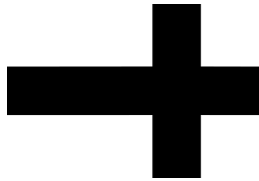


Church(ish)

the polished mask I gracefully wear



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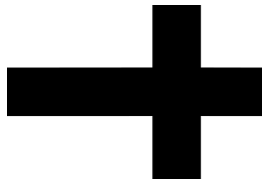
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Church(ish)



by Andrew Paul Cannon

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Prelude

I have had my fair share of negative experiences in the church, but this book is not about my disillusionment or my dissatisfaction with the church or any particular local church. That sort of book would assume that I am the center of all things. I do have to ask the question, though. How does Scripture inform the way that we think about church? This book is not a robust theology, but rather a call to genuine Christ-centeredness in the local church. As I wrote this book and went through the process of editing I realized the scope of its content is much broader than the Christian religion. There is an idea present here that I believe all religious and self-proclaimed irreligious people ought to discover: God is bigger and His existence is more basic than the religion(s) that we have built. He is not confined by it and He does not subscribe to it. He is God and all things are subject to Him.

Admittedly, every local church (or mosque or monastery or temple or religion or denomination) claims to be a God-centered, truth-teaching and believing organization. Can we know which churches, organizations or religions truly are? Is there a difference between the church and the churchish?

Over the last year-and-a-half, my heart has grieved over this topic. The answers presented themselves in a place we would not expect: the Old Testament, namely the Pentateuch and Joshua (the first six books). Most people have gone straight to Acts, or the Pastoral Epistles. Even these books build upon the work of the first books. Rarely do we seek to understand first things. We are true progressivists, only thinking about what is next. For Jews, this foundational section is the Torah and for Muslims they

are the Books of Moses. As I labored in study, I found that a great majority of local church bodies (or religious systems for that matter), according to my own experience and observation, did not have basic, biblical foundations and were not concerned with the purpose that God has had from the foundation of the world for His people. They quickly and irresponsibly skip to present and future things. As we travel back in time together from the comfort of our couches or from our desks, with the purpose of discovering God's designed purpose and plan for His church (and every local church or religion that would be bold enough to bear His name), let us be open to God's conviction and His encouragement from the most fundamental texts in this discrete world; though admittedly, God's eternal nature demands that every text inspired by Him be equally as fundamental and unfading, perhaps as fundamental as the very creation in which it was inspired and in which we also attempt to read and understand.

The story, though, is too familiar. You visit a church and everyone is nice, but no one seems to truly care. The people wear masks of righteousness only to, after you have committed yourself, remove those masks to reveal the face of a horrid witch-like creature. Or, perhaps, a different mask is worn: a mask that looks beautiful so that it hides the fact that the people are not worshipping or teaching about a real god; only some god that is created by human hands from tradition or from the popular religious myths of our day or a day in the distant past. We wonder why people who claim to love Jesus and believe that He is sovereign worry so much or spend so much time condemning their leaders instead of treating them as brothers or sisters in Christ. We likewise wonder why leaders who claim to follow Jesus (or perhaps any other religious figure, though

my presupposition is that Jesus is God) grow so stagnant and prideful in their own faith as if they could produce what faith they have. Masks. Why do churches do so much, but pray so little? Activity can be a mask. There is so much outreach, but so little evangelism and discipleship. Numbers themselves become a mask for those who are not following Jesus and trusting Him with the results. People dress up and pretend to be perfect while neglecting what the Gospel truly means for all of God's people: I was lost, but now I am found. If I stray, Christ will find me again. By our gossip and slander, we hope to draw people's attention away from our insufficiencies, but it is our insufficiencies that cause us to need Jesus. By wearing masks, we defeat the very purpose of the mask; for when we hide our sin, we also hold onto it.

In this prelude, I feel the need to offer a brief warning (so I hope you have not skipped these few pages). Do not read this book if you do not desire to be brought to your knees. If you want to continue to feel like the saint you claim to be, stop here and use this book to prop up your furniture or fill a space on your book-shelf where all of your other books sit so you can appear to be intelligent. I didn't write this book so you would feel good. My hope is to expose God's word in such a way that you are brought to your knees because God has revealed Himself as holy and the one who has all glory. If you choose to read, I implore you to skip section two if you want to continue to feel okay about your own religion. Section two is certainly not for the faint of heart.

So I ask, what is a genuine local church? What is the danger of the churchish? Why should I burn my mask and expose my cross?

