

Knowing God in the Real World

by Jon Paulien (Pacific Press, 2000)

Chapter Six

“Are You For Real?”

In this concluding chapter we probe into the ultimate issue of Christian faith in the real world. Does it make a difference most people would notice? Is it a genuine expression of reality or is it an escape from reality, an “opiate of the people?” What does it mean to be a real Christian? What does it mean to be authentic or genuine? We are all familiar with the concept of “psychological masks,” where a person tries to show themselves as something that they are not. This can be especially tempting when you are among Christians, because everybody knows what kind of behavior is expected. If you don't feel very “Christian” that day, it is very easy to put out the appropriate signals without really meaning it. But phony Christianity does great harm in the secular world.

If you had asked me thirty years ago if I was a “real Christian,” I would have had no trouble answering: “Absolutely! What you see is what you get. I'm the ultimate straight

shooter." And I would have been wrong.

I was visiting the Riverside Church in New York City one Sunday with a couple of friends. It has one of the five largest classical organs in the world. Being an organist myself I never got enough of it. The organist that day was Frederick Swann. He was internationally famous, with dozens of recordings. And he did magnificently that Sunday morning.

When the worship service was over, I took my friends up on the platform to get a closer look at the organ. And since I knew quite a bit about such things, I began to explain some of the different features of the organ. As I talked about the organ, the audience began to grow. It was fun having a bigger audience. So I began to expand on the story a little. And the audience got even bigger. Then suddenly I began to realize that the people weren't looking at me anymore. They were looking behind me. I turned looked around and was standing face to face with Frederick Swann. He looked me in the eye and said, "You'd better get your facts straight, Sonny, before you open your mouth." He turned around and walked away. Have you ever wished that the ground would open up and swallow you? I learned a very painful lesson in authenticity that day.

Honestly, now, are you for real? Are you really the person you seem to be? If you had asked me that question twenty-five years ago, I would have said, "Absolutely. What you see is what you get." But even then, I doubt that the evidence would back me up!

You see, I was just starting out in ministry. And a strange thing seemed to happen. Every Sabbath I would get a big headache. It would start in the middle of Sabbath School and last until the middle of the afternoon. And I couldn't understand why. After a year or so the Lord finally revealed to me what the problem was. The problem was that I was trying to be someone that I

was not. I was trying to be the kind of pastor that I thought everyone wanted me to be. And it was making me sick. Then the Lord passed on this message to my mind, "I didn't ask you to be Billy Graham. I didn't ask you to be H.M.S. Richards. I didn't ask you to be George Vandeman. All I want is for you to be Jon Paulien. And do that for Me." What a relief!

Honestly now, are you for real? Are you really the person you seem to be? If you had asked me that question ten years ago, I would have said, "Absolutely. What you see is what you get. I'm the ultimate straight shooter." But again I doubt that the evidence would have backed me up!

About ten years ago I heard a particular preacher for the first time. And he had an incredible impact on me. Whenever he spoke, my heart would burn within me. It was as if he could read my soul. It was similar to the way I sometimes feel when reading Ellen White. But he was not a prophet. He made that very, very clear. He was just an ordinary Christian speaking from the heart. And yet his words had prophetic power.

What was it that made his preaching so powerful? Ninety percent of his illustrations were from his own personal experience. And when he offered illustrations from his own experience, he almost always talked about his failures and not his successes. That led me to think about my own sermons. And I began to realize that when I gave illustrations from my own personal experience I always talked about my successes. I almost never talked about my failures. So even ten years ago I came to realize that I was still using the pulpit to polish my image.

A New Look At Laodicea

Honestly now, are you for real? Are you really the person you seem to be? A few years

ago I was sitting in a restaurant with several of the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. In the middle of lunch one of them turned to and said, "Jon, what do you think is the greatest need of the Seventh-day Adventist church today?"

It was probably because of this history of mine that I responded the way I did, "Oh, probably to stop living a lie."

At first my answer puzzled me. But the more I thought about what I said, the more sense it made. I believe that one of the great challenges we face as a church is the challenge to stop trying to put on a show for the world. To stop trying to act as if we were perfect, and instead seek to be honest and open with regard to our faith.

But don't take my word for it. Just ask Jesus what the greatest need of the Adventist Church is. He said so in plain terms in Revelation 3, in the message to the church of Laodicea. There Jesus brings His message home to His end-time church. Notice the words of verse 17:

"You say, 'I am rich.
I have acquired wealth
and do not need a thing.'
But you do not realize
that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked."

According to the text, what is Laodicea's problem? The problem is that what Laodicea says and who she is are two different things. Laodicea has put on a mask of riches but she lives in a reality of poverty. She's put on a mask of beautiful clothing but she there is the reality of nakedness. She claims to be living on easy street, but she is actually wretched and homeless.

What does she need? Notice verse 18:

"I counsel you to buy from me
gold refined in the fire,
so you can become rich;

and white clothes to wear,
so you can cover your shameful nakedness;
and salve to put on your eyes,
so you can see."

I want to focus particularly on this last part of verse 18, the problem of spiritual blindness. The answer to Laodicea's problem is medicine for the eyes so that the vision will become clear. Laodicea is living in a spiritual fantasy world. Her self-image is totally unrelated to Jesus' opinion of her, totally unrelated to ultimate reality. He offers to give her what she does not have, a clear perception of her condition.

Jesus sums up in verse 19: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent." Jesus speaks this message, not because He hates Laodicea but because He loves her. And He wants to give her this message so that she can be healed and be real again.

