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## Real, Authentic Authenticity

*It's an attribute that disappears as soon as it's intentionally sought.*

Sharon Hodde Miller

The top-read Hermeneutics post of all time was Karen Swallow Prior's "[Doing Authentic Ministry with My Smokin' Hot Bride](#)," published this July. To avoid misleading any church planters who might read the piece in earnest, the subtitle helpfully clarified that the post was a list of "the worst ever Christian clichés."



Among the greatest offenders was the overused virtue of authenticity. Listed under "Cliché Category #2: Good Words Gone Bad," it elicited quite a few "Amens" from readers.

Christians are not alone in their over-usage. Last week *The New York Times* featured a segment titled "[Authentic? Get Real](#)," in which reporter Stephanie Rosenbloom highlighted the popularity of authenticity as a self-descriptor among politicians and television personalities. Everyone from Michele Bachmann ("I'm a real person") to Anderson Cooper ("I've always tried to just be authentic and real") has touted their authenticity, often citing the attribute as the secret to their success.

Politicians are not alone. Rosenbloom noted that "legions of marketers and social networking coaches are preaching that to succeed online — on Twitter, Facebook, Match.com — we must all 'be authentic!' A proposed panel at next year's South by Southwest interactive conference promises to teach attendees 'how to be authentic and human without embarrassing yourself.'"

The truth is, Rosenbloom's piece just as well described Christians as those outside the church. And to the extent that our society values "being real," authenticity is near to becoming a core American ethic.

Of course, trying to be authentic poses problems. As communications specialist Jeff Pooley told the NYT, "What you can't do is be told by a social media guru to act authentic and still be authentic." What you end up with is "calculated authenticity," or something like stage management.

Consistent with its most common usage, the word *authentic* means "not false" or "not an imitation." It also carries the meaning of "conforming to fact" or "same as the original." These latter definitions offer some insight into the term's rising popularity among secular and Christian audiences. Americans are tired of being manipulated and lied to. Among politicians who purport to represent the people, and Christians who claim to represent Christ, authenticity is increasingly rare and therefore increasingly precious.

Authenticity should not be dismissed as a passing trend or cliché. Though it never appears explicitly in Scripture, authenticity is a thoroughly biblical idea. [1 Peter 1:7](#) tells us that genuine faith brings glory to God; [Ephesians 4:25](#) instructs Christians to "put off falsehood;" Paul regularly condemned false prophets, false teachers, and those engaging in "false humility." Authentic faith and authentic fellowship are valuable aims for the believer. I'd like to propose two perspectives for maintaining a Christian notion of it.

First, authenticity is a discipline that requires time. It cannot be flipped on like a light switch, and it is not maintained without work. I say this as one who struggles to write and teach from my true self, despite my greatest efforts. Both my speaking and my writing tend to mimic the styles of teachers and authors I admire. Finding my own voice, or even figuring out who I really am, has been a challenge.



In fact, my entire life has been a struggle to get out from behind the faces I put on: I want to be perceived as having it all together, as being the perfect wife, as being an intelligent Christian woman, as being compassionate, kind, and inspirational. I have justified my slavery to these goals because they are mostly noble, but the method is entirely wrong. When rooted in a desire to be liked rather than in the spirit of Christ, each one of these “fruits” is an illusion, a fake.

This leads me to my second point about authenticity: It can only be had in Christ. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. . . . The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. You real, new self will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him. . . . Christ will indeed give you a real personality.”

Lewis makes this statement as one who understands the deceptiveness and destructiveness of sin. Only God knows who we really are — that is, who he created each one of us to be. Sin leads us to construct alternative versions of ourselves, selves we prefer, selves that are more comfortable, selves that bring us the most glory. We may try to construct selves that will honor God, but even our best intentions will be perverted when working off a manmade blueprint.

In Christ, however, we become our true selves. God opens our eyes to our sins, to the self-deception, to the things in our lives that are not of him. Then he transforms us, conforming us to the only perfect human being who ever lived. In Christ, we stop operating according to the constraints of social expectations, personal insecurities, and lies. Rather than live in ways that are subhuman, we finally live in a manner worthy of God’s vision for humanity.

That is authenticity. It is a “human being fully alive” (Irenaeus). It is not built in a day, nor is it maintained easily. Like humility, realizing we are closer to it ensures that we will lose it. Yet the nature of authenticity is also good news. Because authenticity cannot be faked, because it does not, ironically, rest in our natural selves, our only option for being truly authentic people is to lose ourselves, casting ourselves on Christ’s mercy, joyfully acknowledging that Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness. The more we realize our desperate state and need of God’s grace, the more authentically human we will be.

posted by Katelyn Beaty

*(Article taken from [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/09/real\\_authentic\\_authenticity.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/09/real_authentic_authenticity.html))*