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Authenticity and the Task of Discernment: A Pastoral Hermeneutics of Christian Life

*Avtentičnost in naloga razločevanja: pastoralna
hermenevtika krščanskega življenja*

Abstract: Authenticity has become a powerful language through which many late-modern persons speak about selfhood, integrity, trust, belonging, and the desire for faith to be lived truthfully. Pastoral theology therefore treats this language with caution: it is not reducible to expressive individualism, but neither can it be received as a Christian norm in itself. This article argues that authenticity is best understood as a pastoral signal requiring theological discernment. Drawing on interdisciplinary accounts, it first identifies recurring concerns: personal appropriation, coherence between word and life, relational credibility, vulnerability, and social recognition. It then reframes these concerns through biblical-theological motifs of truthfulness before God, Christological witness, discipleship, and accountable ecclesial communion. Christy Capper's constructive account is engaged to clarify how authenticity may be ordered beyond the self within Christian theological anthropology. The article's central contribution is to propose a pastoral hermeneutics of authenticity: a disciplined practice of listening, interpreting, discerning, and accompanying in situations of pastoral care, mistrust, self-questioning, institutional disappointment, and the search for personally appropriated faith. Authenticity thus has real, though limited, pastoral value. It may help the Church hear what is being expressed through contemporary appeals to authenticity, while the norm of Christian life remains truthful life received from God, revealed in Christ, and lived within ecclesial communion.

Keywords: authenticity, pastoral theology, pastoral hermeneutics, late modernity, discernment, Christian anthropology

Izvleček: *Avtentičnost je postala pomemben jezik, s katerim mnogi ljudje v pozni moderni govorijo o razumevanju sebe, integriteti, zaupanju, pripadnosti in želji, da bi vero živeli resnicoljubno. Pastoralna teologija mora zato ta jezik obravnavati z razločevanjem: ne sme ga preprosto odpraviti kot izrazni individualizem, hkrati pa ga ne more sprejeti kot samostojno krščansko normo. Članek zagovarja, da je avtentičnost najbolje razumeti kot pastoralni signal, ki zahteva teološko razločevanje. Na podlagi interdisciplinarnih pristopov najprej prepozna ponavljajoče se skrbi: osebno sprejetje vere, skladnost med besedo in življenjem, relacijsko verodostojnost, ranljivost in družbeno prepoznanje. Nato te skrbi preokvirja z biblično-teološkimi motivi resnicoljubnosti pred Bogom, kristološkega pričevanja, hoje za Kristusom in odgovornega cerkvenega občestva. Konstruktivni pristop Christy Capper uporabi kot vir za pojasnitev, kako je mogoče avtentičnost znotraj krščanske teološke antropologije usmeriti onkraj samega sebe. Osrednji prispevek članka je predlog*

pastoralne hermenevtike avtentičnosti: disciplinirane prakse poslušanja, interpretiranja, razločevanja in spremljanja v situacijah pastoralne skrbi, nezaupanja, samospraševanja, institucionalnega razočaranja in iskanja vere, ki jo človek lahko osebno sprejme in živi kot svojo. Avtentičnost ima zato resnično, vendar omejeno pastoralno vrednost. Cerkvi lahko pomaga razbrati, kaj ljudje izražajo s sodobnimi sklicevanji na avtentičnost, pri čemer norma krščanskega življenja ostaja resnicoljubno življenje, prejeta od Boga, razodeto v Kristusu in živeto v cerkvenem občestvu.

Ključne besede: avtentičnost, pastoralna teologija, pastoralna hermenevtika, pozna moderna, razločevanje, krščanska antropologija

Introduction

In many late-modern Western societies, authenticity has become a powerful moral and cultural ideal. Charles Taylor describes this as an »age of authenticity«, marked by the expectation that persons discover and express their own way of being human rather than simply conforming to inherited or external expectations (Taylor 1991; 2007). For pastoral theology, this ideal cannot be treated as a merely cultural fashion. It can name real Christian concerns: integrity before God, truthfulness of heart, personal appropriation of faith, and the desire for faith to be more than inherited convention or social habit. But it can also import into Christian life a late-modern tendency to treat self-expression, emotional sincerity, or subjective congruence as decisive. When that happens, faith is no longer judged primarily in relation to truthful discipleship, ecclesial communion, and witness. Authenticity therefore has to be interpreted before it can be judged theologically.

Tillich's account of theology as both the statement of the Christian message and its interpretation for each new generation helps frame this caution (Tillich 1951, 3): pastoral theology may neither adopt authenticity because it is culturally powerful nor dismiss a language through which people now speak about truthfulness, belonging, and personally appropriated faith.

This becomes especially visible in pastoral work, not least with emerging adults (Arnett 2000; Snider 2024). In settings shaped by individualisation, institutional mistrust, and the expectation to live »one's own« life, authenticity often becomes a way of speaking about several related concerns: the desire for faith to become personally one's own, unease with merely



performed religion, concern about institutions whose words and conduct no longer seem to cohere, and the search for credible belonging. Such appeals deserve attention, but their meaning is rarely self-evident. They may disclose genuine pastoral questions; they may also conceal resistance to accountability, reluctance to receive faith as something given, or a tendency to keep faith answerable chiefly to the self. The pastoral question is not only what authenticity means, but what is being disclosed when people appeal to it.

No single discipline clarifies the problem. Interdisciplinary accounts show that authenticity involves identity, coherence between word and life, vulnerability, trust, and social recognition, but they do not determine its theological meaning. Biblical and theological reflection must therefore ask how these concerns are ordered in relation to God's truth, Christological witness, discipleship, and the Church. Capper is useful at this point because she asks how authenticity may be ordered beyond expressive individualism toward God, the good of the other, and responsible communion (Capper 2023, 129–133.139–147.152–153).