In these verses Jesus identifies a two-fold problem. First, Laodicea needs to repent for its phoniness, its inauthenticity. Without such repentance she will never be what Jesus desires of her. But the second problem is even more serious, she doesn't even know she is faking it. She is totally unaware that her spiritual claims are inauthentic.

In applying this text to the current situation in the Adventist church, I am not pointing the finger at others. For one thing, Jesus is passing judgment here, not me. And for another thing, it would be inappropriate for me to accuse others of something I am guilty of myself. My whole history is a history of being something I'm not. So please understand, the problem of inauthenticity is not just your problem or the church's problem, it is our problem, it is my problem.

I know that this problem is not limited to North America. Wherever I go people come up

to me and say, "There are things going on here that I want to tell you about because you are from another country. If I say these things here, people will use them against me. If I talk to you I can speak freely" This is the great fear of Laodicea. We are afraid that if we reveal who we really are people will turn against us.

The Struggle To Be Real

What does it mean to be real? It is when the outside and the inside are the same. It is when the things we reveal about ourselves are in accord with the real truth about ourselves. This problem of "inside and outside" was familiar to Paul also.

"For our appeal
 does not arise out of deception
 or out of uncleanness,
 or out of some kind of trick.

"On the contrary,
 just as we were approved by God
 to be entrusted with the gospel
 so we speak
 not to please people
 but rather to please God,
 who tests our hearts."

"For we never came to you
 with a word of flattery,
 as you know,
nor on a pretext of greed
 God is witness,
nor did we seek glory from other people
 not from you
 and not from anyone else."

Apparently Paul was responding to an accusation that attacked his inner motives. He was accused of being a phony. And he agrees with his opponents that ministry is not immune to this problem. People can enter ministry for a lot of reasons. They may enter ministry because they

think it is glorious to stand up in front of people. They may enter it to gain money. According to Paul, some may even enter ministry to gain sexual advantage (the word “uncleanness” in verse 3)! Paul is certainly not dancing around the issue in these verses.

Paul speaks to the need for pure motives, not just pure actions. If you study this passage in the Greek, it is even more frank than it is in translation. Paul speaks directly of sexual motives, of financial motives, and of glory and praise motives. There are a lot of reasons why a person might choose to serve the Lord, and many of them are not spiritually healthy. What scares me most, however, is that those of us in ministry may not even be aware of some of these deeper motives. It is easy to fake it. It is natural to put on a mask.

I remember a friend I went to school with. He was one of those rebellious types. He would always park his car in the handicapped parking spot, or front of the garbage dumpster. He would sit in the back of the class and throw balled-up bits of paper around and generally thumb his nose at church authority. Years later he was a student in a doctoral class that I was teaching. He sat in the very last row all slouched down. And almost every day he would raise his hand and talk about "them" and how "they" were ruining the church. He was speaking about the administrators of the church.

Finally one day I stopped him. I said, "You know what? 'Them' is 'us.'"

It just happened that there were three conference presidents and five union presidents in the class. So I said, "Those who hold a doctorate in ministry degree will be the leaders of the church tomorrow. What are you going to do if they make you president of a conference?"

What happened next was truly ironic. Three weeks after the class was over I got a phone call from him. He had just been elected vice-president of one of the largest conferences in North

America. I said to him, "Here is your chance to demonstrate that you can do it better."

And he must have done well. A few years later he became a conference president in another place. I was interested to find out how he was surviving among "them." One day I noticed that we had been assigned to the same General Conference committee. We would be together that day. I entered the room and saw him on the opposite side. I came rushing over, planning to give him our usual high-five. Then he turned around. He was wearing a three-piece suit, and his elbow seemed attached to his side. He held out his hand in a dignified manner and said in a quiet voice, "Hello, Jon. So nice to see you again." I was shocked! In a matter of three years he had become one of "them!"

Now don't get me wrong, he's a really great guy. But this story reminds me that it is totally natural to try to live up to the image that people have of you. It is human to want to be well thought of. It is hard not to change when you find yourself in a position of some importance. It is natural to try to build a sense of self-worth through performance, image-making, and the praise of others. The good news is that my friend is finding himself again. I've heard that he is beginning to set a trend toward a more open and honest style of leadership. But there is no question that it was a great struggle for him. I know because I am no different, it is natural to try to be someone you're not.

Why is it so natural? Because we are afraid to be real. We are afraid to show our true selves. We are afraid of what other people might think. We're afraid of how they'll respond to us. That's nothing new under the sun, the same thing happened in Jesus' day. Notice John 12:42-43:

"Even among the priests
many believed in Him,
but because of the Pharisees

they would not confess it
In order that they might not be thrown out of the synagogue;
for they loved the glory of men
more than the glory of God."

According to the Gospel of John, when we do the things we do because we love the praise of other people, we will not be doing the things that give glory to God. Jesus goes even deeper in John 3:20: "For everyone who practices evil hates the light, and will not come to the light for fear that his works might be exposed." Apparently there is something really scary about letting your true self show. Just ask me. I've had plenty of experience.

The Mechanisms of Defense

Why is it so hard to be REAL? Why is it so hard to be AUTHENTIC? There is a whole division of psychology related to what are known as defense mechanisms. It seems that human beings have built-in mechanisms of defense. They kick in the minute we're under pressure emotionally or psychologically.

Let me illustrate how defense mechanisms work. Let's suppose I was teaching in a large classroom one day. Then Randy Johnson walks in the back door of the class with a baseball in his hand. For those who never heard of him, Randy Johnson is six-foot-ten and can throw a baseball 101 miles per hour with his left hand! Let's suppose that he takes exception to something I told the class and launches his 101 mile-per-hour fastball right toward my nose. Would I stop teaching and ponder my response? "Well, let's see, Randy Johnson just launched a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball toward my nose. I suppose I should start thinking about getting out of the way!" I don't think so! Much faster than you can say "Randy Johnson" I would have

my hands up in front of my face to block this attack on my life! I wouldn't need to think about it. I wouldn't even be conscious I had done do until after I felt the sting of the baseball on my wrists. The reaction would be automatic.

