



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

THE REAL DEAL

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I first saw this picture 4 years ago on a trip to Atlanta. USA Today was doing a story on a trend in Texas they called "Cowboy Church." The article described the churches this way:

Straight-shooter, sinner-saved-by-grace theology, throwing a rope out to the lost, the lonely and those who long for an unvarnished faith. No fancy duds. No politicized preaching. It's come as you are, in spirit, spurs and Stetsons. It's bucking bulls and plumbing Bibles in a dusty arena, or dropping a hard-won dollar in a boot on the back table after a punchy sermon.

At Cross Trails church in Fairlie, Texas, they have the 10 commandments posted on the wall, but in a cowboy dialect. Here's how they read.

Just one God.
Honor yer Ma and Pa.
No tellin' tales or gossipin'.
Git yerself to Sunday meetin'.
Put nothin' before God.
No foolin' around with another fella's gal.
No killin'.
Watch yer mouth.
Don't take what ain't yers.
Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff.

A pastor interviewed in the article said this about his cowboy church. "Our floor is the same dirt-brown as the sand out here, so you can come to church straight from riding or feeding your stock. We don't pass an offering plate because a lot of people think churches are just out for their money...we get people who will not go to church anywhere else, people who haven't been in 30 or 50 years. They've got issues. They may have a divorce, a child in jail, a drinking or a drug problem. We preach about love. Our people already know their lives are screwed up. They need me to tell them there's a God who knows this and cares and wants to help them get back on track."

What hooked me into the article though was that picture. The photographer really captured the honest emotion of the moment. Clint Ellyson was the man getting baptized, and he's no cowboy at all. He works in marketing for a coffee business. But he still

found himself attracted to a cowboy church. He said it's, "the first church where I've felt at home. It's given my life a 180-degree turn. Now I look at people differently and I am more open to others. I don't have to worry about how they perceive me."

What's the draw of these churches? If it were anywhere but Texas, I would say it was some kind of novelty factor. But the opposite seems to be true. People are going there because they feel like it is more real.

We've been talking about New Day's core values for several weeks now, and I would just like to recap what we've looked at so far:

1. Worship is central.
2. Truth must be well-told.
3. The church is a mission outpost.
4. Every Christian is a minister.

Today we're looking at value #5, which is: ***Authenticity rules the day. Transparency is key in a hypocrisy-sensitive culture.*** We've said before that one of the biggest reasons people give for not being involved with a church is that they think it's full of hypocrites. That may be just a cop-out, but churches have had their share of people whose lives don't look much like Jesus. So one of our goals at New Day is to help eliminate that objection to Christianity. We want to bring who we really are as close as possible to who we say we are.

We want to be authentic. Authenticity is a big buzzword right now. People are searching for what's real, because it's so elusive in our society. Everyone's tired of being taken in or duped or treated like a target market. Several years ago, there was an article in an advertising industry magazine about how difficult it is to promote anything to Gen Xers – those people that are roughly between the ages of 25 and 40 now. As a whole, that age group has become very savvy at tuning out sales messages. The article said, "As soon as they think you're trying to sell them something, they turn off and walk away."

Why? Because we don't buy what we're hearing. Whether it's in relationships, politics, religion or advertising, people can sense when they're being played or manipulated, and nobody likes it. Everyone is looking for something that's genuine and substantial and truly meaningful.

The trouble is, we're trying to find it in a society that is more and more about illusion. Image is everything in our culture.

So when we look around for something real, it's hard to find. Even churches can be guilty of following the same path, trying to create a certain image to attract more people. We want to look hip and successful and fun so people will want to be associated with Christianity. We think we have to imitate the rest of society to be relatable.

But I'm afraid that when we do that, we miss out on an incredible opportunity. I'll go even further than that – I think the church has a God-given responsibility to be radically real. That's what people need from a church, whether they know it or not. Church should be the one place people can find what's truly authentic. Because at its very heart, the message of Jesus is all about honesty. It's all about owning our broken condition instead of faking wholeness. It's all about acknowledging a need for God rather than pretending to have it all together.

