

Taking Off The Masks

Most of the people we know wear masks. If Christians are to be relevant in today's world, we need to be able to identify our disguises and face up to society with a new sense of authenticity.

So many people pretending

We are surrounded by people pretending to be anything but who they really are. Over the years I have managed to get close to men and women in politics, diplomacy, business and church leadership. I have found a lot of facades. People try to build lasting relationships, desperately wondering why the rate of break-up (across the board) is tragically escalating and why no one seems to understand them. Husbands and wives discover (often too late) that their mates have been transformed into new people. "I used to love him, but I don't know him any more." Parents and children lose touch because they realise they no longer know those with whom they live. What's really scary is that this culture of "masking" is endemic. Those who wear masks are often unaware of the fact.

Unless we are prepared to face up to our real selves and take off our masks, our family members, neighbours, work colleagues and friends will not be able to see who we are deep down. If all they see is a projection of the "preferred" or "alternative" us, they will not be able to see what works in our lives, the pain we sometimes feel and what "works" on a practical level. Strong, supportive relationships cannot be established on falsehood. The world around us cries out for authenticity. If the church is to make a real difference, we need to engage a culture of dismantling facades and enabling one another to live together in honesty, mutual support and the love of Christ.

We learn to wear masks

When we are children, we don't take masks too seriously. As a boy, I used to dress up as a cowboy, a soldier, or a shopkeeper. I would engage my brother in his Indian tent, chase him with my wooden rifle and trade goods with him using play money. But I knew it was only a game. It was fun and I learned that make-believe was not meant to be taken as an alternative reality. After escaping to a world of our own making, my siblings and I usually returned from our reverie at the sound of our parents calling us to dinner or bed. The masks we wore were part of the game and nothing more.

However, when we grew up, we learned, like so many others, to put on new types of masks, ones that would not come off easily at dinner or bed time, but represented the public "us" we carried through to our most intimate worlds. Because of circumstances, we learned to adopt styles, postures and personas that others liked or accepted. We ultimately discovered that the same applied in church life. Rather than admit we were hurting, we were often tempted (or encouraged) to put on a "brave face". The "brave face" looks cool, together, well adjusted, in control of problems, on top of pressures, able to deal with issues and "overcome the enemy". The longer we left the face in place, the harder it became to peel off the "Super-Christian" cape, or take it away when its usefulness was over, like an old facade that is built into a modern construction, locked in place to preserve it perpetually.

In marriage, too, face becomes a substitute for working through issues with our most significant others. Self-justification and pretence come easily. The very environment where people should be able to be most vulnerable and supported unconditionally becomes a battleground where struggles are complicated by the adoption of the most subtle masks of all.

Masks can relate to status, relationship and power. Well known writer Alain de Botton believes what people desperately crave, more than anything else, is status. Regardless of their social background, education, histories, class, age or nationality, they believe life is all about what others think of us; whether we are deemed a success or a failure, winner or loser. He calls this condition “status anxiety” (and has written a book with this very title).

People for whom status is paramount wear masks all the time. They worry about others’ approval and acceptance. They assume everyone has to be like them, or to like them. Much of what they do is designed to impress the world with what they know, whom they know, how much they own, how they dress, what sort of car they drive and how highly they are esteemed by their peers. I have met many diplomats for whom title and status are an adopted culture they find painful to shed when their terms of duty are over. They become anxious when roles are stripped away or they realise everyone is not appreciating their vast knowledge and hanging on their every word with awe.

Masks and culture

Masks can be cultural. In some societies, “face” is everything and loss of face is considered socially shameful. For the individual, masking stems from the fear that others will think badly of you, will not respect you, will laugh and whisper about you behind your back. It is difficult to admit mistakes, to not knowing facts, or to getting things wrong from time to time. Let me explain. When I lived in South America I often came across people who would invent the realities they thought I wanted to see. “How far is it to such and such a place?”, I would innocently ask, expecting that those who confidently answered me knew what they were talking about. Invariably, the answer would be, “Just one block further”. Rather than tell me they did not know, people resorted to putting on a face of supreme confidence and helpfulness as they pushed “the problem” down the street, into someone else’s orbit, where the scenario would be repeated. Taking these types of assurances seriously, I found it was possible to go many blocks before realizing those who advised me did not have a clue about the location I was seeking.

When I was growing up in Australia I wanted to visit the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. I was fascinated with ancient history and the mummies and treasures that escaped the pillage of grave robbers. What fascinated me most in the museum’s holdings, when I finally visited, was the funerary mask of King Tutankhamen (d. 1343 BC). Experts spent years trying to determine what the young king really looked like. Did those who embalmed his body for burial and made the funerary objects make a true likeness or a safe, generic “look” that suited the times (and their own welfare)? Only recently, three teams of forensic artists and scientists - from France, the United States and Egypt - built models of the boy pharaoh's face based on some 1,700 high-resolution photos from CT scans of his mummy to reveal what he looked like the day he died nearly 3,300 years ago. Nevertheless, in spite of the science, masks of Tutankhamen have become an industry in themselves. In a sense, few people care what he looked like; all they know (and want) is the substitute.