Just as there are natural defense mechanisms at the physical level, so there are natural defense mechanisms at the emotional and psychological level. If someone says something hurtful about us, we may react defensively without even being aware that we have done so. We are quick to defend our honor and reputation even when we argue loud and long that we are not acting defensive!

At a basic level, these mechanisms of defense are self-deceptions. When things go wrong, when we fail at something important, or when we are under verbal or emotional attack, we move quickly to our own defense, whether we intend to or not. In other words, we have ways of deceiving ourselves so that we can hang-on to our self-esteem and avoid guilt and pain. Defense mechanisms help us avoid feeling bad about ourselves. And if knowing the truth is going to make us feel bad about ourselves, most of us would prefer not to know the truth.

Defense mechanisms are so natural that they can even be quite funny, because we recognize ourselves when we hear about them. Let me share a good example of a defense mechanism from the Bible. According to the biblical account, Saul was trying to kill David. But what does he do? He goes around telling everybody "David's lying in wait to kill me" (1 Sam 22:8, 13; 24:9) This is a defense mechanism call "projection." Saul did not want to think of himself as a brutal murderer. So he projected onto David the evil motivations that he himself was acting on. Anytime you feel bad about yourself, it's easy to start blaming everybody else.

Another defense mechanism is called "displacement." The boss hollers at you at work.

But you can't talk back to the boss because you'll probably get fired, so you go home and holler at your spouse instead. Your spouse doesn't want to mess with you right now so he or she hollers at the children instead. They've been taught not to talk back to their parents, so they deal with it by kicking the dog in frustration. That's called "displacement." You express inappropriate anger in one situation that is really directed at some other person or situation. The situation can only come full circle if your boss comes over to dinner and the dog bites him!

Another defense mechanism is known as "sublimation." Sublimation occurs when a person has urges inside that are socially unacceptable. Sublimation helps a person channel those unacceptable urges into an expression that is socially acceptable. For example, a young man might have a murderous anger toward his father. But it is socially unacceptable to murder your father (not to mention the law of God). So the young man channels this urge into a more acceptable path; he may go into hunting, or he may become a football player. Violence in those fields is even commended! The young man might even become a surgeon! Now don't get me wrong, I didn't say that all surgeons have a murderous anger toward their father! I'm simply pointing out that many of us do not fully understand the reasons why we do what we do. Many a sweet and thoughtful young man turns into a raging animal on the football field. One might well ask where that rage comes from.

The well-known Christian psychiatric institute, the Minirth-Meier Clinic, has produced a book called Introduction to Psychology and Counseling. It contains a section called "The Mechanisms of Defense". They make a number of points about defense mechanisms with supporting evidence from the Bible. Let me share a few here.

(1) *Defense mechanisms are automatic reactions to frustration and conflict.* They move

into action without our intention. Like our reactions to flying baseballs, we have all experienced this at an emotional level. Somebody may say just one little word in just the right tone of voice. We turn around and react strongly! We didn't plan to do that. We sometimes call these incidents "red buttons." It is as if someone pressed a red button and we reacted in a predictable fashion. The reaction is automatic.

(2) *Defense mechanisms are unconscious.* Most of the time we don't even know we're doing employing them. They are inner ways of protecting us from painful emotions and experiences. For example, we may find ourselves rejecting people with problems similar to ours because they remind us of ourselves in painful ways (Rom 2:1-3). This dynamic is very common in parents because no one is more like you than your children. Parents are often unaware of the reasons they react negatively toward their children.

(3) The inner purpose of defense mechanisms is *to maintain a FALSE sense of self-esteem* and to avoid anxiety. Because we don't feel good about ourselves, our self-esteem is low. And we will do whatever it takes to keep it from getting lower. By nature, we avoid probing our innermost motives for fear that we will find something that produces guilt and makes us even feel worse about ourselves. While defense mechanisms can protect us from the overwhelming impact of abuse or emotional pain, it is healthier to allow God, over time, to reveal the truth about ourselves to us, so we can gain genuine freedom.

(4) *Defense mechanism are sinful because all types of deception are sin.* The presence of defense mechanisms indicates that most human thoughts, goals, desires, and motives are selfish, destructive, and distorted. The sinful nature is written in our nerves, it is written into the very fibers of our being. In a sinful world, it is natural to be self-centered and defensive. This

diagnosis is clearly stated in Scripture (Jer 17:9) "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

The Heart is Deceitful

This text is like the final blow. Not only is your heart deceitful, not only is my heart deceitful, we don't even know how deceitful our hearts are. There's only one conclusion I can draw from everything we've learned here, to be real is a supernatural event. When you find a truly authentic person, you know that they've been face to face with God. And I would take it a step further, no one could possibly be real unless their self-worth is built on something other than themselves. If your self-esteem is based on your performance then you're afraid to be real because you suspect that your performance is less than perfect. As you look down deep inside, you know that you'll find things that you don't really want to know about. In a purely human sense, therefore, there is no such thing as being real. Every act of sinful humanity is a deception.

"But wait a minute," you may be thinking, "Maybe we have problems with authenticity in the church, but I know lots of secular people who are genuine and authentic." And it is probably true. Secular people do seem to find it easier to talk about their faults than most Christians do. Secular people often seem less burdened with "hang ups" than the typical church person. There is quite a bit of authenticity in the outside world.

