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Faithfully Unmasked: A Warning Against Hypocrisy and a Hope for Our Time

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Introduction

The Church has found herself in a difficult situation these past twelve months. Wrestling with the practical concerns of gathering safely and legal restrictions on worship, many Christians have found themselves in some form of spiritual exile.

They have been isolated from the people who would otherwise demonstrate God's love and care. The voices that once sang together in their sanctuaries have since been muted for fear of feedback in their monitors, and the Christians who have found the courage to attend in-person worship are now met with floating eyes over choking cloth. Indeed, the oft-debated and dreaded drapery which now occupies public interface does not shy away from the house of God. Today's Christians find themselves covered up and cautious. Those who once stood hand in hand before the Cross now sit alone, temporarily detached from one another in hopes of one day gathering again.

It is not the task of this essay to determine whether masks are worth their salt or serve their stated purpose, nor is it to suggest that there is a war between faith and fear in the discussion of masks for which the reader must take a side. Most certainly, the aim of this work is not to accuse, slander, or defame any decisions made by pastors or Church leadership in the past twelve months. There is, now more than ever, a desperate need for congregational humility and patience in this regard. The pastors, directors, and team leaders who have worked endlessly during this pandemic to provide sound teaching and space for worship have done just that. Their efforts should be the objects of our continued prayer as we approach the narrow door (Lord-willing) of a post-pandemic season and spiritual renewal.

This paper is a thematic and expository search into the Scriptures, relevant First Article Wisdom, and helpful considerations by Martin Luther concerning the hidden and revealed God, the God who hides in plain sight and reveals himself

ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. The chief aim of this study is to uncover the many ways in which the Church and larger society have clothed themselves in various masks of hypocrisy. Furthermore, this essay will reveal the negative effects of such hypocrisy and promote Christ's teaching as a model for honest, humble, and genuine living. These traits, exemplified in Christ, are essential destroyers of the masks we wear, both personally and culturally, which threaten our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.

Shuffling the Masks

There are, as a preliminary list, three masks that the average person wears in our society today. First, there is the Mask of Benevolence. It is the mask we wear when we proclaim our love for neighbors while harboring selfishness in our hearts. We wear this mask because we want to be perceived as good but are not willing to act on the goodwill we claim to have. Second is the Mask of Intellect. It is the mask we wear when we claim to have wisdom for the world while failing to recognize God as the Source of all wisdom. We wear this mask because of problems in society that beg to be solved and because we, in our pride, think that some or all of these problems *can and will* be solved by our own reason and strength. Third, and finally, is the Mask of Oppression. It is the mask we wear to give an appearance of weakness which feigns itself as righteousness. We wear this mask when we cannot collect our desired ends from others and when we substitute warlike rhetoric for reconciliation. (NB: In creating a category of false oppression, it is not my intent to remove legitimacy from the claims of those who are, in fact, personally and culturally under attack. Rather, such a category represents and evaluates the trend of militant thought among some who seek out self-righteous behavior through cultural war).

Using the current dilemma of masks as grounds for application, this essay will look specifically at Matthew 6 and at Jesus' warnings against religious hypocrisy. There are three parts to Jesus' warnings which will serve, each in their own turn, as counters to the issues described above. First, we will examine Jesus' response to selfish giving as a model for removing the Mask of Benevolence. Then we shall move on to Jesus' similar polemic against prideful prayer as a solution to the Mask of Intellect. Following this will be an exposition of Jesus' warning against dramatic fasting in order to discard the Mask of Oppression. Finally, this essay will consider Luther's doctrine of *larvae Dei* as a helpful and sanctifying alternative to hypocrisy, reflecting also on Jesus' incarnational role as God Himself unmasked, as the manifold mystery of God who calls us to holy living.

On the Mask of Benevolence

The Mask of Benevolence is an increasingly common form of hypocrisy. Both Christians and non-Christians fancy charities to be something of a sport. They are motivated to give, if they are motivated at all, by competitive schemes and marketing tactics rather than by philanthropy or “goodwill.” It is not uncommon for individuals, schools, companies, and churches to advertise how much they have raised for a certain cause. These gifts can be talents, treasures, etc., yet they are given only in the measure with which they can be flaunted and displayed. Take, for example, the canned food or clothing drives often hosted around Christmas and the undeniable promotion of such events (before, during, and after) on social media. In the present day, it is counter-cultural to do anything but glamorize and glorify our acts of giving.