The word “mascara”, which we use in English to refer to a cosmetic, means “mask” in a number of languages. Let that observation speak for itself.

In other cultures, people cover up for reasons of privacy and religion. Many Arab women cover up their faces and the only males who see them are relatives. When I lived in Lebanon I knew a disproportionately high number of people who were not satisfied with the faces they were born with and paid for plastic surgery, to cosmetically alter their noses, chins, foreheads, ears and other parts of their anatomy. (Such was the extent of plastic surgery that, after the fall of Baghdad in 2003 rumours circulated in Beirut that Saddam Hussein had travelled to Beirut and had cosmetic alterations to assume a new identity.) “Face” is so important in many societies in Asia that people will even commit suicide as a last resort where serious embarrassment and shame have occurred. Masks literally become a matter of life and death.

Are there “too many hypocrites” in churches?

What about church life? Is it true (as I have heard many times over the years) that “the church is full of hypocrites”? Maybe those who say such things are just repeating rhetoric they have heard from others, without giving much thought to what is implied. Others make the statement because they see inconsistencies in the lives of those who call themselves Christians but pretend to be perfect. Or non-believers professing to be Christians (witness smouldering resentment in the Muslim world about the Crusades). What does that word “hypocrite” mean anyway? In fact, it comes from a Greek word, “*hupokrites*”, meaning actors, or stage players, who assumed characters and held model faces (masks) in front of their eyes when they performed, pretending to be one of the gods or a mythical hero. The idea of using an artificial face stuck. A hypocrite is someone who puts on another face.

Jesus criticised the religious leaders of his day for covering up their real selves (Matthew 23:7). He called them “hypocrites”. He said that they trusted in their own sense of righteousness and despised others (Luke 18:9). Their self-positioning was society’s way; people everywhere seek to enhance their own image by making others look bad. However, it is not God’s way. He is not interested in our pious claims or lip service (Matthew 7:6), doing things to be noticed by others (Matthew 6:5, 16). He reads the pages of our inner lives.

In these days of quality assurance, international standards accreditation and high-paid professional clergy with world-wide audiences, the temptation is to pitch the message and culture of “church” in terms of business oriented models and performance indicators. Church services are often evaluated on a scale of one to ten in terms of human values, not necessarily the “Mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Don’t get me wrong. There is nothing amiss with quality in music, church buildings and worship services (they are certainly more enjoyable than sloppiness), but the alarm bells should ring long and loud when those in “ministry” begin to burn out, lose their families, abandon faith in God, fall into immorality, when those closest to them fail to see it coming and when disaster strikes do not have time or the wisdom or inclination to get off the merry-go-round and restore them (Galatians 6:1-2). Social decorum and quality are important, but the model is faulty when the world’s strategies become substitutes for the ordered spontaneity of the Spirit.

Masks are not predicated on relationship, but on second-guessing other peoples' expectations. They don't work when life gets tough. I have had friends in Christian ministry who have over-filled their lives with church "stuff", but ended up losing everything (spouses, homes, belief in God) because keeping the mask in place concealed deep and abiding troubles in their lives from those closest to them, until it was too late.

If we are to live in the Spirit of Jesus, we need to relate the way he did. The Bible says that he was not interested in preserving his reputation (Philippians 2:7). His public "image" was not the defining feature of his ministry – openness and honest in dealing with people were. There were times when he served multitudes and moments when he got away from the crowds, even his own disciples, for refreshment and renewal. At other times he took time out (over he objections of the disciples) to welcome children, talk to blind Bartimaeus and heal him, touch lepers (when it was against social conventions to do so), make mud as a tangible instrument of divine healing, get into boats with his disciples in the midst of storms, face the financial pressures of ministry, sit with outcasts in their loneliness, take an interest in people, feed them when they were hungry and call the weary to rest. He noticed when the disciples argued and encouraged them when they were feeling down. He told them they would be "fishers of men". He had a personal commitment to each of the disciples and spent time with them, in their troubles, where they lived. Jesus did not wear masks; he promoted transparency. On one occasion he went so far as to challenge those who hated him to tell him if they could see any sin in his life (John 8:46).

Only when we admit we are lonely, facing financial pressures, going through relationship changes and feeling tired can we start to let the guard down and allow people to see us for who we are, not necessarily a pretty sight, but more authentic. Jesus was tempted and tested, in all the areas we experience. Whatever you experience, He's been there (or in similar situations).

Why Christians wear masks

Everyone has expectations about what "genuine" Christians should look like, how they should speak, what their attitudes should be. Because we want to appear to have a close walk with God we sometimes make up or adopt false standards, models and norms. When we don't fit the preferred mould we pretend to do so. This is doubly disadvantageous. On one hand, it portrays us in the format we think people expect us to be (it is hard to be consistent at being what we are not). On the other hand, it doesn't allow us to admit to weaknesses. We don masks because we want people to think we are spiritually strong. The songs we sing are all about victory (as they should be, if they are to be faithful to the declaration of the Christian message); we hear lots of affirming messages. But it is easy to be self-righteous. It is hard to admit when we are less than the model. Christians wear masks so that they will not be misunderstood, exposed, judged by others, or get hurt or disappointed. Wearing masks can be lonely, especially if people accept and come to love and relate to the alternative us, when we know, deep down, that what they see is not what we are quintessentially like.