Within a Catholic pastoral horizon, the article's question is also ecclesiological. Discernment is not merely the interpretive skill of an individual pastoral worker, but a practice of the Church as communion: listening to lived experience, testing it before the Gospel, and accompanying persons toward conversion, healing and repair, participation, and shared witness.

The present article builds on these discussions, but its aim is not to offer another definition of Christian authenticity. It asks how pastoral theology can interpret contemporary appeals to authenticity when they arise in situations of pastoral care, mistrust, self-questioning, ecclesial disappointment, and the search for a faith that can be lived truthfully. The argument is that authenticity functions best as a culturally powerful interpretive category: it helps identify real concerns about personal appropriation, coherence between word and life, and credibility, while their theological evaluation remains governed by truthful witness before God and within the Church.

The article develops this argument in five stages: an interdisciplinary profile of authenticity; a biblical-theological reframing of its central concerns; an engagement with Christy Capper's theological account; a proposal for



a pastoral hermeneutics of authenticity; and implications for pastoral workers and for believers seeking a faith that can be lived truthfully.

1 An interdisciplinary profile of authenticity

This section considers how authenticity is understood in selected philosophical, sociological, psychological, and psychotherapeutic discussions. Its aim is not to produce a general theory of authenticity or a norm for pastoral theology, but to identify recurring concerns – personal appropriation, coherence between word and life, relational presence, credibility, trust, and belonging – that later serve as heuristic lenses for pastoral listening and discernment.

1.1 Philosophical perspectives: authenticity, horizons of significance, and social virtue

Although Socrates does not speak of authenticity in the modern sense, his claim that »the unexamined life is not worth living« (Plato 2002, *Apology* 38a) already links self-examination with the question of a genuinely human life. Augustine gives this concern theological depth in the *Confessions*, where self-knowledge becomes inseparable from truthfulness before God. Recalling how he had sought God outwardly, »according to the flesh«, he confesses that God was »more inward than my innermost self and higher than my highest« (Augustine 2008, *Confessions* 3.6.11). This inward turn does not make religious life merely private. Rather, it shows that religious practice cannot remain only a matter of habit or outward conformity. It involves an interior relation in which a person's motives, desires, and evasions are disclosed before God, becoming a summons to truthful self-recognition and conversion.

In nineteenth- and twentieth-century existential thought, authenticity becomes an explicit category for describing what it means to exist as a self. Kierkegaard portrays the human being as called to become a »single individual« before God rather than disappear into »the crowd«. Truth, in this sense, concerns not only objective correctness but also the existential »how« of its appropriation (Kierkegaard 1992, 189–251). Heidegger describes everyday existence as ordinarily absorbed in the anonymous



»they« and understands authenticity as taking up one's finite possibilities in awareness of mortality, finitude, and responsibility (Heidegger 1962, §§45–53). In Sartre, the question of authenticity is approached chiefly through the analysis of bad faith: one evades freedom by hiding behind fixed roles or by treating one's identity as something already given rather than something for which one is responsible (Sartre 2003, 70–95.530–550). In these accounts, authenticity is tied to responsibility for one's own life and resistance to self-deception. This will matter later for the article's account of responsible personal appropriation.

For the purposes of pastoral reflection, two common threads are especially important. First, authenticity requires honesty with oneself rather than hiding behind roles or evasive self-understandings. Second, these accounts assume that a life is shaped by what one recognizes as truly important. What remains less clear is how these commitments are to be ordered and sustained within a community.

Charles Taylor offers one of the most influential philosophical analyses of the modern ideal of authenticity and argues that it can be affirmed without being reduced to subjectivism. In Taylor's account, this ideal includes fidelity to one's own originality, to a way of being human that is genuinely one's own rather than a copy of others (Taylor 1991, 28–29). Yet authenticity cannot be understood as sheer self-creation or arbitrary choice. The self is irreducibly dialogical. We become »full human agents« only through languages of self-interpretation acquired in exchange with »significant others«, and some relationships become internal to identity because the goods we most deeply care about are accessible only in and through them (Taylor 1991, 33–35). Authenticity therefore presupposes a dialogical and relational account of the self, rather than a self enclosed within itself. For pastoral reflection, the significance of this point is clear: authenticity already points beyond isolated self-expression toward relational accountability.

Taylor further situates authenticity within »horizons of significance«. Identity can be understood only against a background of things that matter. For this reason, attempts to justify authenticity in purely subjectivist terms tend to weaken the ideal itself (Taylor 1991, 36–41). In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor develops this point through the notion of »strong evaluation«:



our basic self-understandings involve qualitative distinctions between better and worse, higher and lower, rather than mere expressions of preference (Taylor 1989, 4.91–93). In his account, authenticity therefore depends on goods that orient judgement, not on subjective intensity alone.

Building on Taylor's critique of subjectivism, Charles Guignon argues that authenticity is not merely an inward condition of sincerity, since the self is formed within social relationships and shared practices. For this reason, authenticity is »fundamentally and irreducibly a social virtue« (Guignon 2004, 77). To be authentic is not simply to feel strongly or to assert one's inner conviction. It is to live out commitments whose worth can be recognized and expressed intelligibly within shared forms of life (77–81). Guignon therefore presents authenticity as a socially embedded virtue: a form of integrity and reflective judgement tested within common practices and relationships (77–84).

These philosophical perspectives show that authenticity involves more than immediacy or self-expression: responsibility, resistance to self-deception, orientation toward goods, and commitments formed in relationships. They help pastoral theology hear appeals to authenticity as possible desires for a personally appropriated and accountable life. They do not, however, decide what the highest good is or how a life is to be ordered before God.

1.2 Sociological perspectives: performed, recognized, and contested authenticity

Sociological approaches complement philosophical accounts by showing that authenticity is not only an inward quality of the person, but also something recognized in social interaction. In Goffman's dramaturgical terms, the question is whether what a person claims coheres with what is »given off« through embodied cues such as voice, posture, and action (Goffman 1959, 2–3). He distinguishes the sincere performer, who believes in the impression conveyed, from the cynical performer, who manages impressions without inward commitment (Goffman 1959, 17–19). In this framework, credibility is not secured by claim alone; it is enacted and tested in ordinary interaction.



