace don't we?
The authentic fulfilling life is a life of peace.
Peace in our relationships with our families, friends, fellow workers
Peace between our countries
Peace in ourselves.
And we know that peace is hard to come by because it is so hard to achieve.

But the peace of greatest priority is peace with God.
This peace with God flows into peace with others and peace in ourselves.
That is why Paul appeals in verse 20
Be reconciled to God
And I can understand Paul saying this to people who are not yet Christians
But Paul is saying this to the Corinthian Christians
These are people who have already been reconciled to God
But authentic Christianity means keeping reconciliation with God a priority.
Because reconciliation matters to God.

Normally to bring a ceasefire between two parties
There is a third party who needs to mediate peace

This week Donald Trump had a go at brokering a ceasefire between the warring nations of Iran and Israel

And he did this by getting angry and swearing at both countries.
Let's see how long this reconciliation lasts.

But there is no third party needed for God to broker peace with us.
God takes the initiative himself
He reconciles us to himself through Christ in verse 18
And this comes in a way that is both stunning and costly

Verse 21

²¹ He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God made Jesus sin for us
We could spend years unpacking the wonder of that statement
Christ who had equality with God, Paul says in Philippians 2
Emptied himself of that authority
He became like us – flesh and blood
In every way, he felt hunger, pain, grief, loneliness, happiness
Yet crucially Jesus was without his own sin
And because of this, Christ was made sin for us
Christ became a sin offering in our place
It seems very likely that Paul is picking up the teaching of Isaiah 53

And like the apostle Peter, Paul seems to be applying this Old Testament prophecy to Jesus
⁵ But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds.

Well how does God bring about peace
We start with the offence of our sin against God
On the basis of righteousness or justice,
God has every right to be angry towards our sin
This means our relationship with God is broken

But in his great love
Christ *was made* sin for us
He is the sacrifice who atones for our sin
Because we cannot atone for our own sin
God's righteous anger is turned away from us
And directed towards Jesus on the Cross
Such that God can forgive our sin

Reconciliation is now possible because peace always comes at a cost
And now through the death of Jesus
Enemies can be adopted as beloved children of their father in heaven
And in the resurrection of Jesus as we heard last week
We too will receive eternal life in bodies that will never die

When we will be at home with Christ living in eternal peace.
And all of this comes to us as a gift through faith
That is what Paul means when he says "Be reconciled to God"
Put your trust in Christ alone.
Keep saying "yes to the love of Christ"
Trust not in the worldly wisdom of the false teachers
Trust not in yourself, your status, your possessions, your achievements
Real peace with God can only come in Christ alone.
The apostle Paul knew the joy of reconciliation first hand
After all, God had forgiven a murderer, a destroyer of God's church
And reconciled Paul to himself

As you look at the cross of Christ
How much do you value reconciliation?

I will be able to tell by how you love others
Jesus once said "the one is forgiven little, loves little"
If you are constantly in conflict with others
If you think you are better than them
That you have a right to hold on to your anger at them
That you are never wrong
Then you are yet to understand the cross
In reality, you are a sinner before God just like them
And Jesus died for them as much as he died for you
Real peace with others comes when you value the cross of Christ
To love those who are hard to love
You must understand how you have been loved.

I will be able to tell whether you value reconciliation
By how you love yourself
Do you struggle with self-loathing?
Always at war with yourself
Always punishing yourself for your guilt and shame
If you look at the cross
And see the awful depth of your sin
And if you confess your sin to God
And accept what Jesus did on the cross for you
Reconciliation means that God no longer holds guilt and shame against you
So what gives you the right to hold it against yourself
Real peace with yourself can only come from the cross of Christ

Finally real peace with God means being ambassadors for Christ
The authentic Christian is so transformed by reconciliation that they become ministers of reconciliation
Verse 18

¹⁸ He has given us the ministry of reconciliation...

¹⁹ He has committed the message of reconciliation to us.

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.

The apostle Paul was so radically transformed by the gospel of peace
That he become a messenger of peace
An ambassador of Christ
An ambassador is a representative who carries the authority of the one who sends them
Usually countries send ambassadors to other countries to represent them
But here it is our Lord Jesus who sends those who have been reconciled
Into the world as his ambassadors
We are given the incredible privilege and responsibility to represent Christ
And we bring his message – the gospel
And not only do we proclaim that message – that God wants peace not war
We are to embody that message in our manner and our motives
Compelled by the love of Christ
We are to live like Christ as we preach Christ
In the sermon on the mount
Jesus said “Blessed are the peace makers for they will be called children of God”
And so everywhere we go – we are Christ’s ambassadors
And wherever we have the opportunity we are to share the gospel of Christ
So that others can be reconciled to him.
Authentic Christians are different on the sporting field
Authentic Christians are different in share houses and families
Authentic Christians are different in schoolyards and universities and workplaces
Not entitled
Not pursuing the glory of self
Not drowning in gossip and envy
Not selfish and mean spirited
But filled with peace
Convicted by love
Committed to self-sacrifice
Courageous even when it is costly
Quick to forgive when asked
For that is how we have been loved by our Lord and Saviour Christ.
Do you know real peace that only Jesus can bring?
If you do, then seek every opportunity to be his ambassador

