

neat

let me apologize



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# neat

by andrew paul cannon

A thanks to my brothers, Nolan and Joel. You are more inspiring to me than you will ever realize.



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## Preface

“Don’t cuss. Don’t drink. Don’t have sex before marriage.” That is the message we were pounded with on a weekly basis. “We will give you cool stuff if you come.” That is what we were won with and to. We poured down the isles at summer camp, responding to some version of the Gospel, though it tasted more like watered down whiskey. We went to leadership camps and retreats. Our generation has had more churchy events than any other generation, but we still felt left out. All of that money they dumped into children’s and youth ministry for our generation was wasted. We weren’t interested in your behavior modification attempts.

We designed our own culture, so we thought. It was a result of our continuing education, that education you forced us into. We became the most most formally educated generation in the world. We were quite literally too smart for the church, the same church that chose to dumb things down so we could understand. The only thing you accomplished by dumbing things down was making us think your faith was a faith of ignorance. I hope you are paying attention. I hope I am, too. Now, you try and try to strategize, developing idea after idea to try and retrieve my generation from secular society. You haven’t realized that this isn’t even the point of the Gospel. Every attempt of yours is met with contempt and it frustrates you. “How can we reach them?” you ask, “How can we bring them back?” “Why don’t they understand?” we reply from our nooks with our pour-over coffees and our craft beers, “Why are they so stuck up?”

Turning over in the anthology of Scripture, I realize something very profound for my own generation; the one

that is still lost. God takes the time to reveal Himself in a fresh way to each new generation. Each generation responds in its own way. God causes the previous generations to be an example of either what it means to follow after Him or what it means to deny Him and preach a false gospel.

God is doing the same for us. He has not dumbed things down. The same Christ who blessed the wedding guests at Cana with new wine desires to do a great work in our generation and the next and the next. He does not desire that we simply change our behavior. He wants to give life as a gift. God meets us where we are. He is not bound to the ivory steeple. He is not bound by the rules people invented to seem more spiritual.

Christ ate and drank with sinners. He was called a glutton and a drunkard because of the company He kept. This is the Christ who calls to us now.

## **The Rejected Generation**

Is this the right place? My generation left the church and migrated to places like these because they offered something that the organized church did not- acceptance. That is, perhaps, the greatest travesty of our time. A whole generation responded to the negativity, the shallow semblance of true faith, and the condemnation of a people who presumed to be in the place of God. I think I am meeting someone here and I hope this is the right place. Those who drove us away from the organized church assumed we would become nothing, so they resolved to argue with us and to condemn us for no other reason than we were young. We were the “why” generation and our questions were never answered. I’ve never been here before. I was one of the fortunate, the few, the fifteen percent. I had good mentors and people who supported me. God pursued me and kept me. Most of us, though, ran away from the church because the organization was a bigger monster than what we saw in the world. It plowed like a tractor over the west leaving the land bare, without rotating the crop or fertilizing the soil or making sure there was enough sun exposure. We were hurt, and not merely on an emotional level. Real spiritual assault was perpetrated for the sake of the glory of the name and that ridiculous quote on their marquee. The church didn’t heal. They tried to prove to us that God existed, but if God existed and looked like the people who so adamantly told us that we needed to work to please Him, why would we want to worship that god? They doubled down. So did we. This isn’t what God desired. In their apologetic, there was no apology. Now, my generation is almost entirely absent. What is to come of the generation after us?

Where is this man? Oh, there he is. I see him sitting, sipping his whiskey. Here comes the server, “What will you have, sir?” Of course, I don’t know. I’ve never ordered at an establishment like this, but she is looking at me, “Sir, would you like a drink?” I look at the man I came to meet with as if differing my decision to him. He snickers, “He will have a bourbon whiskey, neat.” I have no idea what that means. I will trust the expert, and I won’t drink too much. I saw my father become a slave to alcohol, and the organized church couldn’t tell me why, there, either. They just said, “Don’t drink. It’s a sin!” That didn’t help anybody.

The server goes to the bar and the man rests his hand on the Bible he has sitting in front of him. The Bible has color-coded markers on many of the pages and I imagine that there are many markers and notes on the inside. His Bible looks more used than many pastors’ in the modern church. My soon-to-be friend, I am determined, is wearing a t-shirt with the letters “AHA” on the front as if to mock those who don’t see the world like he does. No, the letters don’t stand for Abolish Human Abortion. They stand for something else, a hyper-progressive, anti-god religion, and they are proud of that fact. It is how I came to meet this man. He is an evangelist for them, at least that is how evangelicals would describe what he does, but he would hate that sort of description, and perhaps I do also.

The silence has now been a little awkward, but the server finally brings the drink he ordered for me. Gulp. There is a sting and a fleeting sensation as the nectar fills my mouth and the aroma my nostrils. Maybe I won’t take such a big swig next time. Sips from here on out. I might have ordered something that wasn’t good. I am glad I

trusted a man who knew more than I did. I might like it more with a cube of ice.

“So,” the man starts as I marvel, “Can I tell you why I reject the Bible?” That is why we are here, go ahead. I’m listening. Whiff. Sip. Savor.

“First of all,” he starts his argument, “the Bible is an ancient collections of documents written by different human people with many, many contradictions.” He points his finger at the book in front of him. This is how everyone else starts this conversation. I used to think that Christianity presented a false picture of the world, but never did I notice a contradiction in the book. “What are those contradictions?”

As he adjusts his weight and opens the book to the beginning chapters, the server walks by looking at our glasses. Mine doesn’t seem to have gone down at all. He finds what he is looking for and, without making eye-contact, shares his thought.