Jeffrey C. Alexander extends this insight through cultural pragmatics by analyzing how public authenticity comes to be recognized. For Alexander, performances appear authentic when the performer, audience, script, means of presentation, scene, and relations of power align sufficiently for an act to seem natural and convincing (Alexander 2004, 530–536). In these accounts, authenticity can be understood as socially recognized coherence: communities assess whether a person's words, bodily presence, and actions hold together, especially under pressure (Goffman 1959, 12–13.256–257; Alexander 2004, 529–533.566). For pastoral theology, the point is clear: trustworthiness in ministry is rarely secured by asserted sincerity alone. It is recognized, if at all, through coherence between speech, presence, and conduct over time.

Insights from the sociology of religion help explain why authenticity has become a prominent language of credibility and belonging in contemporary pastoral contexts. Heelas and colleagues describe a major cultural shift – the »subjective turn« – in which people increasingly move away from lives shaped primarily by external expectations toward lives shaped by inner experience (Heelas et al. 2005, 2–4). In this setting, institutions often come to be judged by whether they make room for lived experience, emotional honesty, and personal appropriation, rather than being perceived as simply demanding conformity.

From a pastoral perspective, the subjective turn helps explain why individuals may place greater weight on integrity and relational credibility. It also helps explain why authenticity has become an important marker of trust, legitimacy, and belonging. Detached from shared horizons of significance and accountability, however, the language of authenticity can also become a language of self-authorization, selective belonging, or generalized suspicion of institutions. Self-authorization here means treating one's own inward conviction or desire as sufficient justification in itself, rather than as something answerable to shared standards of truth, communal discernment, and, theologically, to God.

Sociological perspectives clarify that authenticity is socially recognized, not merely inwardly claimed. In ministry and ecclesial life, trust depends on whether speech, presence, and conduct cohere over time. Yet recognition is not discernment: a community may find something persuasive



without discerning it as true, and may overlook truthfulness when it appears weak, costly, or institutionally inconvenient.

1.3 Psychological and psychotherapeutic perspectives: congruence, vulnerability, and secure attachment

In the second half of the twentieth century, the expansion of psychotherapy – sometimes described as part of a »therapeutic age« (Svetelj 2022, 174–175) – made authenticity an important concern in clinical and relational reflection. Across several psychotherapeutic traditions, authenticity is treated less as spontaneity and more as genuine, trustworthy presence in relationship. Three recurrent markers are especially relevant for pastoral reflection: congruence, vulnerability, and secure attachment.

In humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers identifies therapist congruence as a necessary condition for therapeutic change. A therapist is congruent, genuine, and integrated when, in the therapeutic relationship, he is »freely and deeply himself« and when his actual experience is accurately represented in his awareness of himself (Rogers 1957, 97–98). Congruence does not mean indiscriminate self-disclosure. It means, above all, that the therapist does not hide behind a professional façade. In Rogers' account, authenticity is therefore not a technique of self-display, but a non-manipulative and receptive presence in relationship.

Later relational and existential therapists develop this insight by stressing that authenticity includes a willingness to be affected by the encounter while remaining within responsible boundaries. Jourard speaks of the courage to be oneself with others rather than hiding behind pretense (Jourard 1971, ix; 133–134). Yalom and Slavin likewise emphasize emotionally genuine presence, vulnerability, and a willingness to acknowledge one's own limits rather than relying on detached expertise or a polished posture of invulnerability (Yalom 2003, 26–29; Slavin 1998, 231–238). Maroda's work on countertransference develops a related concern with the therapeutic use of the analyst's emotional involvement (Maroda 1991). In these accounts, therapeutic authenticity is best understood as integrated relational presence: genuineness that makes trust possible, not raw expressiveness or intimacy without clear boundaries.



Attachment-informed psychotherapy deepens this relational dimension by describing how stable trust is formed over time. In attachment-informed accounts, therapeutic responsiveness is often understood by analogy with sufficiently attuned caregiving: interaction with a sensitively responsive other supports the development of a reflective self (Holmes 2001, xi). Through contingent and »marked« mirroring, and through emotional attunement more generally, affects become more representable and more available for reflection (Wallin 2007, 146–147). This does not turn pastoral ministry into therapy. It does, however, clarify some of the relational conditions under which trust and credibility are formed over time. In pastoral contexts, credible presence may therefore be experienced as reliability and emotional accessibility rather than as continual self-disclosure or charismatic intensity.

Personality and social psychology have also described authenticity as a multidimensional construct. Kernis and Goldman propose a four-dimensional model of authenticity. It includes self-awareness, unbiased processing of self-relevant information, behavior that is congruent with one's values, and a relational orientation marked by openness rather than strategic self-presentation (Kernis and Goldman 2006). Empirical research in this area associates higher authenticity with self-esteem, subjective and psychological well-being, and healthier psychological functioning (Goldman and Kernis 2002; Wood et al. 2008). These approaches suggest a common pattern: in psychological terms, authenticity involves self-knowledge, value-congruent action, and relational openness.

Psychological and psychotherapeutic perspectives make integrity and relational accountability concrete: self-knowledge, congruence, responsible openness, and reliability over time. They help pastoral theology name how trust is formed through presence, tone, boundaries, and consistency. Yet they usually describe the good as integration, flourishing, or relational functioning; pastoral theology must receive these goods within a horizon in which life before God, participation in Christ, and communion provide the final measure.