This is one value that takes ruthless commitment. Because for a church to be authentic means that I as an individual person need to be authentic. And transparency goes against my instincts for self preservation. I don't want to be that exposed and vulnerable. But without a doubt, the more authentic and honest a church is, the greater impact it will have on people's lives.

Several years ago, I worked with a woman whose father was a Chinese chef. As a result, she couldn't STAND your average franchise Chinese restaurant. She would say with a disgusted tone, "That's not real Chinese food." A little white boy like me might be satisfied with Panda Express, but somebody who knows the difference won't want to settle for an Americanized imitation. They want the real thing.

People want the real thing when it comes to church. They're tired of settling for less. So where do we start? How do we make sure we keep authenticity a priority? In his letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul gives us a glimpse of his own heart for this subject. His comments can provide a bit of a road map to help us cultivate our own authenticity.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-10

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed-God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.

If anyone ever gives you a piece of jewelry and you're wanting to find out if the diamond is real or a fake, there are several different tests you can do. You can try the old "see if it will scratch a piece of glass" trick. You can hold it under a black light and see if it turns

blue or yellow. You can try turning it upside down and seeing if you can read a newspaper through it. Any of those approaches may tell you what you've got. But any of those could also be fooled. Some fake stones scratch glass. Some may look the same under a black light. Some might read the same when you turn them upside down. You have to use the combination of several different tests to be certain whether or not you've got a diamond.

Paul was emphasizing his own authenticity to the Thessalonians, and in the space of a couple paragraphs, he puts himself through several different tests. That's important, because most people are going to have more than one level of authenticity they're looking for in the church. If we're going to adequately address the subject, we need to take a hard look at ourselves in three areas. First,

Is our message authentic?

Are we saying something true about God? Ultimately, I think people want to know if God himself is authentic. Is he for real? Is the Christian take on him the right one?

It's not our responsibility to prove the validity of God to anyone. He's perfectly capable of defending himself. Our job is to make sure that what we're saying about him really lines up with what he's revealed about himself.

That's the first criteria Paul addresses: *Is what we're saying faithful to the truth?* Paul insisted that what he was telling the Thessalonians was free of error. Getting the story right mattered to him. He went so far as to write,

Galatians 1:8-9

Let me be blunt: If one of us -- even if an angel from heaven! -- were to preach something other than what we preached originally, let him be cursed.

If you were to review church history from the very beginning up until now, you would see that it has always been a battle to preserve the true gospel. Ideas are constantly being introduced that try to twist it in some way. The truth has managed to survive centuries of attempts to distort it or discredit it. But it takes constant vigilance to make sure that false thinking doesn't creep into our own concepts of God.

The only way to do that is by regularly holding our own ideas up to what God has revealed about himself, particularly what we see in Jesus' own life. We compare our ideas to what we know about Christ.

Roberta Bondi is a retired professor of theology. For years, she struggled with praying to God as Father, because her relationship with her human father had been so painful. Roberta always felt like she was a disappointment to him, and that feeling of inadequacy carried over into the way she imagined God felt about her.

Then one day she went back and read the last conversation Jesus had with his disciples before he died. He tells them he's going away to be with the Father. Then Philip responds.

John 14:8-9

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

As Roberta read those words, it hit her that her picture of what God the Father was like didn't line up with what she knew to be true about Jesus. He told his disciples to get their notion of the Father from his life, which was very different than her dad's life. Jesus cared for the outcasts. He valued women. He treated people with dignity and respect. And he was approachable as a friend – not a threatening, distant figure she couldn't relate to. She recognized the shortcomings of what she thought about God and was able to bring it back into line with reality.

All of us have those distorted images of God in different corners of our mind, ways we picture him that are slightly off. A commitment to authenticity means a commitment to unearthing those concepts and comparing them to what we know about Jesus. Is what we're saying faithful to the truth?