But there is so much less at stake in the secular world. For Seventh-day Adventists, every thought, every word, every action has eternal consequences. And not only that, you are often being watched by critical eyes. Under all that pressure, it can be very, very easy to play games. It can be easy to put on a mask. And we may be tempted to make wearing of a mask a way of life.

So even though there seems to be more authenticity in the secular world, self-deception is not absent there. It is just masked by the lower stakes involved.

Do We Have To?

If authenticity is impossible in human strength we may be tempted to stop seeking it. Wouldn't it make more sense to find a mask that won't slip off when we're in trouble? Wouldn't it be an "ideal world" if everyone could totally, successfully hide themselves? Well, if you are at all tempted by this idea, I have bad news for you. Authenticity is not an option. We cannot walk away from this challenge and stay alive spiritually. Notice the words of Jesus in John 3:21:

"But whoever practices the truth
comes into the light,
in order that his works might be manifested
that they were worked through God."

John 3:20 tells us that people outside of Christ seek the darkness. They seek to hide. But according to verse 21 those in Christ are different. They come out into the light. They are open and honest about their failings. And out of that honesty comes a wonderful realization: when troubled, messed up people do anything right it was because God was working in their lives!

Christian authenticity brings the glory to God and not to human agents. Because when human agents are authentic, you know that they make mistakes. And you know that they know that they make mistakes. So, if a preacher or an administrator is no better than you or I, whatever good they do must be a miracle from God! And the glory for that action goes to God and not the human agent.

Authenticity is not an option for Christians. The minute we put on a mask, we are being

someone we are not. We are trying to make ourselves look better than we really are. To the extent we succeed, we steal the glory that belongs to God. That is the ultimate self-deception, the root of the sin in Lucifer's heart way back in the beginning. Not only that, inauthenticity drives people away from Christ instead of drawing them to Him.

I once asked a youth group the question, "What is it about the church that presents the greatest barrier to your staying a Christian when you reach adulthood?" They each answered privately. And most of them said essentially the same thing. "People who act as if they had no faults." What an irony! We want to set a good example for the young people. We want to show them the joys of church life. So we struggle to hide our defects and our doubts. We put forth the image of a "good Adventist" whether or not we feel it in our hearts. We put on a mask of Christian faithfulness and success. And the young people see right through that mask. Not only does it fail to work, it drives them out of the church faster than anything else we could do.

What shall we do with our doubts and defects then? Shall we revel in them and spread them around as a mark of our authenticity? That is not the answer either. In my experience sharing our present doubts and defects tends to be discouraging to others, and can even incline them toward dangerous behaviors and ideas. The first step in ministering to others is to become aware of our defects and to take them to God for forgiveness and healing. To share current failure is to discourage others. To share struggles in areas where we are making progress, on the other hand, can give others the courage to deal with their own struggles.

Inauthenticity also destroys our spiritual growth. Our masks keep us from seeing the very shortcomings that need to be brought to Christ for healing. While authenticity doesn't earn salvation, inauthenticity can cause us to lose our salvation. After all, we are saved only to the

extent that we confess our sins, that we admit that we need what God has to offer. Confession is simply telling the truth about yourself. Not to confess is to tell a dangerous lie before God, who already knows the full truth about me.

Inauthenticity is not an option for Christians because it also destroys our relationships. In a marriage, people often go out of their way to keep masks on. When problems arise, we try to smooth them over and keep the peace. An inauthentic marriage can last twenty years or more. All the neighbors think it's the perfect family. One day the husband comes home and finds his wife packing suitcases angrily.

She says, "I've had enough!"

The husband says, "What's the matter?"

"I don't need to tell you, you know what's wrong!"

"But, I don't know! What's going on here?"

That's what inauthenticity does. We hide and we hide while the problems get bigger and bigger. One day it all blows up in our face and it's too late to resolve.

Inauthenticity is also destructive in the area of personal finances. A good example is the problem of credit cards. You can buy anything with a credit card, up to half your annual income, and "not pay a cent for it" up front. Oh, yes, there's a bill that comes next month. But they only want a few dollars. In the meantime it is as if you got all these things for free. But nothing is really for free. One day reality strikes. In financial terms, authenticity means having a budget. It means knowing where every dollar is going. If you do not wish to be authentic in finances, and most people don't, the obligations pile up and pile up until you're at disaster's door.

The same thing is true with our health. We don't want to be authentic about our health.

We like to imagine that we can eat anything we want, sit around all day, ignore all the rules of health and still live to be 100 without a single illness. But that's not real life. Inauthenticity can kill you and you'll probably be the last one to know before you go. Authenticity is not an option for Christians, in most areas of existence it is life and death for us.

But there is one major problem with authenticity. We don't know how. Our heart is deceitful and we don't even know how deceitful it is. Being real is the most difficult thing we've ever tried to do. It seems to me that there are two major barriers to being real. First of all, we don't know our condition, the depth of our self-deception. Until we see ourselves clearly, we don't even know when we are faking it. Second, we don't have a sense of our true value before God. A poor sense of self-worth, a deep inner perception that we are hopeless and worthless, prevents us from being real. So if we are to understand our self-deception, if we are to have a clear picture of our own depravity, we must first of all have a genuine sense of our value.

Our Value Before God

Because sin is deeply ingrained in every fiber of our being, the more we know about ourselves the more we dislike ourselves and the worse we feel. When self-worth is low, the most natural thing in the world is for us to put out an image rather than submit to reality. How then can we elevate our sense of self-worth? As we saw in the very first chapter of this book, self-worth must be grounded in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Any other path to self-worth will ultimately disappoint.