Taken together, these interdisciplinary perspectives explain why authenticity has become pastorally significant, but they do not give pastoral theology its criterion of judgement. Authenticity may name responsibility for



one's life rather than the mere performance of inherited roles; coherence between conviction, speech, and conduct; or the credibility of persons and institutions whose words and actions hold together over time. These concerns help pastoral theology hear questions of selfhood, trust, integrity, and belonging that might otherwise be dismissed too quickly. Yet they remain ambiguous: personal appropriation may mature into responsible faith or become grounded chiefly in the self; concern for coherence may resist duplicity or become defensive against claims that challenge the self; and recognized credibility may expose real failures without being able, by itself, to decide what is true. The next step is therefore to reframe these concerns as response to God, participation in Christ's witness, and formation within ecclesial communion.

2 Biblical-theological reframing: truthfulness, witness, and ecclesial communion

Scripture does not offer a modern theory of authenticity. It gives pastoral theology a horizon for judging the concerns now gathered under that term: truthfulness of heart, integrity between word and deed, resistance to hypocrisy, fidelity under pressure, and witness within the community of faith. The point is not that Scripture already teaches authenticity in a modern sense, but that it locates truthful human life before God, in relation to Christ, and within ecclesial communion. This reframing prevents the self from becoming its own measure. Scripture asks not first whether a life feels expressive of the self, but whether it is received and lived as a truthful response to God.

2.1 Truthfulness before the faithful God

Biblically, truthful life begins with God rather than with the self. God is truthful and faithful; human truthfulness is therefore responsive before it is expressive. In the Old Testament, truth is bound to God's reliability, covenant fidelity, and steadfast love. God is not »a human being, that



he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind» (Num 23:19),¹ and the psalmist confesses that the sum of God's word is truth (Ps 119:160). In Scripture, God's word is more than accurate information. It is a trustworthy word that calls, judges, sustains, and forms a people. Human truthfulness takes shape within this covenantal relation: it is a life answerable to the God who is faithful.

This covenantal frame matters for the present argument because it prevents authenticity from becoming a self-grounded claim. The human person is not called merely to express an inner sense of truth, but to live without duplicity before God. The biblical concern with the heart develops this point. When Samuel is sent to anoint David, he is reminded that the Lord does not see as mortals see, since human beings look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (1 Sam 16:7). Psalm 15 describes the one who may dwell with the Lord as one who walks blamelessly, does what is right, and speaks the truth from the heart (Ps 15:2). The point is not perfection without weakness, but an undivided life before God: a refusal of duplicity, deception, and divided allegiance.

Speech is also drawn into this covenantal frame. True witness is not measured by charisma, intensity, or public approval. Prophetic witness is judged by fidelity to the Lord, not by persuasive power or institutional success. Jeremiah is a clear example because his witness is costly. He speaks under pressure, not because the word confirms his own self-image, but because it becomes like a fire in his bones that he cannot hold in (Jer 20:7-9). Truthfulness, in this biblical sense, is not the display of an authentic self. It is a form of answerability to God, especially when silence, evasion, or self-protection would be easier.

2.2 Integrity and religious performance

Jesus' critique of hypocrisy makes the pastoral stakes sharper. In Matthew 6, Jesus warns against almsgiving, prayer, and fasting performed for the sake of being seen by others (Matt 6:1-18). Visibility itself is not the problem;

1 Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE).



public practice can be faithful. The problem is that religious action can be redirected away from God and neighbor toward recognition. What appears as devotion may become a performance of devotion. The outward act remains religious, but its orientation has shifted.

Matthew 23 intensifies the point. Jesus criticizes religious leaders who »do not practice what they teach« (Matt 23:3), and who turn religious authority into a form of public display and burden-imposing (Matt 23:4-7.23-28). Here the issue is not merely private insincerity. It concerns the public damage that occurs when religious authority, speech, and practice no longer hold together. Hypocrisy is not merely a failure of personal authenticity. More basically, it is a failure of truthful witness. It makes the things of God serve reputation, control, or religious self-display.

Contemporary complaints about the Church's lack of authenticity often concern precisely this gap between proclamation and practice. A careful pastoral response neither accepts such complaints uncritically nor dismisses them too quickly. Jesus' critique of hypocrisy gives pastoral theology reason to take this gap seriously. A community that proclaims mercy, truth, and communion has reason to ask whether its common life bears witness to what it says.

James makes this relation between hearing and practice concrete: believers are to be »doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves« (Jas 1:22), and »faith without works is also dead« (Jas 2:26). Biblical integrity is therefore not reducible to inward sincerity. It concerns the relation between hearing God's word, the heart that receives it, and the life that enacts it. A person may feel sincere and still be self-deceived. A community may proclaim truth and still obscure it by the way it acts. The biblical question is not only whether a life feels inwardly congruent, but whether it is being formed by God's truth.

2.3 Christological witness to truth

In John's Gospel, the question of truthfulness becomes explicitly Christological. In John 4, Jesus speaks of worship »in spirit and truth« (John 4:23-24). This is not a call to religious inwardness as such, nor does it make sincerity the source of truth. Worship »in spirit and truth«



is worship shaped by God's self-disclosure, which John presents as given in and through Jesus. Truth is therefore not generated by the worshipper's sincerity; it is received in relation to the revelation given in Christ.

In John 18:37, truth takes the form of public and contested witness, as Jesus tells Pilate that he came into the world »to testify to the truth«. For the present argument, the scene is important because truth, witness, and public pressure meet there. Truth is not treated as a private interior possession. It is witnessed in a public setting where power, fear, judgement, and political calculation are all present. Christian truthfulness therefore cannot be reduced to psychological sincerity or the desire to appear genuine. It is participation in Christ's witness to truth.

John 14:6 grounds this claim more fully: Jesus identifies himself as »the way, and the truth, and the life«. Truth is located in Christ's person and witness, not in inner sincerity or social recognition; Christian life is therefore measured by fidelity to him (John 14:6).

