

## Authenticity (Part One)

***“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen?”***

Reflection 10 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

This series of reflection on “A New World in the Morning” envisions that we in our time stand on the threshold of a great global spiritual awakening the likes of which have not been seen since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. To this point we’ve examined five large themes which I will reiterate.

#1 – Church attendance is declining essentially across the board in North America as it already has in Western Europe. But this is not at all bad news. It’s when established forms fall apart that they make room for what is better, and the result has always been that faith picks up speed, spreads dynamically, in this case, globally.

#2 – Many people are now weighing churches against Jesus’s teaching and their own experiences and are finding in themselves deeper compassion and spiritual insight than they find in many churches. This accounts in part for declining attendance, but it also offers great hope to those who are committed to the teachings of Jesus.

#3 – What many seek today is a global community dedicated to the care of our planet and committed to justice and equality, committed to solutions to poverty, violence and oppression. Jesus, in fact, in his revolutionary inclusiveness points a way forward.

#4 – Many people today see the church as primarily judgmental. So the church has a branding issue but largely because of how much branding, how much judging, the church has done. If the church quits being so quick to brand, the church itself will not be so often branded.

#5 – Secularism is a factor in all this, but not perhaps as big a factor as many suppose. Secularism, in fact, may be past its prime. It’s running out of answers. And many people today turn away from faith as usual not because they are so secularized but because they seek what is more sacredly diverse. They have learned that truth is often found in multiple interpretations and multiple perspectives. And one day most of us will see that this is good, not bad.

Now we shift our focus a bit to the great good news for our time, to the good news that people everywhere are hungering for, in the words of the angel in the nighttime sky over Bethlehem the night Jesus was born – “the good news of great joy for all the people.” And we begin with the notion of authenticity because what many Millennials, many twentysomethings, many of the generation now coming to maturity, seek is authenticity, being real, being genuine. In truth, a lot of people seek this. They seek authentic faith and practice that makes sense on heart level and out in the streets, not just in the pews. They seek people they can trust. They seek ideas they can trust that make sense in real life. They properly reject leaders who rail against things like abortion or gay rights until it’s their son or daughter who faces these issues. And they seek churches that are committed not to their own self-preservation but to serving people: the poor, the needy, the lonely, the left behind, the outcasts. And this has always been the concern of God, the concern of Scripture, the concern of Jesus.

In Isaiah 58, the prophet addresses the people who seem to seek God out, who seem eager to know God's ways, "as if," he proclaims, "they were a nation that does what is right" (verse 2). They seem eager for God to come near them. But they wonder why their fasting isn't working. They're doing everything right in their worship.

"Yet," as the prophet goes on,  
 "on the day of your fasting,  
 you do as you please  
 and exploit all your workers.  
 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife.  
 You cannot fast as you do today  
 and expect your voice to be heard on high."

And then comes one of the truly great texts of all time.

"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
 only a day for a man to humble himself?  
 Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
 and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?  
 Is that what you call a fast,  
 a day acceptable to the Lord?  
 Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
 to loose the chains of injustice  
 and untie the cords of the yoke,  
 to set the oppressed free  
 and break every yoke?  
 Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
 and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter  
 – when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
 and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

It's the same concern for authenticity that drives the prophet Micah in Micah 6:6 when he answers the human question, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" And our minds immediately go to ritual and worship patterns and doctrine ("I believe in the Holy Trinity, in baptism for the forgiveness of sins, in the deity of Christ, in communion every Lord's Day, in a cappella music, in the Day of Judgment and the Second Coming."). Or perhaps our minds go to something dramatic (in our text, verse 6-7):

"Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
 with calves a year old?  
 [Yes, yes, says the priest.]  
 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
 with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
 [Yes, yes, says the priest.]  
 Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression  
 (as, in fact, King Ahaz in Micah's day had done),

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

God, we'll offer you blood, blood and more blood, thousands of rams, even the blood of our children. What is it you want, God? And then we come to verse 8. What the Lord requires is something so much more basic. It's kind of a "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" moment.

"He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly  
and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God."

And of course Micah also means to keep the Sabbath, to observe kosher, to destroy idols, to offer all the sacrifices of Leviticus, to fast on Yom Kippur, to tithe, to maintain absolute sexual purity, and to dress as God commanded. Or does he? These are all great things. Holy things. Sacred things. Great gifts from God if properly understood. But useless, certainly misleading, if you are not acting justly and loving mercy and walking humbly with your God. If you're not living authentic lives.

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*