

# Authentic Christian Ministry

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[ 0 : 00 ] There was an Anglican priest who auditioned for the show Britain's Got Talent. And in his audition, he sang REM's song, Everybody Hurts.

I don't know if you've seen it. You can see it on YouTube, if you know what that is. But the thing was, at the end of this audition, he just mesmerized the crowd.

It was like, by the time he finished singing it, the room was silent until Simon Cowell got up and just started applauding.

And then at that point, everyone was to their feet, standing ovation for a phenomenally good performance. And the online comments were interesting that flowed on that on YouTube.

Some thought that, in fact, he sang it better than REM. And because of the real authenticity in which he sang it from someone who'd been an Anglican priest for many decades.

[ 1 : 08 ] And the amount of hurt that he had dealt with over those years. In fact, some thought that he did it so well that he should, in fact, shift careers. One person made the comment that, I bet you that guy wished he went into a singing career earlier in life.

That is, what was being projected in that moment, in that comment, is a value statement. You know, see how you've impacted not just those sitting in the room with you singing, but people online who have seen you.

See the impact you've made? Why on earth would you be a minister? Why would you do that?

Unfortunately, too many get their view of ministry from the Vicar of Dibley, the Simpsons' Reverend Lovejoy, or Father Brown, or something like that.

For many in our society, the role of minister is that they're there, if they have any concept of it all, they're there to be there for times of crisis, significant life events, ministry of the poor, care for the flock, but basically don't say anything offensive and stay out of the way most of the time.

That's if they've got any concept. But increasingly, in our day and age, when I say to people what I do, when they ask you, what do you do? And I tell them that. I may as well be telling them that I work for the taxation office or that I work for a big bank.

[ 2 : 48 ] Like, it's a conversation killer. And if there's a follow-up question, it's, but what do you do?

Like, what is it that you actually do? For those in the church, we often expect a carer, a scholar, a leader, an evangelist, a manager, a janitor.

Without an own diocese, there is an undercurrent of expectation that the wise leader, and I'm quoting someone, that the wise leader will keep everyone in the church on board while they significantly push forward for new growth and reach new people at exactly the same time.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul is helping us here and the passage is read out to us. What does authentic ministry look like? We saw yesterday, last week, what does the authentic minister look like?

What does the authentic Christian look like? What does authentic gospel ministry look like? That's what we're looking at here right now in 2 Corinthians 2 and 3. You've got this next point out to you already.

[ 4 : 08 ] If you've got the paper version, right down the bottom, point number four is robust love.

That's not where I'm heading, but good thing to think about anyway. So go back and do that later.

We've got three points I want to particularly focus on. But the situation is that when Paul moved on from his time at Corinth, his opponents moved in.

They were eloquent. Eloquent religious leaders who took pride in the outward display of ministry success. They started to drive a wedge between Paul and the church.

They criticized Paul, both of his life and his message as being weak, poor, he's not authentic, he's not the real deal, he's not the true apostle, his ministry is not authentic ministry.

They started to think that Paul was worldly, insincere, cowardly, weak, theological deviant, who preached a false gospel. And so the Corinthian church is in, significant danger of walking away from the authentic apostle and therefore walking away from the authentic good news of Jesus Christ. [ 5 : 26 ] And that's what Paul is fighting for in this letter. As we saw, Paul's defending himself, as we saw last week, as he revealed the characteristics of the true apostle, what it means to be a true follower of Jesus.

Today, the outlines in front of you, authentic ministry, what it looks like. Paul reveals three important things about authentic gospel ministry, what authentic gospel ministry is, what it does, what it produces.

That's where we're going to go, that's the journey. Nick was right, absolutely true, if you do not have a pencil in hand, you don't learn. That is called active engagement in the learning process.

So rip it out, or your finger, if you need to, for your iPad, and have the text in front of you open. No arms folded, just looking at me. Okay, what authentic ministry is?

