



I

# AUTHENTICITY

“His disciples came to him, and he  
began to teach them. . . .”

I like Jim and Barbara, but sometimes it’s hard to remember why. They’re in town once or twice a year on business and bring an enjoyable dollop of Hollywood glitz with them. Yet the talk of fashion and celebrities grows wearisome after a day or two, and I’m seldom sorry for their return to the Coast. We dined at El Ranchero, a kitschy Mexican restaurant on the north side of Indianapolis.

*Some . . . confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about.*

—W. H. AUDEN

“In L.A.,” Barbara began predictably, “we get the most authentic Mexican food.”

“Out of this world,” Jim agreed.

“I mean, it’s to *die* for,” Barbara whispered, as if there were some dirty secret about chimichangas.

I unfolded a napkin and put it on my lap.

“Enrique,” Barbara continued, “our chef at Las Palmas, makes the most *unbelievable* carne asada. And the chicken mole verde? *Divine*.”

“Out of this world,” Jim said again.

“Here in the Midwest,” Babs waxed on, “you simply can’t get good Mexican food. I mean really authentic Mexican.”

“You absolutely can’t get it,” Jim swore, as if affirming under oath that he’d seen George W. Bush stuffing a ballot box in Cleveland.

“But this place is so *fun*,” Barbara chirped with exaggerated amiability, patting my arm as she did so. “It must be so fun for you guys to go out for tacos once in a while.”

“I’m sure you get tired of the barbecued pork,” Jim said knowingly.

Being mostly a Midwesterner, I’m a patient man, but even a Hoosier can get riled now and then. “Barbara?” I began mildly. “Take a look at Hector over there.” I nodded toward our waiter. “And the hostess. And the busboy.”

Barbara blinked.

“These people aren’t pretending to be Hispanic. They’re honest-to-goodness Mexicans.”

Barbara looked sympathetically at the staff, then back at me. “Well, I’m sure they try very hard,” She said, as if they’d all placed third in a beauty contest.

“Sure,” Jim said. “I’m sure the food will be great. Just great.”

We sat in silence for a minute or two, trying to ignore a trio of mariachi horns. Hector wandered over with chips and salsa.

“Quiere mild or hot, amigo?”

It was the devil that made me do it.

“Let’s have the other stuff, Hector. The house salsa.”

“You mean muy caliente?”

“Yeah.”

Hector paused. He looked at Jim and Barbara, then disappeared into the kitchen.

I set the napkin dispenser in front of Barbara and smiled. “You’re gonna love it,” I said. “It’s very authentic.”

## FAUX AUTHENTIC

My friends had not heard, apparently, that Indianapolis has one of the highest concentrations of Mexican immigrants in the United States. The government of Mexico recently opened a consulate in the city, which now has about as many supermercados as it does Starbucks. El Ranchero may be

lowbrow, but it offers real tortillas served up by natives of Mexico.

What could be more real?

Yet authenticity had a different connotation to Jim and Barbara, as it does to most of us. To them, authentic cooking was that which met a subjective standard. It looked Mexican. It was called by Mexican names. It was perhaps based on traditional Mexican dishes. But it was to be found only in upscale restaurants in Southern California—the spiritual home of *real* Mexican cuisine—not in a chartreuse-and-lavender cantina in Indianapolis. And it would not, certainly, come wrapped in a tortilla and smothered with refried beans. To my friends, that which is authentic is that which is tasteful, thoughtfully done, appropriate, haute. Inauthentic is anything gauche, indecorous, or, worst of all, out of date.

Like many Christians, Jim and Barbara take their notion of authenticity to church with them. I've done it too. To them, authentic Christianity is relevant, tasteful, and highly evolved—it's *honest*, for heaven's sake. They consider their church authentic because their pastor preaches in cargo shorts and goes rock climbing on his day off. They themselves are authentic because they are candid about the neglect of their devotional life. It would be inauthentic—phony—to pray when they don't feel like it, so they don't. They are authentic because they deal realistically with issues like abortion, homosexuality, and divorce.

When Barbara mentioned in a previous conversation that she had been divorced and that her children now lived with their father, my wife was sympathetic. “I’m so sorry,” Heather offered. “He not only left but took the kids with him?”

