

Losing the Need to Pretend

By John Burke



If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves.
- 1 John 1:8 NLT

When my wife, Kathy, was in preschool she fell in love with a comic strip character, Zelda. Kathy wanted to be like Zelda. She wanted to do everything Zelda did. Then Kathy decided she was Zelda. Her teachers came to her mom concerned because Kathy would no longer answer to the name Kathy, she wanted to be called Zelda. We've all pretended to be someone we're not. It's fairly common for kids to pretend they are someone else. And it's acceptable if kids pretend because they are still forming their identities. But the goal is to learn to be yourself by the time you are an adult. Unfortunately, few adults seem to be comfortable enough with themselves not to pretend.

Our generation longs for something authentic. They are searching for "the real thing," though they don't really know what "the real thing" is. Because this generation has endured so much "me-ism" and letdown from those they were supposed to follow and trust, they want to see a genuine faith that works for less-than-perfect people before they are willing to trust. They want to know this God-thing is more than talk, talk, talk. They desperately want permission to be who they are with the hope of becoming more. They aren't willing to pretend, because hypocrisy repulses them. Most have yet to realize that every person is a hypocrite to some degree-the only question is whether we realize it and are honest about it.

It Starts with Authenticity

When we launched Gateway Community Church in 1998, the first service was entitled "Losing My Need to Pretend." Everything we did that morning contrasted the inauthentic ways of the religious leaders whom Jesus deemed hypocrites with an authentic spirituality of the heart. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were focused on religious rule-keeping. Jesus reserved his harshest words for these pretenders: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone."(Luke 11:42 NIV) The religious leaders of Jesus' day were so focused on the traditions they had formed around the heart of God's message that they were neglecting the things most on God's heart.

That September morning in the delivery room of our new church, I told our newborn congregation that these stories are a warning against inauthentic, incongruent living. Jesus is basically saying, *Lose the religious pretense; it's destructive to authentic faith. Shed the mask of hypocrisy you hide behind. I want honest, authentic people-not hypocrites who pretend to be something they're not.* I asked the congregation a question at the end of the message: "Can we be this kind of a church? The kind where people don't have to pretend? Where we can be ourselves and stop pretending we're more or less than what we are right now? That's the only way we can help each other grow to be all God intended us to be. If we can't do this, we're just playing church!"

Authenticity is hard work. It always works from the inside out. It begins with the inner life of the leader, being authentic with God. It manifests itself in personal vulnerability before others as an intimate connection with God displaces the fear of transparency. This opens for others a view into an authentic spiritual life of a real human-not a religious salesperson. Finally, it becomes embedded in a culture so that authentic, growing communities of people can be formed and transformed.

Hear John discuss strategies for creating a "Come-As-You-Are Culture" at the *A2 Conference: Innovating with Acts 2 Thinking* on October 25-27 at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. (www.willowcreek.com/A2)