Let me just jump to the chase here, it is God speaking through the gospel. Verse 14 to 17, I'm going to jump straight to 17 of chapter 2.

[ 6 : 36 ] Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity as those sent from God.

Notice that Paul says, the key activity of authentic ministry is the ministry of speaking the word of God.

And it's marked by the sincerity of knowing that we are accountable to God. That is a direct shot at Paul's opponents in Corinth, who peddle the word of God for profit.

And Paul chooses two word pictures, if you like, that are shocking in this section. First he says in verse 14, but thanks be to God who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession. Now that doesn't mean what you probably think it means, and it doesn't mean what the super apostles were declaring. It refers to what great Roman generals used to do when they captured a city, a country, a nation, and they conquered it.

[ 8 : 05 ] They led the captives, their enemies, as conquerors. And they led them to the place of death and slavery.

They would line them all up behind them and they would triumphantly ride back into Rome. The people of the city of Rome would just be singing the praises of their general, all the treasures that they had captured.

First of all, I think they robbed from the nations, and then last of all, the people that they captured. The kings, the rulers, and then the commoners.

Verse 14, but thanks be to God who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession. In other words, Paul's saying, I'm defeated, I'm taken captive by Christ, but he was brought to faith and forgiven and justified and set free from slavery to sin and death and made a glad and willing servant of the greatest general who ever was.

You see, what's happening here is Paul's describing the nature of discipleship. You're at the end of the train. You're captive to Christ. Christ. He's the general.

[ 9 : 38 ] He's the triumphant one. Not you, super apostles. Not you. So what Paul's doing here with these word pictures is he's accomplishing two almost opposite things at exactly the same time.

On the one hand, God is like a great general and Paul is a conquered and called, Paul is conquered and called to suffer in his service even to die.

But on the other hand, God is triumphant and Paul is in his service and through Paul spreading everywhere the good news of the triumphant gospel.

Paul is weak. He's a broken vessel. But God is displaying his greatness, his goodness and his power through him.

Paul's adversaries at Corinth don't recognize Paul's authority and they don't think Paul is triumphant as a missionary the way they think he should be. Some people are converted, some people are not.

[ 10 : 51 ] Some see Christ in him and some reject Christ because of him. They only see weakness and failure and hardship and difficulty and rejection.

He has some success, he has some failures. But they think that if he was a genuine apostle of the triumphant king of kings, then he would have success and triumph in every area of his life.

And so Paul chooses a word picture here that describes him both as belonging to a great victor and as a conquered enemy whose service of the king is to suffer and look weak and even die for him.

Led in triumphal possession as a defeated foe in the service of a king. And yet, Paul says, this is my delight.

This ministry is good news. We go, what? What? Captive? A slave? How's that good news?

[ 12 : 14 ] Paul says, this is my delight because this great victor who leads him in triumphal possession is the king of kings and the lord of lords. This is the one who himself surrendered to the soldiers in the garden of Gethsemane.

Condemned to death by a puppet ruler. Led by soldiers through the streets of Jerusalem carrying a cross as the crowds mocked him before being nailed to that cross and dying.

And to the eyes of the world, he was to be spat upon. He was a loser. He was defeated in that moment. He was a spectacle to be ridiculed.

And yet, as the scriptures tell us, this is no accident of history. This was not an unfortunate event. Jesus himself declared it was going to happen and he was in control of it every single step of the way. Because Jesus declared that I am the God of this universe come into your presence in flesh, the creator and the ruler of all things, the one who assigns the beginning and the end, not just the interpreter of history, but I am the declarer of history.

[ 13 : 36 ] It doesn't happen unless I think it into existence and speak it into existence. The prophet Isaiah says that of this one Jesus, the government of all the universe is resting on his shoulders or rule and authority is his.

There is none more powerful and this is the one who chose the path into captivity. This is the one who was led to the place of slaughter.

He chose the path of weakness and death so that we would be set free from our rebellion against him, the true king for putting ourselves in the place of being the king of kings.