This is why the gospel is so central to everything that we do in life. Without the gospel it is impossible to believe that God could value us. Without a knowledge of the gospel we have no

choice but to project our own sense of damage and worthlessness onto God and believe that He despises us as much as we ourselves do. The only path to self-worth, then, comes in the gospel of acceptance in Christ at the cross. It is at the cross that we find out how valuable we are to God.

Let's look a little deeper into this issue. A close friend of mine, Ed Dickerson, offers a helpful analysis of the human need for self-worth. He believes that self-worth is based on three life convictions; 1) I am precious, 2) I am unique, and 3) I am capable. To be fully conscious of all three is to have a secure sense of worth. But very few of us have any sense of our preciousness, our uniqueness, or our capability because all through life we have heard messages that contradict those convictions.

If a child could grow up knowing that they are precious it would provide a strong foundation for self-worth. But instead of being told that they are precious, most children hear very different messages. "You are worthless," "you're a slut," or "you're so selfish." The message is drummed into them that they have no special value; they are only tolerated by others, they are not precious to them.

Instead of hearing the message that they are unique, most children hear words such as, "You're just like all the rest." On the rare occasions when their uniqueness is noticed, it is the object of scorn, "I'm sure glad there is no one else just like you, I don't think the universe could handle it!"

Instead of being affirmed for the many talents and gifts that God has given them, most kids hear messages such as, "Your best isn't good enough" (don't I know that!), or "Can't you ever do anything right?" or "You're so lazy that by the time you find this job the dog will be

dead!" From day one life presents us with an unrelenting assault on our self-worth. And this is not to blame everything on parents (I don't need that, I already am one!), but parents and others who deal with children are often just projecting their own sense of worthlessness. So unless we can deal with our lack of self-worth, we compound the problem into the next generation.

But thank God there is a way out. At the cross God sent a very different message to the human race. The gospel says, "You are absolutely precious, you worth the whole universe to God." The same Jesus who died on the cross is the creator of the entire universe. So when Jesus died for me, His sacrifice carried the value of everything in the entire universe! What an incredible value God has placed on you and me! We are so precious to Him that He was willing to sacrifice His Son for you and me. So the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that we are infinitely precious.

The gospel also tells us that we are unique. We are told that Jesus would have gone to the cross even if only one person needed saving! He'd have died just for you! That tells me that our uniqueness is very important to God. The same God who made no two snowflakes exactly alike, made no two human beings exactly alike. That means that every human being is a witness to a unique facet of God's character and His plan for the human race. Every time a person is lost for eternity, there is an eternal loss that cannot be fully replaced! We are truly unique, preciously so!

The gospel also tells us that we are capable. Whenever a person comes into relationship with Jesus, they receive spiritual gifts through the working of the Holy Spirit. No two people have exactly the same mix of gifts, but everyone has some. And those gifts are powerful enablings from God that empower us to make a real difference in the world.

So it is at the cross where we find a true sense of our value. It is in the gospel that we

come to know that we are precious, unique and capable. It is in our relationship with Jesus that we find a self-worth that cannot be taken away from us. And that is the key to Christian authenticity. In the acceptance that we find in Jesus we can begin to lift the lid on the darkness within. We can begin a journey toward authenticity, honesty, and self-discovery.

Basic Steps to Authenticity

What are the basic steps in the journey toward being real? In my experience the path to authenticity can be summarized in five steps. These five steps are worth memorizing, so you can go over them again and again and make them a part of your daily walk with God.

First, know your true condition. You cannot become authentic unless you are willing to face the truth about yourself. We will have more to say about this as an ongoing process in the next major section of this chapter.

Second, accept the truth about yourself. Accept the reality that you've been "faking it." When you come to realize the full depth of your depravity and your sin, accept that it is a true statement of your condition.

Third, take the truth about yourself to Christ for forgiveness and release. You take it to Him by confessing it. You tell Him the truth about yourself no matter how painful that might be. What's to stop you? He already knows everything about you. There is nothing you could tell Him that He does not know. But when you confess to Him the reality of your sin, two wonderful things happen. First of all, there's forgiveness. There is the recognition that He accepts you as you are, even in your darkness. Second, there is release from the power of that sin. There's something about confessing your past that takes away its power. Your past can no longer define you because

Jesus will take its power away if you will only be open and honest about it.

Fourth, accept by God's grace that you are significant and valuable in Christ. When it comes to authenticity, this is perhaps the most important of the five basic steps. Only a person who knows that he or she is valuable would ever dare to examine the darkness within. The only way we can gain that knowledge is through the gospel. Our value is defined at the cross. Out of that sense of value comes the drive to be real. On the other hand, the moment that we feel unaccepted by God, the masks go on immediately. No human being is capable of being truly authentic in his or her own strength. It is only in the strength that we receive from Christ that we can accomplish this work.

Fifth, seek to continually grow in authenticity. Authenticity is a process not a state. No human being could become totally authentic in a moment. It would kill us. Our nerves could not handle it. So God feeds us the bad news a little bit at a time. And in the courage of Christ, we can face a little bit each time. As we grow in relationship with Him we become more and more real. Authenticity is a relationship. It is living out in practice what He has said about us on the cross. Because I matter to God, I matter also to me. If God values me, then I had better value myself.

No one can value others unless they sense some value in themselves. Christians who are bitter, cynical, and fault-finding have little or no sense of their own value. Although they may have been in the church for fifty years or more, they have no clear grasp of the gospel. They do not know the Jesus that they are seeking to protect by their criticism.