Pauline texts develop the same orientation in relation to ministry and ecclesial life. Paul can speak of ministry marked by sincerity and godly frankness (2 Cor 1:12), but he refuses to make the ministerial self the center of proclamation: »we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.« (2 Cor 4:5) This provides a demanding criterion for ministry. Ministry is distorted when the minister's self, charisma, transparency, or personal authority becomes the center of proclamation. In 1 Thessalonians 2:4, Paul similarly refuses to make human approval the measure of faithfulness: apostolic speech is answerable to God, who tests the heart. These texts do not speak the modern language of authenticity, but they directly address one of its pastoral concerns: whether speech, motive, and witness are ordered beyond the self.

2.4 Ecclesial communion and accountable truthfulness

Biblical truthfulness is not only personal. It is ecclesial. The life of faith is formed within a community that hears the word, breaks bread, prays, shares goods, and learns to live under the formative claim of the Gospel. Acts 2:42–47 portrays such a community not as a perfect institution, but



as a shared life in which teaching, fellowship, prayer, material responsibility, and public witness belong together. Truth becomes visible in a form of life.

Koinonía is not merely sociological belonging. It names participation in the life God gives, expressed in fellowship, Eucharistic communion, prayer, shared responsibility, and the work of the Spirit (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Cor 10:16; 2 Cor 13:13). This is pastorally important because appeals to authenticity often arise where trust in institutions has been damaged. If ecclesial communion is a truthful form of shared life, the Church cannot answer such mistrust merely by asserting its authority. Nor can it reduce ecclesial truthfulness to image management.

1 Timothy 3:15 speaks of the Church as »the pillar and bulwark of the truth«, yet the claim should not be read triumphalistically. It does not make the Church's credibility automatic, nor does it exempt its witness from judgement. The Church is called to serve and bear witness to the truth in its teaching, worship, discipline, repentance, and common life. Ecclesial truthfulness is a vocation and responsibility before it is a claim.

Ephesians 4:15-16 is also relevant, provided it is not reduced to an interpersonal communication slogan. »Speaking the truth in love« (Eph 4:15) belongs to the body's growth into Christ, its head, and to the building up of the community in love. Truthful speech is therefore not simply the courage to express oneself bluntly, nor is it the avoidance of conflict for the sake of peace. It requires charity, accountability, and a willingness to be formed together.

Paul's account of weakness in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 adds a further correction to this account of ecclesial witness. Christian truthfulness does not require polished strength or invulnerable religious performance. Paul can name weakness because Christ's word to him is: »My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.« (2 Cor 12:9) Yet this is not performative vulnerability. Weakness is not presented in order to draw attention to the ministerial self. It becomes witness only insofar as it points beyond the self to the power of Christ.



These biblical motifs are not only a theological horizon; they also shape pastoral discernment. Truthfulness before God tests whether an appeal to authenticity remains answerable to God or makes the self its measure. The critique of religious performance helps identify whether a real gap between word and life is being named, or whether »inauthenticity« is being used selectively. Christological witness asks whether sincerity and vulnerability point beyond the self to fidelity to Christ. Ecclesial communion places wounded trust, protest, and personal appropriation within the demands of accountability, repair, and shared formation. In this sense, the biblical material becomes hermeneutical: it helps pastoral care distinguish a search for truthful life, a protest against hypocrisy, a wound in relation to the Church, and a refusal of discipleship made in the name of authenticity. Capper's account can then clarify how authenticity itself may be theologically understood within this wider discernment.

3 Christy Capper and the theological clarification of authenticity

Within this biblical-theological horizon, Capper's account is used here as a constructive resource for pastoral discernment. Her work clarifies how authenticity may be understood within Christian theological anthropology without reducing it to subjective sincerity, desire, or personal congruence alone. This matters pastorally because appeals to authenticity are often encountered before their theological meaning is clear.

Capper begins from concerns close to the ones pursued here. She notes the cultural force of authenticity, especially among young adults, and places it against the background of ecclesial failure, hypocrisy, and the loss of institutional credibility. Her opening examples concern the gap between Christian proclamation, public moral language, and actual practice, including cases of abuse, failures of accountability, and public moral inconsistency (Capper 2023, 1–4). For Capper, this makes it inadequate either to dismiss authenticity as mere expressive individualism or to affirm it without theological scrutiny. If authenticity names something that late-modern persons, including young adults, use to judge truthfulness, hypocrisy, and the credibility of the Church, then theology asks how authenticity can be understood, what in it may be affirmed, and where it needs to be resisted.



Capper pursues this question through constructive engagement. Drawing especially on John Macquarrie, she brings theology into conversation with philosophical and cultural accounts of authenticity, identity, narrative, embodiment, relationality, freedom, and the *imago Dei* (Capper 2023, 5-7.37-57.62-99.104-118). Capper's method matters here because it refuses a simple opposition between theology and contemporary culture. She neither baptizes the cultural desire for authenticity nor rejects it as theologically unusable. Instead, she asks whether authentic selfhood can be understood within, and shaped by, Christian theological anthropology.

The result is her constructive definition of authenticity as bringing »the fullness of one's unique, God-inspired self to life« (Capper 2023, 129-133.152). The definition matters because it places authenticity within a theological account of the person. Authentic selfhood is not the discovery of a fixed inner core, nor the unrestrained expression of desire. It concerns a human person who is created in the image of God, formed through narrative and relationships, embodied, socially situated, and called toward the good beyond the self. The phrase »God-inspired self« also sets a boundary: not every desire, self-expression, or claim to sincerity can be called authentic in a Christian sense (Capper 2023, 130-133).

Capper's testing of her definition is especially important for the present article because it shows how theological discernment limits and directs the language of authenticity. Her account makes clear why authenticity cannot be reduced to subjective sincerity, personal congruence, or the enactment of what one experiences as most deeply one's own. In testing her definition, she explicitly addresses Adorno's »true torturer« objection – the claim that even a torturer might appeal to being true to himself – together with objections concerning radical individualism, the expression of desire, and moral relativism (Capper 2023, 139-147). These objections do real work in her argument. They show that a theological account of authenticity is ethically bounded and oriented toward the Good, not merely toward self-expression. Capper therefore provides a theological resource for asking whether contemporary appeals to authenticity are being drawn beyond the self toward God, self-giving love, and responsible communion, or whether they remain enclosed within self-authorizing desire.