He was crushed so that we aren't. And that's the truth that's captivated Paul's heart, his soul, his mind, his body.

He says it explicitly in chapter 5. He says, Christ's love compels us. Because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died and he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

[ 15 : 07 ] And so at the end of chapter 2 he uses a second picture of his life as a sacrificial offering that is a sweet fragrance before God.

This is him living as one no longer for himself but for him who's captured his heart. Starts in the middle of verse 14. Have a look at it.

Got the text in front of you. And uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. And so Paul here pitches his missionary life and his ministry as spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.

When Christ died for our sins allowed himself to be taken captive led to the place of slaughter for our sakes it was like a fragrant offering pleasing to God.

Ephesians 5 2 says that when Jesus died for sins it was a fragrant offering that was pleasing to God. Now here is Paul standing in the place of Christ as his representative here in the world suffering like Christ in the service of his conquering Lord and he says we are the aroma of Christ to the world.

[ 16 : 46 ] But first of all we are the aroma of Christ to God. God sees my service of him and he smells it and it is pleasing to him.

in other words when we suffer in the service of Christ as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ it's like Christ suffering for the lost and God smells this fragrance of sacrificial love and it pleases him. But it's not pleasing to everyone including ironically the Corinthian church. That is there are heart rejoicing and there are heart breaking parts of our service to Christ and the gospel.

This aroma the gospel of Jesus Christ divides the world. Look at the division in verses 15-16 For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

To the one we are an aroma that brings death to the other an aroma that brings life. Some smell the sacrificial love of Jesus from the lips and the life of Christians and it only smells like death.

[ 18 : 16 ] They hear the gospel and all they hear is death. They look to the cross and all they see is death.

They see failure. They see no life. They see no hope. They see no future, no joy. And so they go, that stinks.

And they turn away from it. And if they turn away forever, they die. That's what it says. They die forever.

They are perishing. The smell of death leads to death. You smell roadkill as you drive along at 100 km an hour.

Smell roadkill, it's because something's dead. they don't believe. They don't see the heartbreaking side of authentic Christian ministry.

[ 19 : 18 ] There are people who don't believe. They don't see Christ as precious. They don't see his suffering as a treasure. They don't smell his death for sinners as the sweetest fragrance in the universe.

it's not a satisfying fragrance. It's simply the smell of death and so they walk away. But the heart rejoicing side of Christian ministry is also in verse 16 to the other an aroma that brings life.

Those who are being saved smell the death of Christ as an aroma of life. They see in his death the substitute that they so desperately need before God.

The Son of God dying in their place is the fragrance of life and so they don't turn away. They believe him. They receive him. They embrace him. They treasure him. They submit to him and they live forever.

In his death they see life. smelling Christ is the aroma of life that gives life. And authentic gospel ministry is spreading the fragrance of Jesus by speaking the truth of the gospel of Jesus knowing that the triumphant God speaks through us bringing both salvation and judgment.

[ 20 : 56 ] we don't control that. We're going to see more of this next week in chapter four. And so Paul asked this really crucial question in verse 16.

Who is equal to such a task? Knowing that eternity is at stake through my lips and through my life who can carry that burden?

people everywhere are coming to life or death through me representing Christ. Who can carry that burden? Who can carry that weight?

Paul says, I am. I can. Not because I am sufficient, he says. Not because you're sufficient.

Because we constantly second guess ourselves. Can I do this? Can I bear the weight of being the aroma of Christ at home and at work and on social media and in the playground? And by God's grace, his word to us here is, yes, you can.

[ 22 : 12 ] You can carry that weight. Chapter 3, verse 5, our competence comes from God.

God's grace, we can bear the weight of being the aroma of Christ wherever he has sovereignly placed us. It is God who speaks through us as we speak the gospel because God speaks through the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for our sin and race triumphant over sin and death.

can I just say it would be really good to remember that really, really good to remember that the next time we think that we've got nothing to say in front of our friends around the dinner table who are not Christians.

