

One of the buzzwords that has been used excessively in recent years is authenticity. The advertising world has used it to try and connect brands with consumers; the media have used it to connect with viewers; social media influencers have used it to connect with their audiences. Everything needs to be ‘authentic’ – and everyone needs to live their ‘authentic lives’ – whatever that means. The word was used so often that the Merriam Webster dictionary chose it as the word of the year in 2023.

Yet while the word has been used so frequently some have suggested people are experiencing “authenticity fatigue”¹ – there is something that seems ‘right’ about the desire to truly live according to our values and beliefs. To be our ‘authentic selves.’ I wonder, if we don’t live according to our beliefs, do we truly believe them?

If we want to know what we *actually believe*, then a close examination of our conduct, and of how we spend our time, will be revealing.

Today, as Paul begins to bring his final letter to Timothy to a close, he urges Timothy to be ‘authentic’ – to live according to the beliefs he has had his whole life.

Because there are people who don’t.

Our reading from 2 Timothy 3 began with the words “But as for you...”, and these hint at something. They suggest Timothy needs to be doing something different from other people. “They are doing this, but as for you...” To discover what Timothy should *not be doing*, we need to read the beginning of chapter 3, where Paul says:

You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power.

¹ <https://www.authenticityreport.co/p/exploring-the-rise-decline-of-authenticity>

I had to look up a couple of these words: an implacable person is someone who is impossible to appease, they're stubborn, and potentially unforgiving; a profligate person is given to reckless wastefulness, or extravagance.

Reading these verses, it is striking how many of these things we see today. While it's true that every generation produces people with some of those characteristics, today they seem so prevalent – especially among those in positions of power. Yet, Paul isn't describing people in society in general, he's describing people in the church.

These are people who say they believe, but their conduct says otherwise. As one writer astutely states it by analogy, these are people who are “deliberately unholy and still go to church, covetous and still say morning prayers, blasphemers and still repeat perfectly the Apostles' Creed; they may be treacherous and still remain on the church board, haters of good and still give lip service to God.”² What is worse, is that the people Paul describes are teachers in the church.

These people not authentic; Paul describes them as “wicked people and impostors” who “go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived.”³

It is in this context that Paul says to Timothy, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.” Timothy had learned his faith from his grandmother Lois, and his mother, Eunice,⁴ and now he believed it too. in fact, Timothy ‘firmly believed’ the Scriptures. Other translations say he had “become convinced.”⁵

Timothy was convinced the message of the Scriptures was true; he had learned the ‘sacred writings’ – the Old Testament – and believed them.

This brings me to my first challenge for today, which is to ask, do we know the Scriptures? Timothy knew them; do we? We might know a couple of verses; we might be able to recite parts of Psalm 23; we might know John 3:16; but do we know what the Bible is about? Do we have a basic grasp of the Old Testament, or

² Robert W. Yarbrough, The Letters to Timothy and Titus, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2018), 411

³ 2 Timothy 3:13

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:5

⁵ The New International Version

New? I'm not suggesting we need encyclopaedic knowledge of Scripture, but do we know a basic outline?

Your beliefs about Jesus... where did you receive them? Did you learn about Jesus in Sunday School, or in Church, or from a book. Or did you learn about Him from the Bible? Because while other books are useful, only the Bible is God breathed or inspired.⁶ Only the Word of God is living and powerful.⁷ Only the Word of God is able to "instruct us for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."⁸ Many books are good and useful, but the Word of God is unique; it alone is a light to our path,⁹ and food for our souls.¹⁰

How often do we open the Bible? Once a week on Sundays? If so, that's great; and it might even sustain your spiritual life. But we in this room, are blessed beyond measure; we have the Word of God available to us every day, in print and online. Should we not take advantage of this blessing?

But Timothy did not simply know the Scriptures. There are many people who study the Bible for literary purposes, but who don't believe it. There are lecturers who teach it, but don't believe it. Knowing something isn't the same as believing something. Knowing the Bible isn't enough. Believing it is what is necessary. Timothy didn't simply know the Scriptures, he believed them; he was convinced they were true.

Which brings my second challenge. Are we convinced that this faith is true? Have we 'firmly believed' this gospel of Jesus Christ; are we convinced that Jesus is raised from the dead, and is a descendant of David? Because the thrust of Paul's letter to Timothy is that he need not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, nor of Paul who is in chains. Nor should he be afraid to experience suffering for the sake of Christ. Because if Timothy was not convinced, if he was not fully persuaded Jesus is risen from the dead, and will one day return to judge the living and the dead, then Timothy would have been unlikely to endure suffering. Who would suffer for something they only half-heartedly believed? Who would die for something they were not convinced of?

⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁷ Hebrews 4:12

⁸ 2 Timothy 3:15

⁹ Psalm 119:105

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4

Tragically, there are plenty of examples we could give of people who have suffered for a cause, or who have committed suicide for something they believed in. What unites them was the firm conviction that their beliefs were worth suffering for; they were worth the cost.

If we were faced with the prospect of suffering for Jesus, would we suffer? Would we go to prison for our beliefs? Would we be prepared to have our goods confiscated? Would we suffer physical abuse, or worse? Thankfully, today in New Zealand, none of these things are likely to happen. But we need to consider the possibility; because how we answer these questions is a litmus test for our faith.

Timothy was firmly convinced. But perhaps we're not. Perhaps we don't believe; we're happy to come to church, sing some songs, and say some prayers, but deep down we don't believe.

This might have been perfectly fine fifty years ago, when the Western world was still in the grip of Christendom, and everyone was a Christian, whether they believed it or not. But today the world is not so sympathetic to Christianity. While Christians are not actively persecuted, some of our politicians are bold enough to publicly speak out against the Church; and there are plenty of voices in society who are critical of belief in all its forms. The day may come when the Church is actively opposed. What then?

Which leads me back around to where I began. Do our lives reflect our beliefs? Or do we have a "form of godliness but deny its power." In other words, do we behave rightly while at church, do we even serve at church, but deep down we don't really love God: we love ourselves; we love pleasure; we love money. We don't believe. Church is a habit, a hobby, but Jesus Christ is not the true Lord of our lives. Because while we might be able to fool ourselves, and maybe others, we cannot fool Jesus – and one day He will return to judge the living and the dead.

If this does describe you, then I urge you to examine your life, examine your beliefs, trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour, and so align your beliefs with your actions. In short, be authentic.