The problem with the Mask of Benevolence is not whether giving occurs but the manner in which it does. It occurs only for a season, often out of coercion from the collective rather than personal conviction. Givers compete with one another for pious superiority, as if the Church and world are saying together, “Look what we did for those people! That child has new socks and a sweater for Christmas! Those hungry people have our hands to feed them!” Platitudes are especially common in statements like these, reflecting a superficial care which does little for anyone except Mr. or Mrs. Helpful making their moral claims. These claims are not always without evidence, mind you, but they are certainly full of pride and ego which overshadows the true Provider of all good things.

The Mask of Benevolence allows many so-called givers to quickly retreat from the objects of their affection. They meet what appear to be the wants of others while neglecting their deeper needs, and it is this hypocrisy which Jesus speaks against in Matthew’s Gospel:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

(Matt 6:1-4 ESV)

Jesus warns against doing good works for the sake of being seen. He is not against giving, but he is against much of the loudness that comes along with false piety and self-reverence. The English Standard Version says that Jesus refers to the



"Mosaic depicting theatrical masks of Tragedy and Comedy, 2nd century AD, from Rome Thermae Decianae (?), Palazzo Nuovo, Capitoline Museums" by Following Hadrian is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

self-righteous givers as hypocrites, but the English term “hypocrite” is only a transliteration of the Greek word *hypokritai*, which referred to actors and theatrical players in first-century Rome. In ancient theater, actors would often play many roles for the same show, assuming different characters who were set apart mainly by their dress. Players were also known for using more than one mask for the same performance, so the same man might play a father, a son, and even the occasional god during a single scene. The illusion was not lost on the

audience, but it was nevertheless a moving skill for an actor to present himself as many conflicting characters in the span of a few short minutes.

What was great for theatrical performance, however, was not good for righteous giving. The idea that one would put on the Mask of Benevolence was, for Jesus, just as sinful as not giving at all, for the giver wearing this mask sought to provide themselves moral satisfaction and justification before God without showing any personal care for those receiving their gifts. In other words, the gifts themselves were no more than masks for self-righteousness, allowing the giver to participate in outward charity while still caving in on themselves.

This behavior should not surprise us. Selfish giving is yet another selfish product formed by a selfish heart for the purpose of selfish gain. We live in a fallen world, deeply stained by sin, and people are looking out for themselves, doing whatever they can to present a better face than their own. This presentation is the Mask of Benevolence, and it is our full reward for selfish giving. We may appear to be righteous, but such appearance is a far cry from the real thing.

Jesus calls us to secret rather than selfish giving, to a giving that spares the pomp and circumstance and remains focused on the good of the recipient himself rather than the good of the giver. Jesus is not saying that we *cannot* receive as we give (Luke 6:37-38), but we should be careful not to assume specifics. Doing so lives out the false doctrine that Prosperity Preachers have advanced for far too long, namely that we can get (dare I say take) from God and our neighbors in exact measure the benefits we think we deserve from the other side of a karmic equation. While Jesus promises due reward for our efforts, he does not say explicitly in Matthew’s gospel when or where this may happen.

In light of such ambiguity, it is no wonder that we put on the Mask of

Benevolence. It is a spiritual attempt at self-security when our souls are troubled, but the facade tricks us as well. Our reflection is hazy, and our sinful hearts are covered. We convince ourselves of our own self-righteousness, our own worthiness by our deeds and best intentions. When we fail to receive from others as we believe we ought, the subtle cracks in our face appear. Fill them as we may, we are left with a shattered and fallen image, one that exposes and condemns us for our hypocrisy.

On the Mask of Intellect

The Mask of Intellect is not merely worn or reserved for academics and intellectuals. In fact, the most authentic academics would rather retire than assume some authoritarian rule which defines the ins and outs of their field without accountability or correction. The smartest people in the room do not need to flaunt their intelligence to be recognized, for the fruits of their labors are already understood by those who enjoy their company. Indeed, it is not the experts we need to worry about. *It is the people who claim to be experts who should concern us.* Their knowledge puffs them up, but their attachment to argument and lofty opinion is a danger to all. It tricks them into believing their own words, fools them into considering their own reason and strength equal to or beyond that of their Creator.