Here Capper's project and the present article diverge. Capper asks how authenticity may be understood as a theological imperative within Christian theological anthropology, ethical formation, and mission. This article asks how pastoral theology hears appeals to authenticity before they become clarified concepts: as speech about faith becoming »mine«, protest against hypocrisy, wounded mistrust, resistance to imposed roles, or the desire to live without religious pretense. Such speech cannot be judged simply by matching it to a definition; it remains ambiguous pastoral speech.

Capper is therefore a resource, not a template. Her account clarifies why Christian authenticity cannot remain enclosed within sincerity, desire, or the self's own terms. The present article then asks what concrete appeals disclose or obscure, and what accompaniment, correction, repair, or formation they call for within ecclesial life.

4 Toward a pastoral hermeneutics of authenticity

The preceding sections have identified the concerns associated with appeals to authenticity and the theological questions by which they need to be tested. The remaining task is pastoral: to consider how such discernment takes shape when authenticity is invoked in situations of care, mistrust, formation, and ministry. Appeals to authenticity rarely appear as theoretical claims; they often express pressure, wound, suspicion, or desire. A young adult seeking a faith that is »really mine«, a parishioner who says the Church is »not authentic«, and a pastoral worker under pressure to appear transparent may be using the same word for different realities. A pastoral hermeneutics asks what is being disclosed and interprets it in light of Scripture, Christian theological anthropology, ecclesial wisdom, and the concrete demands of discipleship. In this respect, it belongs within practical theology's concern to relate lived experience, theological judgment, and faithful response (Osmer 2008). It also stands close to the hermeneutical tradition in pastoral care, where the person is attended to as a »living human document« rather than treated only as a case to be classified (Gerkin 1984; Doehring 2015).

Within a Catholic pastoral horizon, this hermeneutic is not merely the skill of an individual pastoral worker. It belongs to a Church called to listen,



discern, accompany, and respond in communion. *Amoris laetitia* offers an important analogue for such pastoral reasoning: situations marked by fragility are neither ignored nor resolved by the mechanical application of general categories, but accompanied through discernment toward fuller participation in ecclesial life (Francis 2016, 291–312). The recent synodal process places this logic within a wider ecclesial grammar by linking listening and discernment with communion, participation, and mission (Synod of Bishops 2024, 29–32). Ecclesial wisdom, in this sense, is not institutional self-protection, but a communal practice in which experience is heard, tested, and ordered toward the Gospel.

Such a hermeneutic begins with listening, but listening has to move toward theological interpretation. »I need to be authentic« may name responsibility for inherited faith, exhaustion with role-playing, protest against hypocrisy, refusal of imposed expectations, or self-protection from accountability. In pastoral life these meanings are often entangled.

For this reason, listening is not merely an informational first step before theological judgement. When appeals to authenticity are charged by shame, anger, mistrust, or fear, persons who feel unsafe or unheard may defend, withdraw, or intensify the claim before they are able to examine it. Attachment-informed reflection on the use of psychotherapeutic interventions in pastoral practice is helpful here: secure, empathic, and ethically bounded pastoral relationships can help believers feel heard in their concrete experience and become able to enter sincere dialogue and spiritual accompaniment (Ganc and Jerebic 2024). Empathic recognition does not decide the theological truth of the appeal; it helps regulate affect and lower defensiveness so that a more demanding question can be heard as accompaniment rather than rejection. In this sense, being heard is not a substitute for discernment, but one of its pastoral conditions. The question is therefore not only whether the appeal is sincere, but what claim, wound, or desire it carries, and how it stands before the Gospel. Capper's account helps clarify the stakes: is the appeal drawing the person toward God, responsible communion, and self-giving love, or leaving the person enclosed within a self-validating reading of authenticity (Capper 2023, 129–147)?



In practice, appeals to authenticity often gather around three concerns. First, they may express a desire for personal appropriation: faith cannot remain merely inherited, external, or institutionally imposed, but has to become personally received and responsibly lived. Second, they may name a concern for coherence between word and life, especially where a gap appears between what is professed and what is practiced. Third, they may express a concern for credibility, asking whether persons, pastoral relationships, or ecclesial institutions remain trustworthy when such gaps have wounded confidence. These are pastorally important concerns. None of them, taken alone, settles the matter. The desire for personal appropriation may mature into responsible faith, but it may also harden into a form of choice that resists accountability. Concern for coherence between word and life may expose hypocrisy and empty religious performance; yet it can also become defensive when integrity is reduced to consistency with a preferred self-image rather than openness to conversion and correction. Concern for credibility may call the Church to repentance and repair; yet it becomes unstable when shifting expectations of public recognition become the measure of faithfulness.

This gives pastoral discernment some orientation, though not a checklist. An appeal to authenticity begins to take a Christian form where it moves beyond self-confirmation and remains answerable to God, to the teaching and witness of Christ, and to the good of the other. It becomes distorted where sincerity is used to exempt the self from conversion, repair, or concrete responsibility. It is pastorally significant where wounded trust can be spoken truthfully without becoming the final measure of ecclesial belonging, and where the desire for a faith that is »mine« begins to take form in accountable practices of faith.

Such discernment is also tested over time: not only whether the appeal feels honest, but whether speech, conduct, relationships, and decisions begin to cohere. These criteria do not remove ambiguity. They give discernment a direction: to ask whether the appeal is opening toward truthful life before God and within the Church, or closing discernment around the self's own terms. They also guard against two reductions: treating every sincere claim as truthful and treating every protest as mere expressive individualism.