“There is a different order of creation events in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2,” he says confidently. I wasn’t aware that Genesis two provided any chronology at all. Sip. It looks like you might be forcing some extra words into the story that aren’t there in order to create a contradiction. I don’t know about you, but I call that a straw-man. Really, if you want to be contentious on this point, I doubt seriously you could look at Genesis 2 and tell me where it says God created the people before, ‘before’ being the operative word, He planted His garden. At least those are my thoughts. When I open my mouth, cautiously I might clarify, it comes out like this, “I don’t see where the order is different.”

“Verse five!” he exclaims, “Verse five!” What about verse five? “It records explicitly that no plant had

sprouted!” The large book is being spun toward me as if the one who brought it wants me to realize my own hermeneutical blunder. I see verse five. I also see that verse five states very clearly that no man was there to cultivate the ground. Then, God formed people and planted a garden, but chapter two does not reveal the order. You have to add words to get that, or simply derive the information from the preceding chapter in the book. Isn’t that the way we usually read, anyway? Why would anyone start a different story in his or her mind after finishing chapter one? Why wouldn’t that person build on the part of the story previously ordered? Why would we assume that the story is disconnected? I think that reveals more about us than about the story this man is trying to disprove.

“What are you getting at, here?” I reply as I sip again, “You really have to tweak the story to get it to say what you are claiming it says.” I am also interested in something deeper than winning an argument. How shallow I have been. How could I settle for argumentation when this man needs Christ as much as I do? I am probably a much worse sinner than he, and here I am listening to respond. Let me try and understand this person. How can I love him like Christ loves me? “I wonder what has caused you to try reading the story the way that you have? What has caused you to start with a bias against the story such that you see what isn’t actually there?”

This man seems somewhat caught off guard by the question. He does what everyone else does when they don’t have a way to respond. He moves on to the next accusation, hoping to distract and gain an advantage. Rarely does anyone actually answer the question that I have asked. Sip. Savor.

I guess people do that with more than facts, don't they? We want things to be a certain way, so we find a way to justify our restructuring of life, or at least our attempts to do so. God didn't mean that. You can't dictate morality. The church hurt me, so her God can't be real. Since when has the existence or the character of God depended on the actions and demeanors of wretched people?

Whatever the reason this guy feels he needs to discredit a word given for the good of all people, I must apologize... and I must apologize.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for whatever was done to you by sinful people." To my own generation, I'm sorry. Here is the open hand. To that prodigal generation who took the Father's inheritance too early and went to live for itself in a dying world, we're no longer children. We have lost too many too young. Why continue to make excuses? Why judge God based on what some sinful and hateful people did to us in the past? There is life and hope. This is my apology. Let me be honest.

## **A Room Full of People**

Look at all of the people here, in this place. Churches beg God for this kind of attendance on Sunday morning. I know, that's part of the idolatry in the organized church. She's jealous and hungry for her own popularity. That's why she hosted all of those shallow evangelistic events for us while we were growing up. Do you remember? Not all of them had that motivation. A few really wanted people to see the life available in Christ. There is not one seat available at the bar. The lounge is full. The dining area is hustling. No, not that kind of hustle. There is actually more of a sense of community in this place than in most local church establishments. It's just barely five-o'clock on a Tuesday. This apology is something that should interest every believer and every non-believer. I am under the conviction that if God is real and if the biblical account is true, that God would not keep either Himself or the validation of His Word from the people of the earth, from the people who fled the organized church to find sanctuary in this place. I have a new hope. Perhaps my believing friends will take advantage and will be strengthened in their faith. Just maybe my unbelieving friends, or friends who have placed their faith in anything or anyone other than Christ, will see that faith in Christ is the most reasonable faith to hold.

“Can I borrow your Bible?” The man sitting here with me, not surprised, answers, “Sure, but there is nothing in there that will make me believe.” I know that. I also know that it is not my responsibility to make anyone believe. I turn to 1 Peter 3:15-16. This particular verse states that we ought to be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have. Of course, the hope that we have as



children of God is in Christ and in the eternal life that He has promised. In order to give a reason, we ought to know the reasons and those reasons ought to be truthful and good. It is amazing that a Biblical faith actually requires that we refuse to have a blind faith. A blind faith actually makes us look naive, even ignorant and stupid and belligerent when we try to argue others into submission. We now see where that gets us. Our absence is the evidence, it is the fruit that was borne. We ought to know the reasons. We ought to not only know the reasons why we have the hope that we have, but we ought to be able to communicate those reasons to others, not belligerently, but with gentleness and respect. Perhaps acting and communicating with gentleness and respect is the most important concept we can grasp. I know. I was once the argumentative and hot-headed Christian. Don't believe me? Look at my twitter feed from 2011. Speaking truth means nothing if we do not do so in love. Our arguments ought to be made in peace with great love.

“I'm not here to convince you of anything, friend.”

He looks surprised.

We see things that are wrong, or that we perceive to be wrong. Our first instinct, many times, is to treat others harshly or form an argument that will accomplish our will and make others out to be the “bad guy.” Nothing is accomplished, even if we do win some profound argument. Yet, we celebrate. What, may I ask, are we celebrating? If I am so concerned about winning, then I will never be interested in seeing others win the greatest victory. Our goal is to honor Christ and to witness others experience victory in Christ as we have, or as we claim to experience. Christ died for people by giving Himself. His first priority was not to make other people look bad so that He could prove that He was correct. We would do well to follow His

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