The problem with the Mask of Intellect is that it bears no reverence for true and godly wisdom. It does not take proper hold of the truth which God's Word supplies, substituting human reason and strength for the pages of Scripture. To people who wear this Mask, everything can and will be solved by more debate, by more inquiry, and by the eradication of what they deem to be erroneous, illogical, or superstitious belief. The Masked Intellectual likewise believes "more" to be the answer to everything: more words, more money, more policy, more goodwill, and less stupidity. Anything that does not suit his fancy as an expert is ignorantly disregarded as foolishness. His prideful thoughts are confirmed by his own biases and bases for echo. He is, perhaps most simply, one who loves the sound of his own voice. This masked performer shovels out and sings bombastic wails that call to mind Shakespeare's famous lines: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." ¹

Such a person would love nothing more than a moment of significance, cherish nothing more than to hear his voice heard by some audience which affirms his banter and clever quips.

He might even receive these things as his full reward. Even so, Scripture once more poses a fatal warning:

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matt 6:5-8 ESV)

Jesus mentions a second time the hypocrites and their love for the spotlight, now in the context of prayer. It should not be said that prayer itself is the problem here, nor is there a scandal in the time and place in which prayer is done. It is the *posture* of these prayers that Jesus is concerned with. That is, those who practice self-righteousness operate with a fatal and formulaic presumption in their prayer and praise. They script and deliver their own personal melodrama of pious activity, looking for the love of man just as much as or more than the love of God. They think themselves wise or worthy of God's attention, and they certainly had it, though not in the way they would have liked. God spoke wisdom through the words of Jesus, and the hypocrites rejected him, sending the Son of God to the Cross because he was getting more of the philosophical spotlight (Matt 27:18).

Jesus' response to this hypocrisy is to correct it with a dose of godly humility, building confidence in his disciples while deriding those who believe they have completed their intellectual ascent. He shows his disciples how to pray the Lord's Prayer, beginning in verse nine:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matt 6:9-13 ESV)

This prayer flips the script of hypocrisy by recognizing and deferring to God's sovereignty in its first three petitions. It is YHWH whose name is hallowed, YHWH whose kingdom is coming, and YHWH whose will is done at all times and

in all places. A person still wearing the Mask of Intellect has immense trouble praying the Lord's Prayer, submitting their will to God, and praising a name other than their own. He or she cannot fathom a sovereign God who controls and ordains the good of the world. He or she would rather lean on his or her own understanding to incite selfish gain and self-piety.

The Church is not immune to the Mask of Intellect and might even be one of its most frequent abusers. If she is not careful, the Church can just as well be consumed by lies of her own creation, seeking to solve complex problems by brute and human force rather than by inquiring of God's wisdom in his Word. She would be wise to pray the Lord's Prayer continually and faithfully, wise above all to submit herself to the unyielding sovereignty of God. She should acknowledge and seek to remedy the difficulties of living in a sinful world, but she must first be unmasked, striving for godliness above all else.

On the Mask of Oppression

Of the three masks being assessed in this study, the Mask of Oppression is perhaps the most insidious and troublesome for me personally. I learned of this mask when talking to a good friend of mine who happens to be non-religious and a self-described agnostic. We were discussing current events when he posed to me his open disgust for people who insisted on a false war between religion and society. He blamed mostly Christian preachers who were so ignorant of their culture that they had little choice but to fight against it. Specifically, my friend was concerned with churches making themselves out to be the victims and underdogs of a culture war when they were just as brutal and antagonistic as those they railed against.

There are quite a few propositions in the discussion above which deserve to be parsed out by someone more qualified than me and at a different time; however, it is my suspicion that the sentiment behind my friend's frustration is one that resonates especially in non-Christian circles. It is almost laughably easy for Christians and non-Christians alike to conjure up a dichotomy between Church and state, Church and culture, Church and media, or whatever options for opposition remain. We want to see an enemy in our scopes so we can justify looking through them in the first place. We lament the habits of canceling, polarization, and hardness of heart when we see them in the secular community, but we neglect the sort of selfish games that are played in our own backyards. More than that, we surmise that any wound inflicted upon us is ample reason to strike back. Our rhetoric for the church militant emerges in response to the sad truth that our numbers are dwindling in many places. We are scared of wasting away, of vanishing altogether at the hands of some postmodern mayhem we perceive, but our responses to such chaos are often just

as brutal and heartless as those of our imagined opponents. It is no wonder that the Church herself has become defined by outsiders as a tribe of hypocrites. We cannot faithfully preach truth in love and yet practice hatred and false testimony against our neighbors.