Part 1

God, the Inceptor

As someone who really desires to follow Christ, I often ask whether or not the local church is what Christ designed it to be? What is the church and where does it begin? If people build the church, is it truly an organism of faith in Christ? Why is it that people in so many local churches or organizations who refer to themselves as churches do way more to glorify people than God? What precisely is our origin? Where is our sustenance? Is it people or God? Is it the case that we proclaim Christ with our lips, but only serve ourselves? What is this thing on my face? Where am I? Why do the windows have so many colors?

God's Image

A long time ago, there was a father who built a house for his son. He knew precisely what kind of man his son was and upon finishing the house, he handed the keys to his son and entrusted his son to keep the house and take care of it. Every so often, the father would come, in person, to walk with his son through the garden in the back yard. One day when he came, the garden was in disarray. Things had been misplaced. There were holes in the sheetrock and the chandeliers were falling from the ceiling. The kitchen was a mess and there were empty cups all over the house. Some of the windows had been broken and weeds were growing up in the yard. I will leave it to the reader to guess the outcome of this story, but let me encourage you not to jump to a conclusion too quickly. When we make assumptions about people, we usually end up also making fools of ourselves.

It might be better, instead, for me to ask how you might respond if you were the father, if you had given someone a great treasure and that person completely destroyed the treasure you gave? A better question remains. Are we more like the son or the father?

Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

So God created man in His own image;
He created him in the image of God;
He created them male and female.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.” God also said, “Look, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the surface of the entire earth and every tree whose fruit contains seed. This food will be for you, for all the wildlife of the earth, for every bird of the sky, and for every creature that crawls on the earth — everything having the breath of life in it. I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. Evening came and then morning: the sixth day.

God gave

The stories in the book of Genesis were handed down orally through the generations until they were finally recorded during Moses’ time. Genesis is the book of beginnings and is the starting point of the Christian faith. Genesis explains for us who God is. If all of Scripture comes from God, then all of Scripture must be understood in light of the book of Genesis. One cannot understand accurately the whole of Scripture without first reading and understanding the book of Genesis. To some degree, Genesis is the most basic book, but the least visited and understood. Maybe this is because we feel like we are already familiar with the stories from our childhood or maybe it is because we desire what is more familiar in the New Testament. God started with Genesis, and so we too, in our striving to understand the things of God, must begin with Genesis.

During my time writing this book, I was reading from T. David Gordon, the author of *Why Johnny Can't Preach*. Gordon gave an account of his church-going experience. He stated that less than 15% of the sermons he listened to actually had a point, and less than 10% actually represented Scripture well.¹ As I thought, I realized that I have made a similar observation. When what I desire is the bread that God gives, I often only receive crumbs or something that does not consist of bread at all. I find that the method of delivery matters not, what matters is that the Word of God is delivered to the people of God. After all, God's words are much more important than the words or delivery of any one person. I just wish more people realized that. God has given us His word and His word is a great treasure.

As we consider this Word, I want to make an observation in the text of Scripture, particularly Genesis 1. When God created people, He gave authority to His people over all of creation. Not only did He give people a great treasure, but He gave His people every treasure. The God of the universe even endowed people with His very image. In some ways, He made people to be like Himself. He made, for Himself, children to whom He gifted all of creation. Not only this, but He observed everything that He had made, including the people whom He placed over all of creation, and saw that it was very good. He was pleased and His people were pleasing to Him.

According to this text, God has given a few responsibilities to the people who have been created in His image. First, as those who have been given all of creation,

¹ Gordon, T. David. *Why johnny cant preach - the media have shaped the messengers*. P & R Publishing, 2009. 18.

people were to take care of what has been given to them. People were also told to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Do we hear this, church? Multiplying is a good thing in God's eyes! When a young lady is pregnant, she tends to be looked down on or condemned by so many in the organizational church. If we operate with Genesis 1 as our starting point, then we cannot ever look down on any pregnancy, even one in which a child is conceived outside of a formal marital relationship. The deed done out of the context of Biblical marriage may be sinful, but neither the pregnancy nor the child are. Multiplication, here, meant more than simple reproduction. It was a command to fill the earth with the very image of God and to subdue or cultivate the whole earth for the glory of God.

By now we may realize which of the two characters mentioned at the outset represents us, and it is not the father. We might even guess what is coming. It seems to me that as we observe creation today, things are not 'very good.' Things in the organizational church cannot, many times, even be seen as very good by any stretch. It also seems as though people have failed to fill the earth with worship for God's glory. Things are in disarray. The garden has not been cultivated. There are holes in the sheetrock. The churchish abound. Everyone wears a mask. That's what this thing is.