Discernment remains pastoral only if it leads to accompaniment and formation. Formation here does not mean pressing persons into inherited patterns; it names the gradual shaping of desire, judgement, practice, and relationship toward truthful life before God, discipleship, and accountable communion. The aim is not to win an argument about authenticity, but to help persons test and reshape their desires within faith. This may involve prayer, moral reflection, spiritual direction, sacramental participation, truthful conversation, accountability, reconciliation, or the slow rebuilding of trust. In some cases the task is to help a person take more responsibility for faith; in others, to name ecclesial failure and resist premature reconciliation; in others, to speak truthfully when authenticity protects the self from discipleship. No single response fits every case.

A pastoral hermeneutics of authenticity receives contemporary speech about selfhood, trust, and belonging without leaving interpretation to private intuition or self-description. In a Catholic horizon, discernment remains accountable to Scripture, theological anthropology, the Church's common life, and the practices through which trust, repair, conversion, and participation become possible. Authenticity functions as a pastoral signal, not as a theological criterion.

5 Pastoral implications for ministry and formation

The pastoral hermeneutics developed above has consequences for those who minister and for those whom the Church accompanies. This section considers two areas in which the argument takes practical shape: the life and practice of pastoral workers, and the accompaniment of believers who speak about faith, Church, and selfhood through the language of authenticity.

5.1 Pastoral workers: integrity, boundaries, and witness

If the Church accompanies persons toward truthful and personally appropriated faith, the pastoral worker's life cannot be secondary. Ministry is not carried by technique alone; it is entrusted to persons whose speech, conduct, and use of authority either support or obstruct the Church's witness. In sacramental and communal forms of ministry – catechesis, preaching,



accompaniment, parish leadership, youth ministry, charitable service – the decisive question is not whether pastoral workers appear spontaneous or transparent, but whether they live ministry truthfully before God and responsibly within the Church.

This is not a call for pastoral workers to cultivate an idealized image of spiritual coherence, as if they were always inwardly settled, certain, and spiritually composed. Such an image would itself become a form of performance. Nor does it require unreserved disclosure of their inner life. The cultural expectation to »be authentic« can distort ministry when it encourages pastoral workers to make the pastoral relationship serve their own need for recognition, intimacy, admiration, or relief. In that case, self-disclosure may appear honest while actually shifting the burden of care onto the very persons entrusted to their care.

Psychological and psychotherapeutic literature is useful here, provided it is used analogically. Rogers' account of congruence, later discussions of therapist self-disclosure, and attachment-informed accounts of trust formation help clarify some relational conditions under which credibility and safety are formed (Rogers 1957; Knox and Hill 2003; D'Aniello and Nguyen 2017; Holmes 2001; Wallin 2007). These accounts also remind pastoral theology that trust is not experienced in the abstract. It is experienced through tone, reliability, emotional availability, boundaries, and the coherence of conduct over time. These insights do not require pastoral ministry to be understood as psychotherapy. Rather, they help pastoral theology name relational conditions that also matter in ministry, while the meaning and purpose of those conditions are interpreted within a specifically pastoral horizon: truthful witness to Christ, the good of the person before God, and the responsibilities of ecclesial life.

Timmerman's empirical moral-theological work on personal pastoral care is useful at this point, especially for parish contexts in which priests and lay pastoral workers offer personal pastoral care. He argues that autonomy and authenticity are not merely abstract principles applied from outside, but goods that become intelligible within the concrete practice of pastoral care and through the practical judgement of reflective practitioners (Timmerman 2010). This helps specify the difference between therapeutic congruence and pastoral responsiveness. The pastoral worker does not



honor authenticity by simply confirming the person's self-understanding; rather, the worker responds in a way that attends to freedom, vulnerability, concrete life history, and the aims and goods of pastoral care.

Here pastoral authenticity is distinguished from performative vulnerability. A pastoral worker who names weakness may bear truthful witness to grace; a pastoral worker who presents weakness in order to secure closeness, admiration, or exemption from accountability has turned vulnerability back toward the self. Paul's account of weakness in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 is not a display of ministerial fragility for its own sake. It is a witness to dependence on Christ. In the same way, pastoral transparency is truthful only when it remains ordered to the good of the other, the integrity of ministry, and witness to the Gospel.

Pastoral workers therefore need more than personal sincerity; they need an accountable form of pastoral integrity. Honest self-examination, supervision, spiritual direction, ongoing formation, and appropriate ecclesial oversight are not external restraints on authenticity. They are practices that keep ministry from becoming self-referential. They help pastoral workers notice when self-disclosure serves the good of the other and when it seeks recognition, closeness, admiration, or relief; when vulnerability points to grace and when it becomes a way of avoiding responsibility. Pastoral authority gives the pastoral worker's personal presence a public and ecclesial effect. The point is not to make ministry guarded or impersonal. It is to ensure that the pastoral worker does not proclaim the self but Christ (2 Cor 4:5), and does not confuse human approval with fidelity to God (1 Thess 2:4).

Ministerial credibility is formed slowly, when words, presence, and conduct hold together under ordinary pressures. Jeremiah's costly speech, Jesus' witness before Pilate, and Paul's refusal to center ministry on himself all point toward this form of witness (Jer 20:7-9; John 18:37; 2 Cor 4:5). Pastoral integrity is not a pastoral version of expressive authenticity, but a bounded and accountable presence that points to Christ.



5.2 Accompanying believers who seek an »authentic« faith

For many believers, especially emerging adults, the question of faith is inseparable from the question of whether it can be lived truthfully. Statements such as »I want a faith that is really mine«, »I cannot pretend anymore«, or »The Church is not authentic« may disclose inherited faith that has not yet become personally appropriated, mistrust caused by institutional failure, fatigue with religious performance, or a desire for belonging without dishonesty. They may also conceal evasion, self-protection, or resistance to claims that call the self beyond itself. The following constructed vignettes show how such language calls for discernment rather than immediate affirmation or correction.