In addition to looking at the message we're communicating, a second question for us is

Is our character authentic?

Are we who we say we are? Ravi Zacharias once said,

Why is it that a community that talks so much about supernatural transformation shows so little of that transformation? We will have to be men and women who embody the message that we are preaching, whose lives are faithful to the claims we are making.

Do our words and deeds line up? Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians realized he had personal integrity. It wasn't just about his words being believable – his life had to be as well.

You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed-God is our witness.

There's a term in desktop publishing called WYSIWIG. It's an acronym for the phrase "what you see is what you get." It's a computer's ability to make what you see on screen look like what will actually come out of the printer. I take it for granted that what I type into the computer will be what I see once it prints, but actually, it takes a lot of

programming to make that happen. Just think back to the days of green screens when computers first came out.

We want to be WYSIWIG people – where what you see is what you get. That doesn't just happen though – it takes work to make the two line up.

In fact, it's not going to happen all the time. When you have this many people together, sooner or later, one of us is going to make a mistake, hurt someone's feelings, or just flat out sin. It's inevitable – no matter how committed we are to authenticity. What we say and what we do won't always align perfectly. That brings up a corollary question:

What do we do when they don't?

So we've screwed up. Now what? How do we act when we've made a bad choice? This is where authenticity gets one of its biggest tests.

The Catholic church has seen its share of high profile abuse scandals in recent years. It's always sad to hear how the victims have suffered so horribly. What seems to have been almost equally harmful to them has been the way in which the problem has at times been ignored, denied or swept under the rug.

I'm not here to pick on the Catholic church – that's just one obvious example. Ever since Adam and Eve hid from God after their bad choice, people have been doing whatever possible to cover up mistakes and shortcomings.

But if that's what we do, we lose authenticity. I've quoted it often before, and I'll quote it many times in the future, but Frederick Buechner hit the nail on the head when he said, "A family is only as sick as its secrets." If we want health, if we want forgiveness, if we want restoration, if we want to be genuine, we have to pursue transparency.

People don't need a perfect church filled with perfect people. But they do need a church that practices open, honest communication when failures happen. We can't have authentic character without that.

That's hard because many people in church have grown up in families where the rules of operation are unhealthy. They might say:

- Don't talk about what's true, because then we'll have to deal with it.
- Don't share struggles, or people will think you're weak.
- Don't feel, emotions are dangerous.
- Don't trust – you'll only end up getting hurt.

This is a church family, and it can take a long time to unlearn those destructive rules of operation. It requires patience and mercy as we watch our brothers and sisters learn the skills of honest communication.

But in what other family do we have a Father who says, “come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest?” What other family can promise that “nothing in all creation will be able to separate us” from their love? That’s God’s family. Here we have the freedom to be open and honest about who we are, in fact we NEED to be open and honest, because that’s how this family works.

A second character question Paul raises is *What’s our source of identity?*

Look again at his words:

...we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

One of the best musicals of all times is Sunday in the Park with George, which is about the life of George Seurat, who was a pioneer in French Impressionistic painting. He was one of the first to develop the idea of painting with dots of colors that from a distance blend and form a new color. It was a radical new technique at the time and people didn’t understand it. One day, an art critic approaches him while he’s painting and says, “Why are you doing this? Why keep changing things?” And George replied, “Because I don’t paint for your approval.”

So much of what I do in life feels like I am painting for other people’s approval. Will you like me? Do you think I’m a good person? Will you be my friend? It’s hard to be yourself if you are striving to be what other people want.

Is my source of identity in what other people think of me, or in what God thinks of me? Paul says the only approval we need is from God himself. He’s the one who determines whether or not we’re authentic. The source of our genuine character is him, and until we discover that, we’re not going to be able to rest secure in our own identity.

I love the old story Margery Williams wrote about the Velveteen Rabbit, whose sense of self was so shaky as he compared himself to other toys. He couldn’t see how he could compete. The conversation he had with the rocking horse about it was so well written:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

We are real because we are loved by God. We know who we are because we're his. We are approved by him, and when we know he loves us as his children, we can't be ugly anymore. He makes us real. He gives us our identity. He makes us authentic. That's the source of our true character.

