

Are you really real?

Bring real and not a fake is critically important for Christians on mission in deprived, urban communities. Efrem Buckle, pastor of a church in South London, talks about the realities of taking the gospel into diverse, minority cultures

'Real recognise real, introduce yourself...' Taken from the song 'Fakin' by Christian rapper Lecrae, this lyric never fails to speak to me each time I hear it. It conveys the supremely high value placed on authenticity by those who are part of Hip Hop culture – and for many who come from deprived backgrounds.

Are you a real man/woman?

Are you a real sufferer/comrade in the struggle of the deprived?

Are those real designer garms you wear?

I remember being at school and being properly ridiculed for not being a real Arsenal supporter, all because I was assumed to have never attended a game. I had (only once)



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but my inability to recall the details of that experience meant I was condemned to being branded a fake supporter. In fact, the only thing worse than not having brand name items when at school was having fake ones!

The issue of authenticity is an important one for Christians who are on mission in deprived, urban communities. It is one that is often misunderstood or carelessly overlooked. For us, the expectation of authenticity actually has two equally important touchstones. Some consideration of basic Christology can help us understand them.

Jesus is really 100% God and really 100% man, and departing from either of these two truths is nothing short of heresy. In the same way, we need to understand that those to whom we are on mission have two innate expectations of Christian authenticity:

First, that we are genuinely Christian – that we actually believe and preach the word of God we claim to hold to. That our words match our portrayal of ourselves, particularly as it relates to what we say we believe.

And second, that we are culturally true to who we are, whatever our culture is, and not trying to be who or what we're not. A 'beg' (a fake person who is trying too hard to beg the approval of those to whom they are trying to relate) lacks any credibility. Like parents trying to be trendy and cool in front of the friends of their teenage children, this kind of behaviour only serves to undermine the value of the gospel we seek to communicate. It suggests that we feel the gospel lacks worth and needs our vain attempts at winning approval to make people buy into it.

The reality of these expectations was brought to my attention pretty sharply while I was ministering to a family at a 'nine-night' gathering (a type of wake which takes place before a funeral). This nine-night was for the deceased mother of a member of our church. I was heckled as I stood to share a few words in the family home, which was packed to bursting with multitudes of Jamaican, non-Christian, Peckham residents...

'Tark de troot! Don't play wid it, TARK DE TRUT, awoah!!'

In the first instance, I didn't fully understand the sentiment. I understood the language, but what else would they think I was going to do but talk the truth? Then it dawned on me, they wanted gospel authenticity, culturally consistent with the setting, expressed in my own way, even though I was the age of the deceased's grand-children and two generations removed from the old school manner they were used to.

The challenge of Christian authenticity on mission goes deeper than the expectations of the unconverted, and it is potentially more insidious. As we are on mission, we are seeking to see people converted and disciplined in 'authentic Christian community'. It is the meaning of that community and the connotations we attach to it which has a major impact on how we approach mission and discipleship. But also having major impact is what the unconverted person considers their life will look like should they choose to submit to Jesus.

I have had more than a few people tell me that they want to follow Jesus but feel there are few Christians they can relate to, because those Christians are culturally alien. This disparity is largely due to the fact that we are new creations in Christ Jesus and are intrinsically different, but there is an extent to which the expression of our life in Christ will conform to a cultural norm of some sort, often a 'zombified' subculture of a pre-existing subculture.

There is no neutral or a-cultural Christian experience, just as there is no definitively 'Christian culture' in a socio-demographic sense. The problem arises when people make the common mistake of thinking 'majority culture'

sensibilities and preferences become the definition of authentic Christianity.

This is addressed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. The Corinthians were assured they didn't need to change their marital, cultural (circumcision), or social (slavery) status in order to be regarded as authentic Christians. They had been bought by Christ and were called to live out their relationship with God in the context in which they had been called. To this Paul adds the emphatic statement: 'This is my rule in all the churches.'

This says to me that it is wrong to have an idea of Christian community which assumes that those of diverse minority cultures (all types of minority, not just ethnic) will assimilate the majority culture. It says to me that the old adage, 'when in Rome', should not be considered in the context of Christian community, informing the expectation that minority cultures should move toward the majority culture in order to be regarded as authentically Christian.

In fact, the New Testament advocates moving in the opposite direction. The Apostle Paul in 'becoming all things to all men', moves away from the majority Jewish culture toward minority culture, with a clear 'missional' purpose. I think we are hard pressed to find any support in the New Testament for the necessity of those in minority cultures to assimilate the majority culture, apart from in ways that relate to righteousness and Christlikeness.

I would go even so far as to say that our standard of morality is not the benchmark by which Christian authenticity is measured. Often our standard of morality is not based on a clear and robust theology, but is rather based on cultural norms; norms that shift and change with time.

I remember when males were considered to be immoral if they wore earrings and ladies if they wore trousers. In fact, in our marriage counselling over 20 years ago, my wife was chastised for not wearing a hat to church and was told that the ceremony would be abandoned if she wore jewellery to the service.

These standards of morality were exegetically indefensible and for that reason she, of course, wore the jewellery I bought her, yet the ceremony went ahead without a hitch.

I would also add, for clarification, that our preferred style of dress and the musical preference by which we choose to praise God does not constitute authentic Christianity. Again, such a claim would be exegetically indefensible.

Further, the lack of the use of received pronunciation should not prohibit an individual of godly character and Christlike attitude from consideration for leadership. Expectations of this nature often become a glass ceiling for those of minority cultures.

One of the simplest ways to avoid the 'shoe-horn effect', where we attempt to force people into our definition of authentic Christianity, rather than a biblical one, is to sincerely and humbly listen. We listen with a genuine openness to learn. As we disciple and teach people the gospel, let us listen to how converts begin to process and apply it to their context and situation, being prepared to let them lead us in that regard.

Granted, there are times when someone within a culture will be blindsided by subjectivity and unable to see how their cultural experience is in conflict with and in need of submission to the Lordship of Christ. It is at these times that we must lovingly take them to the scriptures and question those norms. But without the ability to take individuals to faithfully exegeted text, we don't have grounds to challenge that which we are uncomfortable with.

Maybe the issue then becomes a challenge for us to not be like Jonah, who refused to go to Nineveh with God's message for cultural reasons. When we are in that situation, we can ask Jesus to foster in us a greater openness and respect for those cultural experiences which contribute to forming the other person's identity, without ridicule or condescension.

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More on the issue of culture and the gospel can be explored in the videos from the Reaching the Unreached Conference 2013, available at: [youtube.com/newlifelondon](https://www.youtube.com/newlifelondon)