



## REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

### **Are You Real?** **2 Corinthians 13:1-10**

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This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.<sup>2</sup> I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—<sup>3</sup> since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.<sup>4</sup> For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

<sup>5</sup> Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!<sup>6</sup> I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.<sup>7</sup> But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.<sup>8</sup> For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.<sup>9</sup> For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.<sup>10</sup> For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

### **Introduction**

These days it seem like everywhere you look, you see people grappling with the question of Real or authentic Christianity. Republican presidential hopeful, Mitt Romney, is a devout Mormon. Are Mormons real Christians? Many think they're just as real as real Christians. Senator Rick Santorum is a devout Catholic. Are Catholics real Christians?

Or you may have caught wind of that new show on Sunday nights on ABC that's creating quite a stir. It's called *GCB*, an acronym for *Good Christian Belles*, though the novel on which the series is based uses a different word that begins with a B. It's promoted as a "funny, sassy and heartwarming drama." It's set in the very buckle of the Bible-belt, where big houses and big hair, nice cars and nice jewelry are the norm; and where gossip and quoting Bible verses effortlessly go hand-in-hand.

Some are understandably upset because of a perceived anti-Christian bias. At least one thing's for sure: it forces us all to ask the uncomfortable question about real: What is authentic Christianity in this world of counterfeits?

## Confusion Is Costly

*There's widespread confusion about what it means to be a real Christian.* This is of course true of the culture at large. But there's an alarming lack of spiritual discernment in the church, and in our particular church. Many people just aren't clear on this basic question: What is a Christian?

The problem with confusion about what it means to be real, however, is that it's very costly. Confusion is costly. It breeds complacency among real and not-real Christians alike. It also encourages superficiality. And a lack of spiritual discernment saps the spiritual vitality of the church as well. And this, ultimately, undermines the mission of the church, turns our attention inward, and sullies our witness to the world outside our four walls.

## Not Enough to Say You're Real

*It's not enough to say you're real.* Just because you *think* you're real doesn't *make* you real. You may have a strong sense of closeness with God, or be able to talk at length about your own 'personal relationship' with Jesus; yet this doesn't guarantee that you know the Savior—or that the Savior knows you.

You see, the Bible says the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it? Every one of us is able to act like a lunatic, and tell ourselves we're someone we're not; everyone else may know it to be false but us. Self-deception is real, and Satan is subtle. He is the master-counterfeiter, pumping counterfeit currency into the Christian economy called the church on a daily basis.

Furthermore, words are cheap. Anyone can be taught to say, "Lord! Lord!" But that doesn't mean that Jesus is your Lord, or you his servant. Even a parrot in a cage can be taught to say the words: "Lord! Lord!" But that doesn't turn the parrot into a real Christian, does it?

## You Ought to Be Able to See You're Real

It's not enough, then, to say you're real. You ought to be able to *see* you're real. This is because being real is *a big deal*. For many, it seems that being a Christian isn't a very big deal at all. It's little more than a decision you make at some point in your life; sometimes it's followed by involvement in a church, or an adjustment of lifestyle, or associating with a new group of friends. But sometimes it's not. Ultimately, it doesn't matter all that much, because either way God still loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

Being a real Christian is a really big deal. It involves a radical change of who you are. It consumes the whole of your life. It redirects the trajectory of your life, both now and for all eternity. In fact, being a real Christian is such a big deal, only God's big enough to make it happen!

*Real Christians are new creatures who live new lives.* Physically, they won't look different than others: different clothes or hair cut or accent or skin color. Yet they've been *radically changed* on the inside: given new birth, a new heart, and new sight. And this makes real Christians altogether new people—new creatures who will inevitably live new lives.

They that are truly converted are new men, new creatures; new, not only within, but without; they are sanctified throughout, in spirit, soul and body; old things are passed away, all things are become new; they have new hearts, and new eyes, new ears, new tongues, new hands, new feet; i.e. a new conversation [i.e., way of life] and practice; and they walk in newness of life, and continue to do so to the end of life.<sup>1</sup>

Real Christians are new creatures who live new lives. And their lives are truly set apart, marked by humility, meekness, contrition, Christ-likeness and hunger for God.