Our message must be authentic. Our character must be authentic. A final question to ask ourselves is this:

Are our relationships authentic?

Do we really care about each other? Paul emphasized to the Thessalonians how much he truly cared about them:

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

There was obviously a genuine, caring relationship between Paul and that community. And they knew it.

When people talk about a church being hypocritical, sometimes they're referring to character issues or moral failures. But I would bet you that nine out of ten times those concerns would be overridden if they felt the relationships they had with people at church were authentic. Paul was the one who wrote, "Love must be sincere." If we're not making a connection with people on a personal basis, we're not being authentic. Christianity is a relational faith.

There are a couple ways for us to measure the authenticity of our relationships. *The first has to do with motive.*

When I was in drama, actors learning lines for their characters would always ask, "What's my motivation?" They wanted to get in the heads of their characters and understand why they said what they said.

What's our motivation? Why do we share the message of Jesus with other people? Paul repeatedly told the Thessalonians motives were pure. He wasn't trying to gain anything for himself by telling them the gospel. He wasn't hoping they would give him money. What's our real reason for sharing Jesus with people – because we love them or because we want something from them?

Pastor Pete Scazzero asked that question of himself and realized he didn't like what he saw. He writes,

My emphasis was on “going to make disciples” and growing the church. I needed people to respond. It wasn't so much that they were “scalps,” but there was something I needed them to do and be, so I could get Christ's mission done more effectively. There was a whole world out there in need of Jesus Christ – churches to be planted, people to be trained, poor folks to be fed.

It became difficult to distinguish between loving people for who they are versus using them for how they could join with the mission. Did I need these people to be converted to Christ in order to build the church or my program? Or could I simply delight in them as created beings made in the image of God?

What's our agenda? What's our motivation? For our relationships to be authentic, we need to examine why we do what we do, why we say what we say. Are we driven by genuine care for the other person, or are we hoping to get something out of it? Is it more about our needs or theirs?

Another way we can test the authenticity of our relationships is by asking.

Are we sharing ourselves?

Paul loved the Thessalonians so much, he says he wasn't just sharing the gospel with them – he was sharing his life with them.

It's a whole lot more work and risk to do that. It takes time and vulnerability. But church was never intended to be an information dump. It's where two or three are gathered in his name. It's the collection of Christians together.

We'll talk more in depth about this next week as we look at love and reconciliation. Our point this morning is that authenticity is measured in part by the way we relate to one another. Are we just about words, or are we investing ourselves in other people?

Our example is Jesus. For as much time as he spent teaching with people, he also just lived with them. He went fishing. He went for long walks. He ate dinner and went to weddings and funerals. He let them see his own emotions and inner thoughts. He cried in front of them. And through all that, they could see how much he cared for them. He wasn't teaching a faceless crowd – he was sharing with friends. What he had to say took on added credibility because his life was so visible.

The old Puritan preachers believed that they shouldn't let their churches get any bigger than where they could know the people personally. They felt it was important for the congregation to not just come hear them Sunday mornings, but to see how they lived during the week.

Talking to people about God is easy. Living like it's really true in front of them – that's the hard part. As I said at the beginning, this value of authenticity only holds true of us as a church if it holds true for us individually, in the way we relate to each other at New Day and the way we relate to the rest of the people in our lives.

Scott is going to come and sing a song for us that's really a prayer. As you listen to it and pray it to God in your own heart, I'll leave you with some questions to consider:

Where do I need more authenticity in my life? Maybe I don't feel very solid in my grasp of the message of Jesus. Maybe I have some character issues I know I'm not being honest about. Maybe some of my relationships have been insincere. Where would God have me begin to cultivate greater authenticity this morning?

Second, where am I looking for approval? Am I still painting for other people, or do I feel like I've become real in my identity as God's child?