Example 1: Institutional credibility and wounded trust

A 27-year-old woman who has distanced herself from the Church says, »I left because the Church is not authentic«. In conversation, it becomes clear that she is not simply expressing private disappointment. She remembers a parish setting in which questions about a leader's conduct were deflected by appeals for unity and patience. Those who raised concerns were described as divisive, while public language about mercy, truth, and communion continued unchanged. For her, »inauthentic« names a gap between proclamation and practice.

A defensive response would move too quickly to protect the Church's reputation. A merely affirming response would allow her disappointment to become the final interpretation of the Church. Neither is adequate. Her language of authenticity discloses a real concern for credibility, but also a wound in relation to ecclesial belonging. The question is not simply whether the Church can be defended, but what truthful witness requires where trust has been damaged.

Accompaniment therefore begins with a non-defensive space in which anger, grief, and distrust can be voiced without being silenced, minimized, or prematurely redirected into appeals for unity, forgiveness, communion, or fidelity. Such recognition does not make her interpretation the whole truth; it is the pastoral condition for any renewed trust. If trust is to become possible again, it passes through truth rather than around it. This may require naming failure, acknowledging harm, receiving confusion without



defensiveness, and identifying forms of accountability or repair. The pastoral worker's role is not to manage the Church's image, but to remain truthfully and steadily present without demanding premature reconciliation.

Such accompaniment may not lead to immediate resolution. The woman may not be ready to return, and the pastoral worker may not be able to repair what damaged her trust. Still, the conversation can prevent two reductions: seeing the Church only through injury, and reducing ecclesial belonging to institutional loyalty without truth. If trust is rebuilt, it will be rebuilt through visible truthfulness, accountable communion, and a more credible relation between what the Church proclaims and how it acts.

Example 2: Personal appropriation and the cost of discipleship

A 24-year-old man asks for a pastoral conversation after several years away from parish life and says, »I want a faith that is really mine, not just something I inherited«. His concern deserves serious attention. In the form of faith he received, as he experienced it, churchgoing was regular but tied to respectability, sharp judgements of others, and little space for honest questioning. He does not want simply to repeat that pattern or perform belief for the sake of belonging. His language of authenticity names a genuine desire for personal appropriation.

A pastoral response first affirms this desire. The problem is not that faith is inherited; Christian faith is always received before it is chosen. Yet faith cannot remain merely external, role-based, or unexamined. It becomes his own as he receives it anew, examines it honestly, and begins to live it before God and within the Church. Personal appropriation, however, is not the same as self-authorization.

The difficulty appears when the conversation moves from searching to concrete response. He is willing to speak about authenticity and honest questioning, but hesitates when invited to try practices through which faith might take form: praying regularly, reconnecting with parish life, seeking reconciliation with someone he avoids, or allowing questions about work and relationships to be brought before the Gospel.



This does not make his doubts suspect. Such doubt may belong to truthful faith. But pastoral accompaniment sometimes requires *parrësia*: truthful, non-coercive speech that helps him recognize when honest searching has begun to protect him from concrete response. The aim is not to force a resolution, but to help him ask whether his desire for authentic faith is opening him toward Christ or keeping him at a safe distance from the demands of discipleship.

Accompaniment therefore proceeds slowly. His desire for a faith that is »really mine« is tested and deepened through conversation, prayer, moral discernment, gradual participation in the community, and concrete acts of responsibility. The movement is not from questioning to unexamined conformity, but from self-enclosed searching toward a faith received, chosen, and lived as a response to God's call.

These examples show why authenticity has to be interpreted rather than simply affirmed or corrected. It may signal wounded trust, personal appropriation, fatigue with religious performance, resistance to hypocrisy, or hesitation before discipleship. The pastoral question is what such speech discloses and what form of accompaniment, judgement, healing, repair, or formation is called for in light of the Gospel.

5.3 Authenticity in light of the Gospel

In light of the Gospel, the concerns expressed through authenticity are received and redirected. The desire for personal appropriation is drawn into discipleship, where faith becomes personally received and lived as a response to God's call. Concern for coherence between word and life is deepened into integrity before God. The demand for credible persons and institutions becomes a call to accountable communion. The search for authentic faith may therefore become a place where unexamined faith, wounded trust, performative belonging, or resistance to discipleship is named truthfully. But the Gospel neither simply confirms the self's desire to be authentic nor reduces it to mere conformity; it calls that desire into conversion, healing, responsibility, and communion.



Conclusion

This article has argued that authenticity is not a self-standing theological norm in pastoral theology. It gathers real concerns – truthfulness, personal appropriation, resistance to religious performance, institutional credibility, and belonging – but these concerns are not self-interpreting. They may disclose a desire for truthful life; they may also conceal self-validating uses of authenticity, wounded mistrust, or resistance to discipleship.

The article's contribution is to treat authenticity as a pastoral signal requiring discernment. Interdisciplinary accounts help identify the concerns carried by this language; biblical-theological reflection and Capper's constructive account clarify why those concerns are ordered beyond the self toward God, the witness of Christ, and accountable life in the Church. The pastoral task is to discern what an appeal to authenticity discloses and what accompaniment, judgement, healing, repair, or formation it calls for in light of the Gospel.

This approach has practical consequences for ministry and formation. Pastoral workers are not called to make ministry a form of self-expression, but to offer a bounded, accountable, and truthful presence that points beyond itself to Christ. Such presence is sustained by self-examination, supervision, and ecclesial accountability, not by spontaneous transparency alone. Discernment becomes pastorally fruitful only where persons are first received in a way that lowers defensiveness, regulates affect, and allows more demanding questions to be heard as accompaniment rather than rejection. Believers who seek an »authentic« faith are neither pressed into premature conformity nor left with the burden of self-validation. Their search may become a place where inherited faith is received anew, wounded trust is addressed truthfully, and the desire for integrity is drawn into discipleship and communion.



Data Availability Statement

As this study is based on a theoretical approach, no new research data were generated or analyzed.

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