

An Authentic Witness
Colossians 4:2-6
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Almost every day, someone has to apologize publicly for something he or she said or did. Toyota has spent most of the last month expressing regret for their faulty gas pedals. A few weeks ago, Education Secretary Arne Duncan had to stand before cameras and apologize for saying that "The best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina." He admitted it was a dumb thing to say.

When we hear a public apology, we decide whether we think it is authentic or not. To make that determination, we try to discern whether the words reflect the genuine feelings of the ostensibly contrite person or whether the act of remorse is simply a public relations ploy. As we learn more about John Edwards, it seems that his public apology was mostly his attempt to save his political career. His actions since that apology seem to indicate that his words were not from the heart.

In the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, the Rev. Pat Robertson said that the natural disaster was God's way of punishing the impoverished country for a pact their ancestors made with the devil a long time ago. Numerous people have demanded that the outspoken clergyman apologize for his comments, but so far, Robertson has refused to do so. Although I totally disagree with his statement, I don't think he should apologize, because he believes what he said to be true. Unless the reverend develops a different understanding of God's involvement in that earthquake, a public apology would be a sham.

Those of us who are fifty or over, look for integrity in public statements of any kind. We want to know if the speaker's words and actions match his or her true beliefs. If a man says he believes in marital fidelity, he must prove the genuineness of his profession by staying faithful to his wife. If a woman says she believes in total honesty, she must reflect this belief by telling the truth. If there are major discrepancies between what a person claims to believe and how he lives, we will reject his message.

This fact has a great deal to do with whether or not we believe a person's profession of faith in Christ. If a person claims to love Jesus, but hates his neighbor, rarely worships God, is stingy with his money and worries about the future night and day, we won't trust his religious proclamation.

If you are forty or under, however, you probably look at things a little differently. Those born in the decade of the sixties or later don't really believe there is such a thing as complete integrity. In fact, when someone claims to fully practice what he preaches, the forty and under crowd sort of roll their eyes. They are convinced that no one fully lives up to what they say they believe and that it is dishonest to claim otherwise.

My father was as good a man as I have ever known. He believed in telling the truth and did so to a higher degree than most people I have known. In the latter years of his life, he sold cars and did pretty well because he was known as a salesman that would tell people the truth about a vehicle.

One night, when I was a boy, I saw headlights go across our back yard. My parents thought I had seen a reflection until a person knocked on our door. My father answered the door to find an inebriated man apologizing for missing the turn and driving through our shrubbery and peony plants. We called the police and eventually the man and his dented up car were removed from the premises.

A few days later the insurance adjuster came to our house to survey the damage. I stood by my father as the man said, "so the driver came right through here, wiped out some bushes and destroyed your basketball goal." Now the truth was that we didn't really have a basketball goal. Somewhere along the way, my brother and I had found an old tether ball pole and rolled it onto our property. It consisted of a rusty pole, stuck in mound of concrete. My brother and I grew tired of tether ball and so we rolled the pole onto an empty spot in the yard and haphazardly attached a rim to the top of the pole. We had no backboard and simply invented games that required us to throw objects into the rim for points. When the adjuster referred to our basketball goal, I interrupted, feeling a need to explain that it wasn't really a basketball goal, but as I spoke, my father put his hand on my head to quiet me. A few weeks later, we had a brand new basketball goal, planted in the ground with a full backboard and rim.

I'm sure my father concluded that he had paid insurance all his adult life and was due this one little indiscretion, but the point is even an honest man is not honest all the time. For younger adults to believe a public profession, that claim must include a admission that there is a gap between what the speaker believes and how he is able to live. Somewhere in the testimony, the person must say, this is what I believe is right and I try to live by this value, however, I fall short.

In London, I am told, in many of their subway stations, there is a gap between the subway car and the platform. Throughout the subway system, there are signs to warn riders about this dangerous space that read, "Mind the Gap." Young adults want us to mind this gap that exists between our profession and our actual expression of discipleship. When we act like it doesn't exist, they quit listening to our message.

If a woman at work claims that since she put her faith in Christ, she loves everybody, worships God with her whole heart, gives her money liberally to help those in need and never worries a single moment of any day, her witness will not be accepted by most people under the age of fifty. For that witness to have authenticity, she must acknowledge that even though she believes in Jesus, she still struggles from time to time with loving her neighbor, making worship a priority, giving her money as Christ has taught and leaving her worries with God.

At the end of his letter to the church at Colossae, the apostle Paul called on the new disciples there to be authentic witnesses to the peace they had found in Jesus Christ. In describing what that meant, Paul called on the Colossians to have both integrity and authenticity. In other words, he told them to aspire to fully live out the teachings of Jesus they claimed to believe and to be honest about their need of God's grace to cover the gap that often existed between their sincere intentions to follow Jesus and their actual behavior. We have the same calling, so we need to listen closely to what Paul had to say.

He begins by advising that if we are going to be an authentic witness for Christ, we should ground ourselves in prayer, not trust in our own piety or cleverness. The apostle writes, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word." Carl Jung wrote a lot about the masculine and feminine energies that are within us all. Jung called those aspirations that cause us to want to sail toward improvement and achievement, masculine energy. The feminine energy, Jung wrote, is that which keeps us grounded in our humanity. Prayer makes good use of both kinds of human dynamics. We can pray with our masculine energy, "Lord increase the integrity of our lives, help us to more fully live out your teachings." In addition, we can pray with our feminine energy, "Lord keep me from pretending to be more than I am. Keep me authentically connected to your grace, for as much as I want to be like Jesus, I keep falling short."