It would be really good to remember that the next time you're leading a community group and it isn't going so well or a youth group or sharing with a colleague or you're running a ministry and it just seems like nothing's happening. Really good to remember that.

the gospel is what we've got and it is sufficient. We're going to talk more about this next week. The gospel is what we've got and it is sufficient.

[ 23 : 30 ] It's not about our personalities, not about our giftedness or our knowledge or even our weakness. And this leads us to the second point that I have about authentic ministry.

It's in verses 3 to 11 of chapter 3. Authentic ministry, what it does, it changes people. God not only speaks through the gospel but God changes people through the gospel.

Now Paul flashes this out for us, first of all, by mentioning how God has changed the Corinthians themselves in verses 1 to 4 of chapter 3. ministry.

And then secondly, by telling us about the kind of change-producing ministry that God has given to Christians in verses 5 to 11, chapter 3.

Now Paul's opponents of Corinth were saying, you know, Paul can't be an authentic apostle of Jesus Christ because, you know, frankly, look at his ministry. He's always rejected.

[ 24 : 38 ] He's always in jail. People are running him out of town. They're rejecting you know.

Where's the massive crusades and thousands of people coming to life? Where's that happening?

He doesn't seem to display the results that you would expect if his ministry was authentic. And so Paul's reply was, guys, kind of awkward, but have a look around because before I came to town

with the gospel in Corinth, you didn't even exist as a church.

You weren't even there. In other words, you are the fruit of my ministry. Awkward to point it out, but the changes being brought around through the gospel came through me to you.

You're my letter of commendation. I don't need the degrees on the wall. I don't need letters of support from the mayor of Athens.

You've got you are my commendation. You are the result of my ministry. In other words, the Corinthian church is his boast.

[ 25 : 52 ] They are the proof of his ministry. The lasting fruit of authentic gospel ministry is people. Changed people are the lasting fruit of authentic gospel ministry.

Not the size of the church, not our mastery of theology, not the books we write, not the talks we give, not the number of programs we run, not the budget being met, or any other metric you want to throw at it.

Not the number of gospel endeavors we support around the world or the value of our property. People are the lasting fruit. People have been changed by God through the gospel that has been spoken by us.

God eternally changes people through the gospel that has saved us and that we proclaim. That is the heart of what God has given us to do while we are on this planet.

And then, sorry, that's what it says in verse 6. God has made us competent ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit, for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

[ 27 : 16 ] Now, if you're starting to doze off right now, stick with me here, because I want to just keep unpacking a little bit what authentic ministry does in changing people.

What does it do? What's happening in this change? What sort of change are we looking at? The contrast that Paul works with in verses 6 to 11 is pretty straightforward.

He has in mind Exodus 33, which is on the back of your service sheet. Exodus 33, that was just read out. And he's saying, God really worked through Moses at Mount Sinai and the old covenant of the law.

It was a clear display of the power of God. It was spectacular. It was clouds descending, fire, and mountain shaking, and just awesome.

I just think, wouldn't it be great nowadays? What would happen at Chatswood if I was to get up week after week, and when I spoke, the foundations of this building shook, and the cloud descended, and just hold on, I'm just talking to God people.

[ 28 : 37 ] baptismal waters were parted, and just imagine people would flock to it because this is spectacular ministry.

This is the power stuff we've been looking for. Paul. Paul's saying, God did amazing stuff through Moses, spectacular, but now God has made us servants of a new covenant, a new way of working rather that comes from the Spirit of God rather than words written on tablets of stone.

A new way of working brings life rather than death. Now, that was the awkward bit about that passage. What Paul is trying to achieve here is our confidence in gospel ministry when we're losing confidence in the face of gospel ministry.

That's what he's trying to do here. In the face of hardship and guilt and rejection and apparent ineffectiveness, his answer is that God miraculously speaks through the gospel message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to bring people to new and eternal life and they are changed forever.

