

Psalm 72 Genesis 41:37-40 2 Corinthians 3:4-9 St. Mark 7:31-37

We want to be real

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal, entitled “The Perils of ‘Wannabe Cool’ Christianity” by Brett McCracken, is very interesting, especially since it was written by a 27-year old evangelical. McCracken addresses the frantic scramble of evangelical leaders in the US to come up with some form of image overhaul for the expression of our Christian Faith...an effort “to rebrand Christianity as hip, countercultural, relevant...to rehabilitate Christianity’s image and make it “cool”...” After a fairly enlightening discussion on the methods some have employed in their attempts to get the attention of our youth... including a web series called MyNakedPastor.com...why anyone would find such a title attractive transcends my understanding...McCracken cuts to the quick and offers his own opinion...or perhaps one could even view his conclusion as a warning. He writes: “If the evangelical Christian leadership thinks that “cool Christianity” is a sustainable path forward, they are severely mistaken. As a twentysomething, I can say with confidence that when it comes to church, (now listen very carefully to this) when it comes to church, we don’t want cool as much as we want real.” Did you hear that? “... when it come to church, we don’t want cool as much as we want real.” “If we are in Christianity in any sort of serious way,” he continues, “it is not because it’s easy or trendy or popular. It’s because Jesus Himself is appealing, and what He says rings true. It’s because the world we inhabit is utterly phony, ephemeral, narcissistic, image-obsessed and sex-drenched – and we want an alternative. It’s not because we want more of the same.”

Thought provoking, don't you think? But the part I want us to focus on today is McCracken's statement about being real... "we don't want cool as much as we want real." The life of Joseph is probably at once one of the most interesting biographies in the Old Testament and, for this reason, also one of the most well known. It is a story of redemption and, in many ways, his life parallels the history of Israel (from slavery to powerful leadership) and also foreshadows the life and ministry and death of our Lord Jesus (from death to resurrection and ascension and coronation and rule at the right hand of God the Father). Now, while there are many examples we may take from the exemplary life of this remarkable young Hebrew to apply to the way we react to adversity and trial, I want to look just at Pharaoh's question in verse 38 of our Old Testament lesson for today. After Joseph had been brought from jail to interpret the troubling dreams of Pharaoh regarding thin cows eating fat cows and not getting fatter and blighted heads of grain devouring good heads of grain...and after he had succeeded in warning Pharaoh through the interpretation of these dreams of seven years of famine following seven years of plenty...the Pharaoh said to his servants in verse 38, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" Something in Joseph's speech and behavior caused the Pharaoh to see something deeper...something significantly and positively different from all the others in his court...something that reflected the God Joseph believed in and Whom he served.

Now the question we, as evangelical Christians need to ask ourselves is quite simply, "When others look at my life, will they see the Spirit of God in me by the way I talk or the way I live or the way I react to adversity or by the way I behave in public or in private?" You see, that's what McCracken and other young evangelicals are asking for.

So, we need to ask ourselves is what we claim to believe real? Is it something that can be seen, touched or experienced by others? There are many things we think are important in the life of the church...things that we think need to change if we are to attract the next generation...and while some of these things do need to be addressed, they are not nearly as important as the need for us to change the way we live out our Christian lives...not only on Sundays, but on every other day of the week.

Many people followed Jesus in the early days of His ministry because of what they thought they could get out of Him. They enjoyed His “coolness”, if you will, especially when He healed them or fed them or when He challenged the stuck-up, stuffy social elite of His day. His life and ministry astonished them beyond measure as they observed Him do all things well. However, many of these one time followers left Him once they realized that He wasn't the free gravy train they thought He was, but those who continued with Him did so because of something they saw in Him...something far more meaningful than bread and fish and healings and exorcisms. They saw that He had the words of eternal life...they saw in the way He lived and in what He said and did that He was indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And it was that something that drew them to Him and held them captive in its loving embrace.

You see, Jesus was real...there was nothing phony about Him...He had no hidden agendas...He did not try to fit in with the hip crowd or even attempt to duplicate their methods. To the contrary, He stood out from the crowd, so to speak, in every way. In many ways, He simply minded His own business, come to think about it, as He never sought to advertise Himself or His ministry. There were no flashy Palestinian Billboards heralding a crusade or a revival. Often we find Jesus almost trying to hide after word

about a miracle got out and He and His disciples were being swamped with those who wanted to see what they could get out of ‘the church’. Jesus had no gimmicks...in fact Isaiah said that there was nothing attractive about Him...He simply went about doing what God was always doing...simply loving His world. And it was this “realness” that both attracted people to Him and repelled people from Him and in the end, it was His “realness” that got Jesus killed...

What St. Paul had to say about his experiences with the church in Corinth also addresses the idea of being real rather than flashy. False teachers had invaded the church at Corinth and they tried to get the parishioners to side with them against the Apostle. They claimed he was weak, slow, unimpressive and unqualified, physically unattractive and intellectually unimpressive. In today’s terms they probably would have said he was not cool. Reading St. Paul’s first and second letters to the Corinthians is certainly not listening to a rap song, now is it? But in his defense St. Paul pointed out that he conducted himself in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity (please note that he qualified what he meant by sincerity), not with fleshly (or worldly) wisdom but by the grace of God....he said that he was not peddling the Word of God, as so many were doing at that time, but rather he lived out the Christian message in godly sincerity, and as this message was from God, he spoke in the sight of God in Christ. Indeed, their very existence as a church backed-up his defense...the church itself was a letter of recommendation for the Apostle...something about his words and deeds and his person had caused these Corinthians to turn from their false gods to the One and only True God as revealed in Jesus.

But again, the bottom-line here is that St. Paul was real. Look at what he said about himself in our Epistle reading. “And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, Who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” While the false teachers played on words and the fears of the parishioners, St. Paul simply lived what he preached. And that simple life was gloriously attractive to many...and it still is. St. Paul is still one of the greatest examples of what real evangelism and real mission work ought to look like...

But in application, tell me, dearest beloved brethren, when people look at your life... when the youth of today look at your life...do they see something real or do they see you trying to live up to the latest fad somewhere out there? Do they see your life as mirroring the world or as something that provides them with a better alternative to the marage our society seems to pursue fanatically? Whose life are you living anyway? Yours...or some character in a book or a soap opera? Or are you trying to recapture your fading youth? Or are you trying to desperately keep up with the technological marvels of our time? Or does your life revolve around you only – your happiness – your well-being – do you sacrifice anything for the sake of what is true and real? Or do you rather sacrifice others to fulfill your fantasies or dreams or ambitions? You see, the world does all those sort of things. They do that because they have nothing else to do...they are, in many ways, empty and so they have to constantly refill the void within themselves to give their existence some meaning. So why would we, the Church...we who have the fullness of the Godhead dwelling within us...we who have the truth...we who have eternal life in

us...why would we want to copy them? For what reason? Unless, of course, we really aren't real in our Christianity after all...then we aren't able to be real, are we?

So, dearest brethren, think on this as you come before the One Whose reality is able to make our lives as real as they ought to be. And ask Him to help you put aside the desire to be anything other than absolutely and totally sold out for Him. Ask Him to help you to make Him number one in your life...in every part of your life, so that when others look at you, they will not see a façade or a show or a prop, or a pitiful attempt to look “cool”, but rather the Spirit of God living in you.

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