

The Real Thing
Fall '95

“Coke. . . It’s the Real Thing.” The advertisers touched a nerve. From a marketing standpoint, Coca-Cola’s slogan was a stroke of genius. In a society struggling against slick, Madison Avenue facade, people hungered for truth. They needed “the real thing.”

The church has this need. Gene Getz challenged Christians to embrace a higher standard with books entitled “The Measure of a Man. . . The Measure of a Woman. . . The Measure of the Church.” Francis Schaeffer, author of “How Should We Then Live?”, traveled the country challenging believers to make their profession real. Today’s Christian bookstores are packed with literature written to help people discover, in various areas of their lives, what is, in Christ, “the real thing.”

How does one measure a ministry? How do you know when you’ve found “the real thing?”

It’s an important question. Inner-city ministry has its share of cynics. Sadly, like Jonah, some have no interest at all in redeeming urban communities. Jesus will have strong words for those who discard the Judeas and Samarias of their world.

Certainly it’s a critical question to any who wish to support ministry efforts. But it’s also important to the people in the ministry, the emerging leaders who will one day carry on the work. How do you know you’re doing the right things? What principles will guide you?

Thankfully, God has a standard. In a letter to the church at Corinth, Paul describes what he considers the marks of authentic ministry. These set the standard for what truly is “the real thing.”

Perseverance

One sign of authentic ministry is the mark of perseverance. “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”

(II Cor. 2:14)

Paul uses the imagery of a Roman victory march. The victorious general would lead his soldiers and their captives through the city. Citizens watched from the sidelines, applauding as they passed by. The air was filled with a sweet smell released by the burning of spices in the streets.

Although Paul likens the advancement of the gospel to a Roman parade, he acknowledged the presence of opposition and suffering. Later he writes: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed. . .” (II Cor. 4:8)

To move forward in the midst of hardship was a sign of authenticity. That’s perseverance! It’s proof that God is with you every step of the way. John Perkins once said, “That which does not defeat me makes me stronger.” The first mark of authenticity is perseverance.

Sincerity

Another sign is the mark of sincerity. “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.” (II Cor. 3:17)

Sincerity is one of those words that has suffered a loss of meaning. Today we equate

sincerity with emotional fervor. A person is sincere when they really believe what they're saying. For example, if a person passionately believes that God is dead, we may disagree, but we would consider him sincere in his belief.

Yet sincerity has little to do with emotion or passion. Sincerity involves honesty, genuineness, being true to who and/or what you represent. A salesman, therefore, is sincere not when he delivers a good sales pitch, but when his pitch is true to that which he's selling.

Paul did not peddle the gospel. On the contrary, his words rang true. He spoke as in the presence of God. Paul was careful to represent his God well.

Recently a fellow ministry leader paid me a high complement. "I trust your theology, Ted. You don't just think about what to do; you think through the reasons why you do them." Whether it be ethics or morals, raising funds or relating to staff, the setting of policy or fulfilling a mission, our actions must be consistent with biblical principles and Godly character. That's sincerity: words and actions that reflect the values and character of our God. Sincerity is the second mark of authentic ministry.

Changed Lives

A third sign of authenticity is changed lives. "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry. . ." (II Cor. 3:2f)

Just the other day I received a surprise letter from a former club kid. It reads, in part: "It was about 12 years ago. Ted asked me to attend a Christian Youth camp in Colorado Springs. . . It's as clear in my mind as if it happened yesterday. . . asking for forgiveness. . . asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit. . . When I think of who was my first Christian influence, it was you and Shelly. God Bless You! You are always in my prayers."

One of the results of a "real thing" ministry is that people come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. When God uses your words and actions to bring about spiritual renewal in the lives of people, that's a good sign. It's a mark of authenticity.

Competence

The fourth sign of authentic ministry is the mark of competence. "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant. . ." (II Cor. 3:5f)

Webster defines competence as "the ability or capacity to get something done." Earlier in his letter Paul asked a searching question: "And who is equal to such a task?" His answer is surprisingly blunt: We are! Paul is confident in his competence!

He explains why. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (II Corinthians 4:7) The competence Paul speaks of comes not from human strength but God's. God gives His people the ability to get His work done. Therefore, competence in ministry is a good thing. It's another mark of authenticity.

Something special happened at the Christian Community Development Association's National Conference. Jimmy and I received the 1995 Tom Skinner Leadership Award. My plaque reads: *Presented to Ted Travis, Neighborhood Ministries, For Outstanding Achievement and Commitment to Developing Leaders.*

This was a great honor, to be recognized like this before my peers, mentors and friends. But equally exciting was watching the response of Jimmy. He was in shock! Yet when he stood at the podium to say thanks, he gave glory to God for the work He had done in his life. He was nationally affirmed as a leader. It's a moment we will never forget.

I'm thankful God has given us living letters. But I'm also grateful for the struggles, for through them we've been able to persevere. I have genuine peace about the conduct of this ministry, that in every way we have sought to demonstrate sincerity in what we say and do. And thanks to God's enabling power, we have demonstrated a measure of competence in ministry. "How do you know when you've found 'the real thing?'" I don't know if anyone can be 100% sure. But there is a standard. There are marks of authenticity. And so we press on. We struggle in the trenches, share the good news, fulfill our mission. And, not taking anything for granted, we shall continually examine ourselves against God's standard, in the hopes that, by God's grace, we might be found to be "the real thing."