Now, Moses' ministry in the Old Testament was very spectacular. It was very impressive. Massive, visible signs of God's presence and Paul says that the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit leaves Moses' ministry for dead.

[ 30 : 23 ] And he says in chapter 5, you won't get that if you have the attitude of the super apostles who only look at things from the outside, who just want external, physical displays of success, you won't understand.

Gospel, true gospel impact. Moses' ministry was quite remarkable except for the fact that it couldn't bring change in anyone's life.

That should be pretty obvious to us. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai, 3,000 people died at the foot of the mountain as a result of their disobedience.

In the midst of the spectacular display of the glory of God, 3,000 people died because they couldn't even obey 10 simple rules.

They had in their possession tablets written on by the finger of God himself. Verse chapter 3 verse 7.

[ 31 : 53 ] Now if the ministry that brought death, which is engraved in letters of stone, came with glory so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the spirit be even more glorious?

If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness. Ministry of the gospel brings real time God honoring righteousness. It changes people for eternity. It's like a light bulb and turning a light, grabbing a torch, walking out right now and shining it at the sun.

The torch has got no power. It's nothing. The glory between the two is so, I mean, you get it. There's no comparison in brightness and illumination and glory. God has given to Christians, even weak suffering Christians, even Christians struggling with their own sin, given to Christians who embrace the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and being led by him in triumphal procession, a ministry that is mind-blowingly superior to Moses.

[ 33 : 15 ] And you will run everywhere else looking for other metrics, looking for some sort of power other than the gospel, if you do not trust the power of the gospel.

It's superior because God's glory is revealed in the good news of Jesus Christ died and resurrected. His glory is no longer veiled. That's the main point. I love that song we sang, it is no longer veiled. That's the main point of verses 13 to 18. And to simplify these verses, Paul is saying that when the gospel of the Lord Jesus is proclaimed, the so-called weak, defeated, crucified Jesus, what some will see is the magnificence, the beauty, the power, and the splendor, and the value of God himself for the very first time.

They will see true glory through apparent inglorious ministry. Some will see the splendor and majesty of the transcendent creator, God, in the face of Jesus Christ.

Glory is a very small word with huge significance. All the goodness and perfection and authority and power and majesty and the godness of God is packed into two syllables, glory.

[ 34 : 48 ] Our ministry is wider and deeper and more effective than Moses in bringing lasting change. Why? Because God changes people on the inside through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only does God speak through us when we speak the gospel, but God changes people when we speak the gospel as his glory is revealed in the gospel.

gospel. The Spirit opens our hearts to apprehend, to appreciate, to savour, to cherish and treasure the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this happens, as this happened, the Spirit changes our inner desires and drives, so that we want what Jesus wants and we get freedom.

See that in verse 17? Authentic ministry changes people from the inside out. It's not external compliance forcing change, but deep internal change of the desires that changes outward behaviour.

[ 36 : 09 ] Genuine conversion. Your whole value system is overturned. I love the story of John Patton. He was one of the first Christian missionaries to the islands of Anuatu.

In fact, he was the first Christian missionary to not be eaten on the islands of Anuatu because in those days they were cannibalistic tribes. He wrote in his autobiography about one particular convert to Christianity who was dying.

a former cannibal chief. And it's not just because they're hungry. Their whole value system is wrapped up.

Their whole perspective in terms of the world view, in terms of the universe is wrapped up in cannibalism. It's not because they've got nothing else to eat. So this former cannibal chief is dying. And when he was dying, he came to Patton to say goodbye to Patton. And Patton writes this.

Abraham, that's Patton's Christian aide, who himself was a former cannibal, right?

[ 37 : 19 ] This guy was a former cannibal. He says, Abraham sustained him, tottering to the place of graves. And there he lay down and slept in Jesus.

