

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE CHRISTIANITY - #1

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Like many, I have inherited from a previous generation a fellowship of believers. I am a part of a religious group with beliefs and practices that have been handed down from one generation to the next. The claim of this assembly of believers is that they are the real thing... they are genuine Christians.

If I had inherited a painting that claimed to be a Rembrandt, I would want to know for certain whether it was genuine or not. The previous generation who passed it on to me would have confidently told me it was genuine, but where is the proof? Can one even obtain the evidence of genuineness?

I propose to write a few articles with the above title because I have received such an inheritance. Merely claiming to be a genuine Christian does not make one genuine. There must be some evidence of genuineness and a search for the proof will be the thrust of the forthcoming material. As I begin these articles, I have not completed the search. This material will not be a mere reporting of what I've already believed. I am simply initiating the search. I wish to reexamine all aspects of what I claim to have in possession that I might with certainty acknowledge its genuineness. Yet, if the quest determines that what I have is not an original, then I am willing to make any adjustments necessary to possess what is genuine.

Like inheriting a Rembrandt, I have a picture of Christianity, but is it genuinely of Christ? To ask the question of genuineness is to recognize the existence of fakes. It is always a possibility that someone may think he has a genuine picture when all that he inherited is a worthless forgery. Many outside my fellowship possess pictures of the church, all claiming to be genuinely of Christ, but all differing from one another. Are they all really Christian? Reason tells me that it is impossible. If $X=2$ and $Y=2$ then we may conclude that X and Y are the same. Yet, if we say that the Catholic Church represents genuine Christianity and the Community Church is genuinely of Christ, then we would have to conclude that the Community Church is Catholic. Since we know this cannot be true, we would have to say that one or both are not genuinely of Christ.

There are also those within my inherited fellowship who are now saying that what I have is not an original. They are making adjustments and changing their picture of the church, claiming that what we've inherited was flawed. They are encouraging me to do the same. But, if what I have is a genuine picture, then I would be letting go of something that was of Christ and exchanging it for something that claimed to be of Christ, but really isn't. Why let go of a Rembrandt for a forgery? But, the question is, "Do I possess a genuine picture?" So, the need to search for genuineness is vital. Let us, therefore, do for ourselves what we would require of all who claim to be Christian. Let us test our beliefs and practices for genuineness.

But how shall we proceed in our investigation to find the truth? To determine genuine Rembrandts, one would need an authentic painting for comparison. Perhaps one would also consult experts who have studied Rembrandt's originals and who would know one when they saw one. In like manner, if genuine Christianity exists, then it must have had a beginning... an original picture, one accepted by all as genuine. Of course the only original picture is to be found in our New Testaments. Thus, we must search the Scriptures to get a clear view of the genuine and then compare our own picture with what we find there. If my picture does not measure up to the original, then what I have is something less than genuine.

Where shall we begin our search? When we open the pages of Scripture, we discover information about a number of churches in various geographic locations. Should we choose one of these as an original for comparison? The problem I've discovered with this method is that each congregation was chastised or rebuked for some error they believed or practiced. This indicates that they, themselves, were not always measuring up to the genuine standard. So, I propose that we strive to find the original picture of the church which we know to be genuine, and compare our own picture to it. I have a picture of Christianity that I've inherited, but there is a question of its genuineness. So, I'm interested in what standard was applied to the New Testament churches to determine their genuineness. We may be able to see the original picture,

by reading what was right with these congregations and by what was wrong with them.

The original picture of the church was conceived in the mind of God (Eph. 3:11). He sees it clearly. He commissioned the original picture of the church to be painted by His Son. Every congregation should be a genuine picture of the church painted by Christ. Whether or not one's fellowship is genuinely a Christian fellowship is determined by how it measures up to the heavenly ideal.

That there is a heavenly picture of Christianity may be easily discovered by studying what is written to the first congregations. Messengers with heavenly authority implied that there was a divine standard. Jesus possessed all authority (Matt. 28:18) and He sent out His apostles with an inspired vision of Christianity (such passages as John 16:13; 1 Cor. 14:37; Eph. 3:4; 2 Pet. 1:20,21; etc. is evidence of an accurate heavenly picture presented by inspired messengers in the New Testament). Thus, when something was written down about Christ and His picture of Christianity, we may be confident that it reflected the original standard of God.

Along with me, many others have inherited pictures of the church, but they all look different. One picture includes such things as ornate buildings, a pope, a political hierarchy, traditions, sprinkling babies, a rosary, and holy water. Another picture in the possession of others, includes none of these but does include such things as faith only, instrumental music, government by conventions, a pastoral system and nonessential immersion. These are two entirely different pictures that claim to be the same thing... that is, genuine Christianity. One or both must be forgeries.