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch holocaust survivor of World War Two
Her family was punished for hiding and saving the lives of Jews in their home
Her father Casper died in prison
Her nephew Christian died in a concentration camp
Her sister Betsie died in Ravensbruck Concentration camp where Corrie was also imprisoned
Betsie’s faith in Christ and her gentleness and care for fellow prisoners
and even the Nazi guards who treated them brutally had a lasting impact on Corrie

Corrie Ten Boom - this unassuming lady
could easily have been twisted by resentment and hatred for her enemies
Instead she became a powerful ambassador for Christ
After the war she set up a rehabilitation home for concentration camp survivors

And taught them about the love and forgiveness of Jesus to break the cycle of hatred
Then she travelled to over 60 countries to share the gospel
She once said “You never touch the ocean of God’s love as when you love your enemies”
Something she had to do
When a former Ravensbruck guard came to her at one of her meetings and held out his hand
Seeking her forgiveness
Only with the strength of God,
Corrie Ten Boom took his hand and forgave the man who had tormented the women at Ravensbruck
What an incredible example she still is to us today as an ambassador for Christ

Earlier this month I witnessed another ambassador for Christ
When I attended the funeral service of Sam Ellis
Sam was a four year old boy who died of neuroblastoma
An aggressive cancer that Sam battled for most of his life
The Ellis family had to move from Benalla to Melbourne for Sam’s many, many treatments and operations
At the Royal Children’s Hospital
And while in Melbourne
Sam’s mother, Lauren, attended our church’s Mainly Music program with Sam

At the funeral, Lauren along with her husband Jack, Sam’s Dad
Spoke honestly about their grief of losing Sam and his long battle with cancer
They gave thanks to God for the life of their son and the adventurous spirit God gave him
And his wonderful bond with his older brother Tommy
And they spoke about their hope in Christ who welcomes little children like Sam to himself
Many members of Sam and Lauren’s family then got up to share their memories of Sam
As well as their grief, thanks to God and their hope of seeing him again in the resurrection

And then the thing that surprised me most
Was when Jack got back up to preach at his own son’s funeral
I expected the minister who led the service to preach
But Jack preached
Jack is not a trained pastor, he’s a tradie
I’m a trained pastor but to be honest I would have been so racked with grief if that was my son
That I would have found it impossible to string words together
But Jack was so compelled by the love of Christ
That what he wanted to preach was not his own son Sam
But Sam’s Saviour and Lord – Jesus Christ
He wanted to persuade the hundreds of people gathered there and watching online
To be reconciled to Christ
And God gave Jack the strength to preach so well
Jack embodied verse 20

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf, “Be reconciled to God.”

Let me finish with Jack’s words.

*I've been asked many times
Why Sam, why did he have to suffer so much
Why did our family have to go through this
And to be honest I don't have an exact answer
I do know that all things work together for the good of those who love God
and are called according to His purpose
But perhaps Sam passed away so that you could be here today
So that you could hear about Jesus and what he's done on the cross for you
How he loves you and how he offers the gift of salvation
Perhaps you are here today so the seed could be planted
Sam was always going to pass
Whether he was 4 or 104
He was always going to pass as is everyone here
Every person is going to have to give an account for their life to God
The question is "do you know Jesus?"
And more importantly "does he know you?"
The only way you'll get to heaven is by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.
And accepting him into your heart
Sam believed in Jesus
He loved Jesus
Every so often he would say "God is good" or he would come to Lauren and say "I love God"
I can say with full confidence, Sam is in heaven
And another thing people say to me is that "Sam was taken too early"
Sam was not taken, but rather he was received into the arms of his Lord and Saviour Jesus
Sam was received into glory, he was not taken early
Sam was called home when Jesus decided the time was right
That does not mean we do not miss him
It does not mean that we are not shattered at his passing
But we can rejoice and be glad
That Sam who battled through intense pain, through sickness, through separation and suffering
So bravely and so courageously
Is now running around in heaven in his new body free from pain, suffering and cancer
Sam is in perfect peace and happiness with his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
He has run his race, fought his fight and now he is at rest in Jesus
Friends and family here today, do you believe in Jesus?
Do you know him as your Lord and Saviour?
If you died tonight, do you know where you will go?*

Authentic Christianity means real perspective, real power and real peace.