The Struggle To “Know Thyself”

While the most important of the five steps listed above is the affirmation about the

gospel, the most difficult step is the first. It is knowing the truth about ourselves. I remind you of the long pilgrimage I shared with you at the beginning of this chapter. Time and time again I was sure that I had attained authenticity only to discover a hidden phoniness right in the midst of my best efforts to be real.

Anyone who has struggled for authenticity knows how difficult it is to grasp hold of. You can have it and twenty-four hours later find yourself faking it again. How do we find our way to a clear picture of our own reality? How do we find true authenticity when the evident reality about ourselves is self-deception (Jer 17:9)? Let me share a series of practical steps to self-knowledge, things I have learned over the last thirty years in the greatest battle of my life. My struggle will have been well worth it, if it will be the means of helping others.

1) Spend time with the Word of God. One step in the path toward authenticity is to spend as much time as you can reading the word of God. This may seem an obvious place to start. Many people, however, read their Bibles daily, yet are not confronted by their own self-deception. We need, therefore, to unpack this concept further.

The Bible, first of all, aids our search for authenticity by affirming our value before God. As you read, look for the many ways that the gospel comes through. Mark up the passages that talk about how much God values you and me. Many of us have been raised in a legalistic setting where the gospel is affirmed in speech, but unbelievable in experience. We qualify every statement of the gospel to the place where it doesn't seem truly biblical ("we are saved by faith apart from any works, but. . ."). It is imperative, therefore, that we saturate ourselves in the biblical texts that affirm the gospel until every legalistic doubt in our minds is driven away. This process can take quite a bit of time. Only when we know and understand the gospel will we have

the courage to enter into the process of growing self-awareness.

Further help to our search for self-awareness can be found in the Bible's biographies, the stories about the major characters. It's a good thing that I didn't write the Bible, because if I had I probably would have treated the main characters of the Bible as heros. Abraham, Moses, David and others could easily have been portrayed as flawless saints. I would have told about their wonderful deeds so that other people could be encouraged. But rather than being encouraged, those striving for authenticity would come away discouraged. They would feel that they could never attain the kind of relationship with God that the biblical heros had. And they would be tempted to give up the struggle.

But I didn't write the Bible, God directed its production. Character after character is portrayed authentically, as real people with significant flaws. In fact, most Bible characters seem even more messed up than you or I are. Yet God used them. He didn't wait for them to become perfect, lest His reputation would be soiled by association. He used them in spite of their flaws. This characteristic of the Bible is powerfully described in one of the most remarkable passages in Ellen White's writings (*Testimonies*, vol. 4, pp. 9-11).

The story of Esther is an example of what I mean. Because the hard edges of the story are not that plain in translation, we have had a tendency to elevate her to a certain level of sainthood. She is the brave girl who won a beauty contest by the grace of God and became a faithful witness to the truth in the king's court. I don't doubt that she was brave. But the Hebrew text of Esther makes it clear that it was no beauty contest and that she was no example of how to practice faith in a hostile environment.

Whether or not Esther chose to be a candidate in the "contest" it was not about beauty.

The contest involved a “one-night stand” with the king. And she participated, evidently with enthusiasm. Esther somehow proved that she was better in bed than all the other girls. In the Hebrew of Esther 2:13-14 it says that in the evening the girls would go to the king from the House of the Virgins, and in the morning they would go instead to the House of the Concubines. Most translations gloss over this in embarrassment. If you find yourself offended by this story, take it up with the Author. He may prove to be more open-minded than we are.

Not only did Esther become queen by this unusual means, it is also clear that she did not practice her faith when she lived in the palace (Esth 2:10; 5:12-13; 7:3-4). There is no mention of God or prayer anywhere in the book. And she evidently stopped keeping the Sabbath and didn't eat the special Jewish diet. She was a “cultural Jew.” How do we know? Her own husband didn't have a clue that she was Jewish. Authentic Jews are very hard to hide, especially in your own bedroom and kitchen.

You see, Esther and Mordecai weren't even supposed to be in Persia. God had called His people out of Babylon (and Persia) fifty years before. Many went back to Palestine under God's direction. Most did not choose to go back. Life had become comfortable and God's call seemed more than they could bear. Esther and Mordecai were representatives of a whole people out of line with God's commands. And once the road to compromise is entered, it can be hard to get off, and one can end up in surprising places.

But in spite of all the shady things that went on, what do we know about Esther? When the people of God faced a great crisis, she was in the right place in the right time to accomplish God's purpose. Although His people were in apostasy, God did not abandonment them. Although Esther's life was full of small and large compromises, God was still willing to use her.

She was truly a heroine of courage in spite of her faults. What a God we serve! No matter where you've been, no matter what you've done, God can still work miracles in your life if you will let Him. No matter how dark the discoveries you make in your quest for authenticity, God is willing and able to redeem your life and use you for His glory.

The Bible is an authentic book. Even in translation, 2 Samuel will knock your socks off. As far as Hollywood goes, 2 Samuel is definitely R-rated. (R-rated movies are usually full of sex and violence.) In the Bible, unlike Hollywood, the sex and the violence are there to show us the folly of a life apart from God, and the pain that comes when we violate the laws of our being. And to encourage us that, like David, we can break away from the darkness to a better way of life.

An honest reading of the Bible, therefore, should lead us to authenticity and give us the courage to confess our sins. If God could accept Esther and David, there's hope that He'll accept me, too. But reading the Bible by itself is not enough. Have you ever read your Bible for fifteen minutes or so and then realized that you couldn't remember a thing you read? Defense mechanisms don't shut down just because we are reading the Bible. In fact, we all have a tendency to see what we want to see when we are reading the Bible. I have learned, gradually, that I cannot find full authenticity in Bible study alone. I needed to combine it with something else.