But, our purpose is to test our own picture for genuineness. So what kind of picture do we have? It is interesting to learn that there are different views of the church within our fellowship. For some the genuine picture includes a well-kept building, a sign out front, an invitation after every sermon, two assemblies on Sunday, no instrument, no women leading the assembly in any way, a full-time preacher, a board of elders, Bible classes, the Lord's Supper each week, and immersion for remission of sins. For others, there are some noticeable differences in their picture: no Bible classes, no eating in the building, only one communion cup, no full-time preacher, and no cooperation with other congregations in financially supporting ministries. Then, there is a newer picture that is still being painted which includes an increased role for women in the assembly, the addition of an instrument to our singing, engaging in fellowship with denominations, doctrines driven by felt needs, and optional worship assemblies accommodating traditional and contemporary tastes.

If we were to survey every Christian in our fellowship, each would have a different picture. My own differs from the three above in some respects but corresponds in some ways. In comparing and clarifying our own pictures of Christianity, we would soon discover that we all consider that the elements included in our pictures would naturally fall into three categories: [1] There are some things that are essential to our picture. If these were removed, it would change the picture so that it was no longer genuine. If Rembrandt's name or some background items were removed from his painting, the alteration would result in lessening the value and genuineness of the picture. It would not be a genuine Rembrandt since he included things that are no longer a part of the picture. [2] There are some things that are not essential to our picture. These are inconsequential to us. Their presence in the picture does not alter the picture and if they were removed, the picture would remain genuine. If our Rembrandt is ornately matted and framed, but the original of comparison was not, does this mean our picture is a forgery? The matting and framing do not alter the picture itself and would have nothing to do with the genuineness of it. [3] There are some things that would destroy the genuineness of the picture. These are things that we view as actually altering the picture so that it can no longer be called genuine. If someone painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa, the painting becomes less valuable. And, as it would now appear, we could not refer to it as a genuine De Vinci since he did not paint in a moustache. The addition would have to be removed for it to be genuine.

Our task in testing our own picture, then, becomes clear. To determine if our picture of Christianity is genuine, we must discern those aspects of it that are essential to the original. We must also determine what aspects of our picture are not essential and in no way alter its genuineness. And then, we should examine our picture carefully to see if any alterations have been made to what is seen in the original.

This approach seems reasonable. Every small detail of a picture may be put to this test to determine if it is truly in the picture Christ painted of His church. This will not be an easy task, but I am convinced that it is a necessary one. I must know if what I've inherited is genuine or not. To hold on to a forgery in the belief that it is genuine is to cling to something that has no value.

Before we engage in our investigation, we might need to address our motives... yours and mine. Some will likely say that I have an agenda... that I am opposed to certain practices and that my purpose is

merely to attack them. This would be an unjustified accusation. It is true that my own picture looks different than the one now being painted in other parts of our nation. Personally, I like some of the items being painted into the newer pictures. But, what I like or dislike is irrelevant to the genuineness of the painting I now have in my possession or in the one now being painted. I am not content to possess only a picture of the church... I want a genuine picture... one painted by Christ. There is no value in possessing one that is not genuine. I want one that is signed by Christ. I do not want to become the artist of any new picture and call it a Christ painting. Nor, am I willing to accept any other preacher's picture as genuinely of Christ. I want the truth. I am unafraid of the truth. If the truth proves that my picture has been altered in some way, I want to change the picture back to its original quality.

I am willing to put my picture of the church on display for all to critique. I am asking for critique. I desire for others to compare my picture with the original and tell me if my picture is genuine or not and to give me the evidence as to why. I propose to engage in examination myself, but I recognize that I may not be able to objectively judge my own picture so others who may be experts in the paintings of Christ must be consulted. I welcome such consultation with open arms.

I have nothing to lose in doing this. I have everything to gain. Since I don't mind changing my picture to get it back to the genuineness of the original, I can only increase the value of my picture. Some may say, "But your congregation may dismiss you or other congregations would not let you preach for them." Is this a reason not to search for truth? I would expect this of the denominational preachers who possess only forgeries and desire to hold on to what they possess because it makes them comfortable. I am appalled at my brothers who want to hold on to their pulpits even if they preach for a church that is less than genuine. I do not preach to receive a paycheck and I do not work for a church. I work for Christ, who called me to preach His gospel and I must submit to Him. I want only His picture of His church.

Are you willing to put your picture on display for examination? Some among us are ready to change their view of the church, but are reluctant to have their views tested for genuineness. Are you one of these? Why would we be unwilling to place everything we believe and practice on the table? Is it because we are not sure that these things are a part of the original, but we don't want to turn loose of them? The only way we can know if we possess something genuine is to put it to the test.

In the forthcoming search for genuineness, I ask only for kindness in our critique of one another. I do not want to judge motives, but rather limit myself to doctrines and practices. In like manner, I want to be treated the same. I cringe at the thought of being misrepresented and somehow "written up" by those who have no understanding. Yet, I am willing to take the risk. I am willing to fully display what I believe so that you might carefully examine it... and help me correct it... out of your love for the Lord, His people... and me.