These marks aren't momentary; they don't show up for a season, then disappear. Instead, they continue throughout their lives, slowly but surely growing over time. This is the proof of the pudding: perseverance in the life of faith and following Jesus.

Or, most simply put, real Christians live *lives of love*: real love, not counterfeit love; love not in word and talk, but in deed and truth; love that's visible, tangible, practical and sacrificial. Love is the hallmark of real Christians. When it comes to authentic Christianity, faith-filled, obedient love is the sign of signs.

## Examine Yourself

In this passage, Paul has a very simple way of talking about what it means to be real: "Jesus Christ is in you" (2 Cor. 13:5). Of course, his point to the Corinthians is to challenge them to examine themselves to see if indeed Jesus Christ is in them. Paul's asking them the question this series has intended to ask you: *Are you real?*

That's a question worth asking. Paul doesn't shy away from confronting Christians with this challenge: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5).

Nor is Jesus afraid to ask followers and would-be followers this same question. Remember how he probed Simon Peter, the one who denied him three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:16). That's Jesus' way of asking: *Are you real?*

It's quite biblical to ask yourself if you're real. But it's also wise. Who wants to be surprised on the Day of Judgment, only then to find out you're actually not real? Would anyone want to stand before King Jesus on that Day and hear him say, "I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23).

Simply to presume upon a happy future, without giving it serious consideration, isn't wise. In fact, given the stakes, it's simply foolish. It's like building your house on the sand, as Jesus says. Yet I fear many professing Christians approach their own eternity without ever seriously asking themselves whether or not they're even real.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 391.

## This Magic Called Real

When it comes to being real, the Velveteen Rabbit gets it right. In fact, for weeks now we've been asking the same question the Velveteen Rabbit asks his old friend the Skin Horse.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." . . .

"I suppose *you* are Real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic called Real happened to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him.<sup>2</sup>

## Are You Real? *Really?*

So how about you? Are you Real?

*Really?*

Many of you know you're real. It's not self-deception or presumption or wishful thinking. Instead, it's what the Bible calls "the full assurance of faith." You know you're real because you see you're real. You're making your calling and election sure. That's a wonderful thing—and ought to thrill your heart, strengthen your faith, embolden your witness.

Others have a question mark in your mind. You realize there's more to being real than simply wanting to be real, or thinking you're real, or saying you're real. As a result, you don't know if you're real. You're just not sure. In the past, you've felt like you were real. But you're in a different place now. Things have changed; what you once called real faith seems far less real

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<sup>2</sup> Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit: Or How Toys Become Real* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983), pp. 4, 5, 6.

than it once did. You need to heed the Apostle Peter's counsel: "make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10).

Then, there are some of you are coming to the terms with the fact that you may not be real. When you take an honest look at your life, you just don't see the marks of real. You're not hostile to Christianity. Quite the opposite, in fact, you have a very high regard for the Bible and believe it's God's word. And you believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins. Yet, for some reason, it doesn't have a hold on your life.

You know you're not real, but you want to become real and be real. You're like the Velveteen Rabbit: you long for this magic called Real to happen to you. You long to become Real, to know what it feels like. But like the Velveteen Rabbit, you're scarred of what might happen to you if you become Real—all those "uncomfortable things" that worried the Rabbit worry you as well.

The invitation for you today is for real faith. Not belief in facts, but reliance upon a person—Jesus Christ. He is God's glorious gift of love.

## **Conclusion**

You become real, as the Skin Horse knows, when you're loved for a long, long time. The Bible says God loves his children from everlasting to everlasting; that we have been predestined in love.

What real Christians realize is that God has loved them for a very, very long time; indeed, from before the foundations of the world. If you're real, you've been the apple of his eye from all eternity past. He's had you on his heart for longer than you can imagine. He's been forever excited about calling you his very own.

Real is what happens when God places his sovereign love upon you, calls you to himself, makes you his very own.

And, best news of all, once you're Real, you can't become unreal again. As the Skin Horse says: *It lasts for always!*

Amen.

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