2) Practice authentic prayer. A crucial companion to authentic Bible study is authentic prayer. When we offer authentic prayer in the context of Bible study, there is some hope that we will learn something from the Bible. Authentic Christians find something fresh in the Word every day because they are open to God's "jarring" in the spirit.

But authentic prayer is not just any kind of prayer. What I mean by authentic prayer is prayer that is directed toward God in full commitment. It is whole-hearted, whole-souled immersion in the prayer experience. Authentic prayer says, “I want to the truth, no matter what the cost.” When we seek truth in the Bible we need to allow God to open us up to His Spirit, to make us willing to know the truth, accept the truth, and follow the truth wherever it leads. When you tell God, “I want the truth, no matter what the cost,” you will receive it, but you will also pay the cost. Truth can cost you your family, your job, your reputation, truth can even cost you your life. Do you want to know the truth that much? If you do, God will give it to you.

In the previous book, Present Truth in the Real World, I tell the story of a time when I was wrestling to know God’s will in my life. I was lying face down on a hardwood floor in Brooklyn. I didn’t know what to do. Finally in desperation I cried out to God, “I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and I don’t care what it costs me!” And God gave me what I needed. My life has never been the same.

3) Apply the various types of journaling. A close companion to authentic prayer is journaling, a subject we covered in some detail a few chapters back. In journaling I seek to let God open me up to my true self. God uses writing to draw up the depths of my being in ways that nothing else can. I can use journaling to pray, to record God’s answers to prayer, and to take note of the various ways in which God’s power has been at work in my life. But the journal that is most pertinent to the issue of authenticity is the Book of Experience. Here I invite God to probe whatever area of my life He wishes to examine, and to expose me to it in writing! This has been an invaluable experience in developing authenticity.

I’ve discovered, however, that self-deception is an incredibly sneaky thing. You can

deceive yourself even in your own diary! I remember a day when I was writing in my journal and really going deep. The thought suddenly came to me, "What if you were to die tonight and the whole world would see what I wrote in this journal?" So I started editing a little to make it look a little better! Not very smart, but very human! No one wants others to think badly of them, even after death. So journaling, as helpful as it is, is not the final answer by itself.

4) *Take authentic prayer another level deeper.* We've talked about wanting the truth no matter what the cost. And that is tremendously important. But when it comes to knowing yourself, it isn't good enough. I have learned to go to an even deeper level of prayer. One could call this deeper level of authentic prayer *Authentic Prayer II: The Sequel!* This prayer goes something like this: "Lord, I want the truth *about myself* no matter what the cost."

Do you see the difference? Truth can be very abstract. Truth can be doctrinal. Truth can be about gaining a right understanding of all the beasts of Revelation and having those organized in a row. Knowing truth can be very satisfying. But it can become a substitute for a more practical kind of truth. Knowing the truth about myself is very different from truth in the abstract. It comes very, very close to home. It is the kind of knowledge about ourselves that other people often have. So you could pray it this way: "Lord, help me to see myself as other people see me. Help me to get the kind of understanding about myself that other people have."

God is very good at that. Hebrews 4 tells us that He's a "heart" surgeon that gets down deep inside. He can even divide up the bone from the marrow. He can dig even deeper to see the thoughts and intents of the heart. The book *Steps to Christ* contains a most precious statement in that regard. "The closer we come to Jesus, the more clearly we see the defects in our own characters." Many people have that statement turned around in practice. They act as if, "The

closer we come to Jesus, the more clearly we see the defects in everybody else's characters." But, that's not reality.

Those that are close to Jesus are very much aware of their own faults, so much so that they don't have time for everybody else's. One of the clearest signs of a dying Christian experience is a critical and fault-finding spirit. But while authentic prayer is a very valuable tool, I've learned that even the deepest levels of authentic prayer don't go deep enough sometimes. I've learned that we can deceive ourselves even in prayer. For example, have you ever lied to God in prayer? Have you ever gone to church so mad at God that you wanted to punch Him in the nose? But when it came your turn to pray you said something like, "Oh, Lord, I love you so much. You are so important to me." It's truly amazing! We know God knows all about us, yet we tell Him what we think He wants to hear. So our search for authenticity need to go even deeper than the prayer life. Even deeper than journaling and Bible study.

5) Accountability. The deepest level of all may be the most critical to success in knowing oneself, accountability. Self-deception is deep-rooted enough in all of us that it is intertwined even into our prayer lives and our Bible study. Sometimes the only way that God can break through to us is through another human being.

“There are souls perplexed with doubt, burdened with infirmities, weak in faith, and unable to grasp the Unseen; but a friend whom they can see, coming to them in Christ’s stead, can be a connecting link to fasten their trembling faith upon Christ.”

Ellen G. White, Ministry of Healing, p. 297

Accountability means allowing others to help you keep watch over yourself. There are a number of ways that you can take advantage of this. One way is through a sharing group like Alcoholics Anonymous or a “cell church” where the only penalty is for being inauthentic.

Everybody is required to tell the truth and is accepted in their telling of it. And a fascinating thing happens in a group like that. As you hear somebody else telling the truth about themselves, you connect with what they are saying and realize that you have some of those same faults yourself. You recognize yourself in the confession of another. In an atmosphere where people are confessing their sins, you have the courage to confess your own.

This is a real struggle for Seventh-day Adventists. Prayer groups in the Adventist Church often fail because of inauthenticity. We are quick to make requests for other people, particularly people who are at some distance from our active concern. "My neighbor's wife has a nephew, whose third cousin's boss has been diagnosed with cancer. Please pray for him." Or our requests for ourselves are inconsequential (and therefore safe). "Pray that God will give me \$10 to buy a new hair-dryer."