People destroyed

In Genesis 3, we read a story of how people rejected the mission of God in order to gain for themselves. Because people had been given all of creation, all of creation suffered when people chose to cultivate it for themselves rather than for the glory of God. God, in his knowledge, had to know that the people He created, in their freedom,

would take His gift and completely destroy it. Yet, He still gave His people everything and did not hold anything back from them.

Everything written for us in Scripture has been given in light of this moment. When we listen to or read the text of Scripture and are not changed to our core by what we hear or read, then we have taken God's word, which is a treasure given to cultivate our lives in this time of sinfulness, and we have trampled on it. It threatens to tear off the mask that keeps us so comfortable; so we let it gather dust as we masquerade in our polished *mâché*; not that we can see very well to pick up that dusty, weighty, old book anyway, not through the eye slats we cut for ourselves. Still, after everything, God has taken the time to reveal Himself to us; and still many pulpits of many churches are full of false teaching, many seats full of unlistening ears. People are asleep. Much like Adam and Eve, we want to cultivate our churches to fit us. We often want our pastors and brothers and sisters to fit a mold that we have fashioned rather than live in obedience to Christ. There are many expectations churches set that cause not only their membership, but also their leadership to live in sin before God. No wonder the organizational church is in such a terrible place today regarding its spiritual health!

As one example, Acts, chapter 6, tells us specifically two things. First, it is absolutely wrong for a pastor, elder, apostle, and overseer to perform any tasks that would cause him to neglect the ministry of the word. Yet, in churches world-wide, pastors are required or asked to perform tasks that cause them to be unprepared when performing the ministry of the word (preaching, teaching, labored prayer and evangelism). As a result, most churches serve bread crumbs when people are in desperate need of a

spiritual meal. Second, no group in the church should be neglected. Yet, churches favor one group over another and fail to, according to the method described in Acts 6, select church members to serve the neglected groups so that their pastors do not have to live in sin during their time of service.

We wonder why so many pastors have to leave the ministry because of moral failure. We wonder why so many church leaders (90% of pastors) are burnt-out or exhausted. We wonder why a majority of pastors today have bad marriages (77%). We wonder why a majority of our leaders experience depression on a daily basis (71%). We wonder why only 23% of pastors actually feel content in their churches.² Part of the reason is that many churches, by the anti-biblical expectations they set, force pastors and members to live in constant sin; and worse, to do so in the name of Christ.

We want to conform the text of Scripture to ourselves because we do not want what is under the mask to be exposed. We want to shape our lives for our own glory or success. We want to cast blame on others for our mistakes. In Genesis 3:7, after Adam and Eve had sinned against God, we read that they tried to cover their own shame. They hid from God. They tried to gain for themselves. This led to their trying to heal themselves. All it did was drive them further and further from God.

There is a vicious cycle present, here. When we try to gain for ourselves, we sin against God. When we sin against God, we try to cover our sin. When we try to cover our sin, we drive ourselves further from God. When we

² Krejcir, Richard J. "Statistics on Pastors." Into Thy Word. 2007. <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/?articleid=36562>.

drive ourselves further from God, we sin again. When we sin again, we try to cover our sin. When we try to cover our sin, we drive ourselves even further from God. Adam and Eve started the cycle. They got caught in the cycle. They fell, and they fell, and they continued to fall. The same is true for us. We have nothing to offer. We cannot raise ourselves up from this circumstance. We are unable to help ourselves. The image of God about the human person has been altered and we are unable to restore that image. This is humbling, isn't it? We hear all the time, even from churches that claim to preach God's Word, that to some degree we can make ourselves better. We hear that we must strive to be better people in order to be in God's good graces. We hear that we have to get our lives together before God will do a great work. We hear that God depends on the willingness of His people to accomplish His work. This works-based teaching is a mask that has been created by people and placed over human shame as if we can, like Adam, hide from God. These ideas are entirely contrary to the text of Scripture from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. This is why it is important for us to receive the treasure of Scripture as God has given it. When we receive it any other way, we get it wrong. The only way we can be helped or raised up is if God breaks into this vicious cycle and, Himself, rescues us. All of Scripture begins with this and cannot be read or applied well without considering this fact: there is nothing we can do to merit God's all-encompassing and entirely sufficient grace. If any other message is stated or implied, then it is not the message of Scripture. It is only a mask that helps us to feel more comfortable, condemned but comfortably unexposed (for now).

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