“Oh, God no,” Barbara said, as if the oath made her denial more believable. “I left *him*. I couldn’t stand him preaching at me all the time, using the Bible to beat me down.”

Heather, seldom at a loss for words, responded soothingly. “You must have felt so lonely,” she said. “I know the Christian community can be judgmental sometimes.”

Barbara frowned as if trying to comprehend Heather’s meaning. “God no,” she said it again. “My church friends have been great. They told me, ‘Honey, sometimes you just have to do what you have to do.’”

Barbara acted pragmatically when she ended her bad marriage. Was she being authentic? Was the spiritual advice she received authentically Christian because it displayed tolerance? How are we to know? How do I know that I’m authentically Christian? How do you?

In the world of art, a painting or sculpture that is purported to be the work of someone other than its true maker is called a forgery. There have been some notable examples. In 1496 Michelangelo created his first known sculpture, a sleeping cupid. Because he was unknown as a sculptor, the young artist had little hope of selling his work. So he devised a plan.

Michelangelo buried the marble statue in acidic soil to give it the appearance of being very old. He then sold it to an art dealer who represented it as an ancient Greek objet d'art. The piece was eventually acquired by Cardinal Raffaello Riario of San Giorgio.

But the art was not really ancient, not really Greek, not really—authentic. When the cardinal learned of the forgery, he demanded his money back. Michelangelo was fortunate that the misrepresentation only enhanced his reputation as an artist; some art forgers go to jail.

That which is authentic is that which is objectively verifiable as genuine. An authentic Rembrandt is a painting known to have been created by the artist himself. Authentic Mexican food is that prepared by Mexicans—like the food at El Rancho. Taste, propriety, suitability for the postmodern world—these are immaterial to the claim of authenticity. What matters is that the item originates from its purported source. That which does so is authentic. Everything else—no matter how relevant—is fake.

What, then, would be an authentic Christian?

## TO BE REAL

My wife visited the Netherlands recently, the homeland of both her parents. Heather was raised in the New World but steeped in the Old. Like any good Dutch girl, she attended a

Dutch church, went to a Dutch school, celebrated Dutch holidays, maintained Dutch traditions, and associated mostly with other Dutch children. She is as proud of her Dutch heritage as of her American citizenship. While in Amsterdam, she bought new clothing, delighting in wearing the latest European styles. She immersed herself in Dutch culture. She became finally Dutch, so she thought.

At a grocery store, she waited in line as the clerk finalized a purchase, chatting amiably with her Dutch customer. Then the woman turned to Heather and addressed her in flawless English, “May I help you?”

There is something about being American that cannot be discarded or even disguised. Our nationality is apparent at a glance to both friends and enemies. We cannot conceal our source.

Being a Christian must be the same.

During Jesus’ trial, Peter wished to avoid being known as a follower of Christ. He tried everything to dissociate himself from Jesus, but he couldn’t. Everything gave him away—his history, his mannerisms, his speech, even his clothing. He had “friend of Jesus” written all over him. He was an authentic Christian, verifiably connected to Jesus himself.

We, on the other hand, try desperately to create the persona of Christ-follower but are often unsuccessful. We name ourselves things like evangelical and fundamentalist. We label ourselves, literally, with bracelets and bumper stickers. We

adopt a churchy way of speaking. Yet for the most part, nobody confuses us with friends of God. There are no servant girls persistently accusing us by firelight, “You—you were with him.” That may be, quite simply, because we were not. In spite of our claims of authenticity, we have spent very little time with Jesus or none at all. We lack that familiar aspect that can be acquired only by prolonged exposure. There is nothing genuine about our claim to be Christlike, to be Godlike, and everyone knows it but us.

Authentic Christianity is that which originates with Jesus. Authentic Christians are those who associate themselves with him, who know him, who learn from him, who emulate him. Christian identity is not a bracelet or a necklace or a set of lingo. It is a way of being, of thinking, and—most especially—of relating to other people that will be instantly apparent to all who meet us.

This is the authentic Christianity for which I hunger, and it begins with these words: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”