The deep problems that we worry about in the dark tend to be left unspoken. By making relatively inconsequential requests we can maintain the illusion of authenticity while protecting ourselves from painful scrutiny by others. My wife once belonged to a small women's group in our church. To encourage authenticity, a rule was established: nobody could ask for prayer for anybody else or speak about anyone else's problems. Any request must either be for themselves or related to their own needs (a spouse's illness can have a frightful impact on oneself). It was a powerful group.

Related to this concept of small groups is an insight from Seventh-day Adventist history that a friend suggested to me. Many of the *Testimonies for the Church* read as if they were the journals of the people they were written to. In the *Testimonies* God was offering a unique path to authenticity, telling people truths about themselves that they had failed to attain on their own.

Perhaps the goal of these *Testimonies* is not so much unbending rules for all who read them as it is to do the work of a small group in the readers' own quest for accountability. In reading the *Testimonies* we can often identify with things that Ellen White was saying to someone else. The *Testimonies*, rightly handled can open up windows into our own depravity, to which we can apply the gospel for forgiveness and healing.

I have an even scarier suggestion for the few and the brave. Find a carefully selected (hard-nosed) friend who loves you and cares deeply about you. Someone who would never want to see you hurt. Go to this friend and tell him or her, "If you knew that I wouldn't get mad and take it out on you later, what is there about me that you would tell me? What problems do you see in my relationship with God? How do I come across to other people?"

That is scary, isn't it? Well I couldn't live without it. I have three friends, in addition to my wife (one is a white American, one is an African-American, and the third is Hispanic). I know that these three men love me. And I trust in their love. I have given them the right to confront me about my faults at any time. Whenever we get together, we have accountability sessions where we go away alone together and open up the deepest recesses of our hearts to each other. The Bible says, "Nothing is so precious as the wounds of a friend." And no friend is so true as the one who loves enough to tell the truth.

You see, I am somewhat of a public person. Many people are a bit afraid of me because I have a very strong personality. The average person tends to tell me what they think I want to hear. But I don't want to end up like Saddam Hussein. No one ever tells him the truth, because the only advisors who ever told him the truth are dead. So he is probably the last person to know when he is making a big mistake. Too many people are depending on me and my walk with God.

So I've worked very hard to cultivate friends that I can trust, and encourage them to be honest with me. This is one of the best ways to bypass your own defense mechanisms.

But what if you don't have any close friends? What if there is no one on this earth that you would trust with the deepest anguish of your heart? Then there is still a way. Find a good, Christian counselor to help you. Counselors are trained to help people open up and discover the deeper truth about themselves. Counselors are trained to be good listeners. Counselors can often detect when you are playing games of self-deception. Counselors are trained to offer the kind of accountability we need in the context of confidentiality. While I have found counseling helpful at various stages of my life, it is particularly critical for those who have nowhere else to turn. Life is too short to waste in inauthenticity.

Conclusion

For the sake of reaching those who don't know God, Christians, particularly SDA Christians, are tempted to craft an image of high-quality Christian faith. We want secular people to see our church as an ideal community where their lives can be freed from the strife and confusion of the real world. We want the church to be truly attractive to them. So we try to hide our doubts and our conflicts for the sake of secular seekers. We fear that authenticity, since it reveals our "bad stuff," is opposed to being a good witness.

When it comes to secular people, however, truth is good. Being authentic is the best way to reach secular people with the gospel because it allows them to identify with us. Secular people have come to believe that church is a cop out, a way of avoiding painful realities. But when they see broken people following Jesus it jars their misconceptions about Christian faith.

When they see real people finding faith they are tempted to try it for themselves. When secular people discover that even Jesus, who was without sin, was needy, angry, sad and frustrated at times, they become open to a relationship with Him. When Christians are authentic, therefore, it gives

seekers reason to hope that they too might be welcome to approach the throne of God.

So for Christians who want to know God for themselves and who wish to reach out to their neighbors in the real world, the road to authenticity is the only way to go. It is certainly a tough road, straight up the side of a mountain. It begins at the foot of the cross with the realization that I'm worth the whole universe to Him. If I am worth that much to Him, then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks about me. With the courage I receive in Christ, I can begin groping toward honesty and reality.

While you may feel down at the enormity of the task, let me remind you that there is One who knows everything there is to know about you and He knew it all before He decided to go to the cross. As He pondered the depths of your soul, He could have easily said, "Ohhhh, I'm not going to die for that!" Instead, He spread His arms out to you and to the whole world. He says, "I embrace you as you are. I embrace you with all your short-comings. I embrace you with all your self-deceptions. I embrace you with all your defense mechanisms. And if you will let Me, I want to elevate you to sit with Me on My throne to be among the most honored people in the entire universe (Rev 3:21). In Me, you have everything you need."

At the foot of the cross you can begin to let the mask come down. You can begin to let your real self show because you can also talk about the value you have in Jesus. There is no way out of the human dilemma without Jesus. As you read these concluding words, I want to invite

you to give yourself unreservedly to Jesus in the quiet of your own thoughts. What are you really giving up anyway? What is there to lose? What you're giving Him is the confusion and the self-deception that you'd love to get rid of anyway. Receive Him and welcome a new day of self-awareness mixed with peace.

Many of us dream that the Church will take up its God-ordained role for the end-time and prepare the world for the return of Jesus. But the only kind of church that will make a major difference in today's world is one where the people and the faith are real. This is no easy task, but today is as good a day as any to start. Today can be the beginning of a more authentic Christian faith in your life. I invite you to join me on the path. The road is steep, but you're gonna love the view.