And there the faithful Abraham buried him beside his wife and his children. Get this, that is incomprehensible in their culture.

He's dead, we eat him. And here is Abraham caring for a dying man, not eating him, and Patton goes on to say, thus died a man who had been a cannibal chief, but by the grace of God and the

love of Jesus changed, transfigured into a character of light and beauty.

And then he looks to Europe and all the skepticism of Europe and against the Christian faith. And he says this in his diary, what think ye of this, ye skeptics as to the reality of the power of conversion.

All the skepticism of Europe would hide its head in foolish shame and all its doubts would dissolve under one glance of the new light that Jesus and Jesus alone pulls from the converted cannibal's eye.

[ 38 : 48 ] God hear what he's saying there is? Change, deep change, displays the glory of Christ and produces more change in others.

one of the strongest arguments, historical arguments for the resurrection of Jesus is how do you explain the change in the disciples?

There's no explanation for that. How do you go from being cowards to bold proclaimers of the gospel? There is no explanation, no psychological explanation for it, no historical explanation for it, except they saw the glory of God in the face of Christ in the resurrected Jesus.

And they went from being cowards to bold. And that's what authentic ministry produces. The fruit of authentic ministry is changed people, it is bold people.

Therefore, verse 12, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

[ 40 : 14 ] It is the confidence that the sovereign God, spirit of God, is at work in this ministry to change hearts of stone in the hearts of flesh, and to give life and righteousness and permanence to all of God's people, God is at work.

It's that confidence that God is at work. It is the hope of the victorious gospel of the triumphant king of kings. The gospel will accomplish all that it was sent to do. It will not come back empty anymore than the word of God can fall to the ground.

Paul is utterly confident that the spirit of God will conquer and justify and preserve for glory all whom God has chosen for himself.

In other words, he's saying because of this power, I cannot fail. By the almighty power of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel, everyone appointed to eternal life will believe.

This is the hope of Paul, and so he is bold. And boldness, to understand what it is, it's the opposite of fear and timidity.

[ 41 : 24 ] it's the opposite of shrinking back and pulling away. It's not shame, it's not guarded speech, it's not minting our words, it's not being indirect, it's not being vague, it's not being obscure in our communication.

We should never cloud the word of God and the simplicity and the clarity of the gospel with palatable generalities and euphemisms that obscure the clear and the sharp contours of the truth. Boldness is the fruit of hope. Christian hope is the cause of boldness in the Christian life. So, if you are not bold in your witness, if you find yourself in a sphere around the non-Christian world, shrinking back, if you are not courageous, if you are not risk-taking in your ventures of righteousness, if you are not open and straightforward with your speech, it's because your hope is defective.

Perhaps you're hoping in the wrong things to make your future happy. Perhaps you've never really thought seriously about the relationship between the strength of your hope and the boldness of your service to Jesus.

The relationship is really clear there. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold. Since we have such a hope, and only because we have such a hope, can we and must we be very bold.

[ 43 : 06 ] And so his encouragement here is that if your hope is defective, it's probably got something to do with the fact that you're actually spending more time on YouTube rather than in the Bible, rather than gazing on the gospel.

He says, keep fixing your gaze on the glory of God in the face of Christ in the gospel. It is your hope, it is your boldness, and it is the way that God will bring change and transformation in your life. If, however, that's for you, for Christians, if, however, you're here today and you're not a Christian, maybe, even as I've been speaking for the first time, the veil is slipping away.

You're starting to see Jesus in a slightly different way than what you did when you first came in here. You heard this stuff about him being the triumphant king of kings who in fact became a slave for your sake.

You've heard Paul say, it's Christ's love that compels me, and for the first time, you're not seeing him as judgmental. He's the king of kings who's conquered sin and death and shame and death for you.

[ 44 : 28 ] Can I say that if that's you, have you seen the veil slip for right now? The stakes are very high for you. Come to him, surrender to him, and find your joy in him today.

I'd love to speak to you after the service.