When we are grounded in prayer, we are continually reminded that our witness is dependant upon the Spirit opening doors for our testimony, not upon our cleverness to work a word about Jesus into every conversation. If you've ever tried to force a spiritual conversation on another person, you know how impossible it is to communicate anything real in such a situation. Contrived conversation about the role Jesus has in our life is not authentic and people will shut us down every time we pursue it. When the Spirit opens a door, however, so that we can share our

faith in natural ways, life-changing results can occur. So the apostle Paul told us to ground ourselves in prayer to keep us alert to our own need of grace and to seek the Spirit's help to provide us with an opportunity of authentic witness.

Paul also said an authentic witness talks about the revelation of God not about our own spiritual achievement. He wrote, "pray that I may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly." When we study the book of Acts we make a surprising discovery. Paul was not put into jail because he preached about Jesus. In fact, in Jerusalem, where he was arrested, the people were respectful when he spoke about Jesus. They rioted, however, threatening to tear him from limb to limb when he claimed that Jesus had sent him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. The revelation God gave to Paul declared that all people, regardless of race, nationality, income or religious upbringing could be born again into the household of God. This truth had to come from a revelation from God for it was unknown among humanity at that time. Throughout the world, every tribe, nation and culture had their own religion. If you were Egyptian, you worshiped Ra. If you were Canaanite, you worshiped Baal. If you were Hebrew, you worshiped Yahweh. If you were Greek you worshiped Pan or one of the other gods of Greek mythology. Part of being loyal to your cultural identity was to worship your god. No one professed that their god was for all races and cultures. In fact, many preached the exact opposite. Folks not of their historical experience were barred from worshiping their god and relegated to the protection of their specific culture's inferior god. Christianity was unique in that the good news was for all people. When we share our faith today, the core of our testimony should be that God, in divine grace, sent Jesus to save all people from their sins and to unite us in a new family of faith.

A friend of mine recently did a survey of church web sites and found that the vast majority project a message that says, "please, please, please visit our church and hear our talented pastor, our awesome choir, put your children in our fantastic children's bible school and enrol your teen in our cool youth ministry." In other words, the messages were all about how great the church was with almost nothing about how wonderful God's grace and love is. To be an authentic witnesses, we have to find a way to focus on the revelation that God has acted in Christ to save us all by grace not on how good we have become since meeting Jesus.

Lastly, Paul said an authentic witness is guided by wisdom from above, not human impulsiveness. He said, "conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of your time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone." A few weeks ago, several Baptist short term missionaries were arrested in Haiti for trying to take a group of children out that country without proper documentation. They have been charged with trafficking in children. Although some news services have reported that these missionaries were American Baptists, they were not part of any of the denominations with which we are affiliated. The Washington Post and many other news agencies evidently do not know the difference between Baptists from America and American Baptists. The charged parties were Baptist from Idaho, they were not members of the American Baptist Churches to which we belong.

I don't know if they had malicious motivations or not. What I do know is that by acting so impetuously, they have cast a shadow on the mission work of hundreds of Christian agencies that are involved in the rescue work in that ravaged nation. Thoughtless behavior can construct huge barriers to our witness. That is why Paul said, think let your actions be guided by God's wisdom, not human impulsiveness. If in a rash of anger, we curse our next door neighbor over his barking dog, can we really give an authentic witness of the love of Christ? If we defensively promote a person of our own race over a better qualified person of another race, can we really witness to the justice of Christ? If we respond to financial pressure by lying to make a sale, can we really witness to the truth of Christ?

If you choose to join us this Lenten season and read "Same Kind of Different as Me" you will meet an authentic witness named Deborah Hall. For most of her adult life, Deborah was, by her own estimation, not much of a Christian. She attended church half-heartedly and wrestled with sizable doubts about the doctrines of the faith. Her

marriage endured a very rocky passageway of unfaithfulness and her college-aged children grew distant. Then, at the mid-point of her life, she had an experience with Christ that changed her life. From that moment on, she chose to use every opportunity to witness to others of the grace of God. Rather than plod along through each day oblivious to the opportunities of witness around her, Deborah started each day with a prayer to be made aware of people who needed her love and who had love to share with her. All her friendships were seasoned with the love of Christ. Her relationship with her children was revitalized by the Spirit of Christ. Her stale married was transformed into a love affair and genuine partnership of affection, trust and respect. Then, with her house in order, Deborah was led to transform a dirty dingy homeless shelter in downtown Fort Worth into a place of safety, beauty and hospitality. In addition, the Lord led she and her husband into a relationship with a beaten-down homeless man that changed all their lives. And then her life went in a direction that she could never have anticipated. I don't want to ruin the story for you, but suffice it to say, her faith enabled her to use even the most difficult of life circumstances to be an witness to the power of God.

Deborah Hall lived what Paul preached. Her witness was empowered by prayer, inspired by revelation and guided by wisdom. May God help each one of us become authentic witnesses in all the conversations and relationships of our lives.