The Mask of Oppression presents a problem in Christian circles in that it fails to recognize both the position and power of God's Church triumphant. This mask not only veils us with a sense of self-righteousness; it also projects a Mask of Opposition on any person or people who appear to have an upper hand against us, extending our own false drama—our own false narrative of tragedy—to those who are hardly worthy of an understudy to true villainy. Because of this, the Church creates powers and authorities where there may be little to worry about, especially in light of the Gospel. There are, to be clear, legitimate dangers to Christian life and well-being across the world. In the discussion above, I am speaking primarily of the American context in which religious freedom has been infused into our core values and protected with decent rigor from the nation's earliest days.

We must now come to ask ourselves what, if anything, Scripture has to say on this topic. Jesus told his disciples to be wary of wars and rumors of war in respect to his Second Coming (Matt 24:6), but what should we think of the rumored wars which are waged in the here and now, when He is still on his way? His discussion on fasting in Matthew 6, while not an exact parallel to the present situation, may yet provide us with the insight and clarity we need to evaluate our hearts and direct them towards better and holier things:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt 6:16-18 ESV)

It is worth noting a play on words as it appears in verse sixteen. The word that gets translated as "disfigure" in the ESV is a form of *aphanizo* which literally means "to vanish or destroy." It is a negation of its root, *phaino*, which is translated as "be seen" at the end of this verse. In other words, the hypocrites are destroying themselves so that their suffering may be seen, pitied, and revered. They beat themselves up and showcase their pain in some masochistic display via the Mask of Oppression. This self-destruction may inflate their egos, but it is a profound insult to those who are suffering pains and hurts which are outside of their control. What these false fasters are doing is not a pious act for God; it is a show of strength which seeks to undermine any moral authority their cultural oppressors can muster,

especially the Gentiles in their midst.

It is often forgotten, or perhaps just rarely mentioned, that the Jews were not a political majority in the days of Rome. The Jews maintained a mostly civil relationship with Roman authorities and citizens, many of them becoming Hellenized and adopting the pagan culture as their own. There was, however, a select faction of Jews who set it upon themselves to restore proper reverence for the Mosaic Law in everyday life. These were the Pharisees: the ones Jesus was most likely referring to as hypocrites in Matthew's account. The Pharisees were a minority in the Empire, surrounded by pagan influences and subjected to foreign rule. They saw themselves in a cultural battle with the Gentiles, looking to preserve their own traditions more than they were trying to dominate the public sphere.

It is in this light that we should read and understand the false fasters as Jesus exposes them. Their fasting was not only meant to inspire awe and reverence from their fellow Jew; it was meant to stand up and against the orgies and drunkenness that ran liberally and unashamedly through the streets of Rome. These Jewish hypocrites emphasized their perceived marginality by disempowering themselves even further, starving themselves while feeding into the already present narrative that they were second-class citizens among the Roman population.

Jesus sees right through this self-righteous and self-defeating game, calling out the hypocrites and instructing his disciples to, in a word, stand up straight and face the world courageously rather than play out some personal tragedy. Specifically, Jesus tells his disciples to anoint their heads and wash their faces when they fast. Notice once more that fasting, much like prayer and giving, is not the issue here. *It is the manner in which it is done.* Faithful fasting, and by extension all Christian living, is the denial of self for the sake of personal intimacy with God and our neighbors. Our good works are not simply another public or political demonstration, nor are they means by which we should assert our pride against the perceived pagan majority. Furthermore, adding bombastic demonstrations to the Christian life makes our work a service to self and removes any sacrifice from the equation. Our starvation and physical oppression become a show for the world to see rather than a prayer for God to answer.

Christ and Church as Masks of God

Martin Luther coined the phrase *larvae Dei* in his doctrine of vocation, a pair of words that translates to the Masks of God.² Luther claimed that each Christian in their own place and position was to reflect God's love shown to them through Jesus. He saw Christians, the people themselves, as various faces that God could wear as he continued his divine activities. The phrase *larvae Dei*, rightly

understood, should then give us pause when we consider the masks we exchange for the mask of God. Whether they be benevolent, intellectual, or oppressed, our false fronts are full of flaws and foolishness which need to be filled in and enlightened.