Masks are like refuges. They can be put on to "hide" things, when we are afraid others will not like what they see. They are crafted to provide an alternative to our weaknesses and inadequacies, to make ourselves better than they think we are.

Masks also serve as defense mechanisms. If we are hurt once too often, we put on a front that does not reveal how we feel deep inside. We spend precious time and energy comparing ourselves with others. All too often, however, we run the risk of not dealing with the underlying issues. Sometimes the mask becomes fixed and we can't take it off; when the real us sees the light of day we are disappointed. We need a sense of balance and priorities. This is the pre-condition for renewal.

Early Christians frowned on the use of masks as a pagan practice. If Christians – and the church – are to remain relevant today, unbelievers need to be able to see who we are, what we represent, what we really believe, how we deal with disappointments, weaknesses, human limits and reverses. They want to see if we are “really real”. If they detect show and pretence, they will be turned off.

Should we take off our masks?

There are good reasons not to share everything in our lives and past histories with everyone we meet, scenarios that are sensitive and need be worked through with people of trust. It is not appropriate to open our hearts to every man or woman in the street. Sometimes even the most “saintly” are not the best candidates to help us (“How could I measure up to him or her, when they have ‘got it all together?’”)

Having said that, the Bible encourages us to recognise who we are. If we are not honest enough to do so, on any level, we will not be able to change. (How can you change something you pretend doesn't exist?) The Bible teaches us that God loves us, Jesus Christ died for us just as we were (Romans 5:6-8), he is prepared to forgive the past and provide healing and restoration. Because we are Christians we are “accepted” in him (Ephesians 1:6). He doesn't judge cynically, but searches the heart (1 Chronicles 28:9; Romans 8:27). We are tempted to fall for the old trick of judging by external appearances (1 Samuel 16:7). When we come to the cross, we have to do so with our failures, faults and fears. James encourages us to confess our faults to one another, so that we can pray meaningfully for one another and be healed (James 5:16). This only occurs in relationship. We are commanded to accept one another, warts and all (Romans 12:16; 15:5), to speak the truth in love to one another (Zechariah 8:16). After all, when we are left to judge what is in the heart of a person we are apt to make incorrect assumptions; only that person knows what is really in his or her heart (1 Corinthians 2:11).

In these days of extreme make-overs, real change is possible, change that is dynamic and brought about by God, as the Holy Spirit fashions us into the likeness, or image, of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). In Him we become brand new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). The power and grace of God are constantly available to achieve this in our hearts and lives (1 Corinthians 15:10).

The Bible teaches that we must not cultivate a habit of sitting in judgment on others. I know some Christians who are extremely judgmental. They probably mean well, but when they sit in the judge's seat they forget that, by so doing, they are setting standards by which God will assess their own lives (Matthew 7:1, 2). The Bible commands us to judge justly (John 7:24). This means, by God's standards and out of His redemptive heart of compassion and reconciliation.

Will the real you please stand up?

Take off the mask. It is not the real you.

What non-Christians need to see are Christians who are honest, open, transparent and “human”; people who occasionally have “bad days”, suffer disappointments and frustrations and are capable of being wounded by circumstances, but who lead the way by responding God’s way, with His enabling, and don’t give the impression they have something to hide or that the Christian walk is uncomplicated. The fact remains, life can be tough and the road can be full of potholes. There are lots of evil people and attitudes in the world. All Christians struggle and sin from time to time. They get depressed, angry with circumstances, feel bad when a relationship breaks up and react the wrong way in times of pressure. All Christians need times of refreshing and revalidation of faith in Christ. It is hard to relate meaningfully to untouchable Super-Christians, who never have doubts, never feel down and never experience loneliness or frustration (*or do they?*). It can be quite confronting to start to admit what we are really like, but honesty is an important part of change.

The Christian family should be a place where we feel safe and secure, to admit our weaknesses and begin to grow, to accept who we are, rather than hiding behind walls, to accept personal accountability and be prepared to admit where we are wrong without fear of public disclosure of personal problems. The Body of Christ should be an accepting environment where we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep those who weep (Romans 12:15) because we are collectively and individually honest enough to do so and are genuinely committed to one another. It is a tragedy if we end up losing out by pretending to be something in the very place where we should be able to afford to be honest and vulnerable.

Acceptance, simplicity and love, based on Christ, are able to dissolve masks.

Jesus taught that the key to fulfilling all of God’s laws and expectations was loving him and loving people (Luke 10:27). Being a Christian is not all about “serving the program” and feeling we have let the side down when we are less involved than others. Authentic Christianity comes from accepting who we are and how God sees us, trusting him for the results and living openly and transparently in his love and grace.