Important for our discussion here is also that, for Luther, both “human and nonhuman creatures function as masks of God... behind which He remains the creative agent of life.”³ These mask-bearing creatures are also the tools by which God provides and preserves life, producing order in creation rather than chaos. While unity and harmony come from godly interface, discord is always the result of false fronts and what other masks bring to the table, both in our relationship with God and in those we have with our neighbors. Lies can only sow needless divisions between us, wedging pride into the middle of pain and sorrow, and this is not what we are called to as Christians.

The Great Commission of the Church is to represent Christ in every time and place, going to the ends of the earth, teaching as Jesus did and baptizing as Jesus commanded. His truth, his love, and his mercy should not only guide our movements but also give the model for our mission to all people. There is no worthy substitute for Jesus; nothing compares with the incarnate *imago Dei* as he is revealed in Scripture. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the unmasked mystery who creates and controls all things. (Col 1:15-16) He is the exact imprint of the heavenly nature, the radiance of God which shines rather than shadows his divine activity. (Heb 1:3)

There are times, however, when Christian radiance is overlooked, times when Christ is left unmentioned, and the mask over God’s character remains. Going unrecognized, the character of God becomes looming and ominous because of its ambiguity; his love and justice take the form of problems needing to be solved rather than facts historically and physically demonstrated by Christ on the cross. Thus, a lack of the proclaimed Christ has led many faithful Christians to be swallowed up by needless mystery, constantly trying to explain God’s character by secondary means, desperately seeking relief from the looming strangeness of his divine shadow. Speaking of God in theological terms without mention of Christ’s forgiveness is to put a mask on his character and ignore his reconciling work. Furthermore, this sort of theology will inevitably put itself in the role of Christ himself, “(undertaking) to reconcile us to God by seeking to penetrate (his) masks, to get behind (his) abstractions.”⁴ These efforts are fruitless, however, for the Mask of God’s character cannot be removed by anything but the proclaimed, crucified, and risen Christ. Apart from this proclamation and historical reality, “God and Satan are virtually indistinguishable.”⁵ Explaining God without proclaiming Christ thus reduces God to a cosmic question, if not a caustic phantom to be feared by all.

The problem of masks, both ours and God's, can only be solved by Jesus. He is the one who reveals our sin, stripping us of our false piety and striking us with the heavy hand of the Law. He is also the one who redeems us from our sin, freeing us from falsehood and sanctifying us by his Spirit, sculpting us by his Word and through the fires of temptation. He invites us to put on a new self and to dispose of the lesser masks we make, showing them to be the machinations of our own hearts and minds bound to sin (Col 3:9-10). He exhorts us to kindness, humility, patience, meekness, forgiveness, and, above all, love which binds us together in unity (vv.12-14).

As Christians and as the Church, we must ask if the mask we wear is helping or hurting our witness to the Gospel. We must look in the mirror and re-examine the cracks of our fallen image. We need open and honest accountability from our Christian and non-Christian neighbors to show us how, when, and where we miss the mark, where the inconsistencies are in our prescribed and ascribed identities. This is not only a cry for a better conscience, nor is it simply a call to personal conviction; it is a matter of professional embarrassment. We are chosen as God's people, elected, justified, and glorified by his sacrifice. If there is to be any definition of Christian community, any thought of world mission which seeks to bring that community into contact with culture, it must begin with an honest look at our own shortcomings as sinners-yet-saints pressing on to the coming Kingdom. We do not need to feign our benevolence because the benevolent God has borne our burdens for us. We do not need to fake our wisdom because there is an almighty Wisdom who rules justly for all time. We do not need to falsify our oppression because we have a God who has put Death, the ultimate oppressor, in chains.

We wear the righteousness of Christ alone, the revealed Mask of God for our sake and for those around us. He is not to be traded for lesser faces; He remains the same yesterday, today, and forever, and there is no hypocrisy in eternity.

Endnotes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. 5.5.23-27.
- 2 Martin Luther, "Exposition of Psalm 147" in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 14, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Daniel E. Poellot, and George V. Schick (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 107-135.
- 3 Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, (Baker Academic, 2008), 55.
- 4 Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 20.
- 5 Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 20.