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# 1

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## First Conservative Church of . . .

**W**e love Jesus but are unsure about the church. Despite it being a familiar place, the church has deeply hurt us. In like fashion to a family, those closest to you can be quickest to draw blood.

To us the church is often a place of frustration, anger, and disillusionment. While most of us grew up in the church, we now feel alienated because of our differences. Written off as arrogant, careless, or idealistic, we are leaving the church still holding on to the hope of following Jesus.

### “REAL” CHRISTIANITY

Since we were children, our generation has been enamored with reality. The birth of reality TV only fueled this desire. We revel in knowing intimate details about our favorite characters as they compete on an island or fall in love.

The value of reality has also affected our personal lives. Few generations before us are so quick to acknowledge failure. Our vulnerability and openness to share about our lives

is clear to everyone. We see this as beneficial, letting people see our true self.

Pop culture only continues our education as celebrities boldly display their lives to the world. Their breakups and hookups are covered in explicit detail. We love it. We also find their mistakes posted for all to see. Yet we are quick to welcome them back. We accept their mistakes because we know we make mistakes. We forgive because we know we need forgiveness.

Our generation is messed up, and we know it. But we also want a place to belong, to be known. To us, ugly reality beats fake beauty any day. Perfection is a standard no one can meet.

But many of us grew up in homes and churches where image management was king. As a Christian, it was your goal to convince others of how spiritual you were. Reality was irrelevant. Perception was everything.

When this happens, little attention is given to actual hurt or doubt. Forced smiles cover up deep-seated pain and struggle. Jesus, the Bible, and prayer are the answers to every question.

As a student I once attended a church service with a guest speaker who was “famous.” Eager to hear his remarks, I listened intently. He was a dynamic speaker, sure to connect with a new audience and exposit God’s Word in a fresh way.

What followed was nothing less than a slew of self-glorifying stories filled with encounters and relationships with other “famous” people. I don’t remember a single Scripture ever being read. All attention was given to his past ministry success and how he led with power and strength. The local church sat at his feet, soaking in everything.

I walked away completely disgusted. This was name-dropping and narcissism on a level few reach. Possibly more devastating was the church's response. They loved it. In stereotypical fashion, this Christian leader presented a version of Christianity that led to ministry success and material acquisition. And he wasn't even part of the prosperity gospel crowd.

Good intentions abounding, we have received a faith that values perception over reality. Mature Christians need to have their life in order. Mature Christians need to look good on Sunday morning. My generation has been taught this set of values. But such an attitude does not validate our struggles, doubt, or frustration. We learned that life is about having everything together . . . or at least playing the part.

For us and our culture, this makes no sense.

### **REALLY, THAT'S YOUR PRAYER?**

As a young believer, I was taught that small groups are the answer to true community and fellowship. Surely, a group of Bible-believing people coming together would create a space of honesty and truth. It's a simple way to grow in the context of community.

In my experience the Bible study usually works out pretty well: read the passage, answer the questions, and walk away with a goal for the next week. Where this model often falls apart is at prayer time.

Insert Jon Acuff. Writer, speaker, and blogger. The following is a description of what happens next and what causes us to question the value of Christian community.

Have you ever been in a small group with people that confess safe sins? Someone will say, "I need to be honest with everyone tonight. I need to have full disclosure and submit myself in honesty. Like ODB from the Wu-Tang Clan, I need to give it to you raw!" So you brace yourself for this crazy moment of authenticity and the person takes a deep breath and says . . . "I haven't been reading my Bible enough."

Ugh, you, dirty, dirty sinner. I'm not even sure I can be in a small group with you any more. Not reading your Bible enough, that is disgusting. And then once he's gone someone else will catch the safe sin bug too and will say, "I need to be real too. I haven't been praying enough."

Two of you in the same room? Wow, freak shows! I can barely stand it.

But what happens when people start confessing safe sins is that everyone else in the room starts concealing their real junk. I mean if I was surrounded by confessions like that in the eighth grade I would have instantly known I couldn't follow the "not reading my Bible enough" guy with my own story:

"Soooo, this weekend when it was snowing I told my parents I was going to the dump to sled but instead I was really just digging through a 200 foot mountain of warm trash looking for pornography." And the same principle would have applied to me in my late 20s. I wouldn't have been honest sharing my struggles with Internet porn if everyone else confessed their "safe enough for small group" sins.

And that sucks. It sucks that as broken as we all are, as desperate as we all are for a Savior, we feel compelled to clean ourselves up when we get around each other.

But this blog has taught me something unbelievable. If I stop writing tomorrow, this will be the lesson I cling to the most.

When you go first, you give everyone in your church or your community or your small group or your blog, the gift of going second.

It's much harder to be first. No one knows what's off limits yet and you're setting the boundaries with your words. You're throwing yourself on the honesty grenade and taking whatever fallout that comes with it. Going second is so much easier. And the ease only grows exponentially as people continue to share. But it has to be started somewhere. Someone has to go first and I think it has to be us.

We're called to give the gift of second to the people in our lives. To live the truth, to share the truth, to be the truth.

Let's give the gift of going second.<sup>1</sup>

Life and faith are not perfect. Whether it's sin or doubt, we struggle. We are all sinners in need of grace; not just for grace when we say "the prayer" but grace every day.

Sometimes I think the older we get as Christians, the more our theology can be distorted. For a believer who has known Christ for years, it is easy to acquire a sense of entitlement. You serve in the church, you are faithful to your

small group, and you attend Sunday school. In a sense, you've arrived. You deserve God's grace. You've earned His favor. You've hit the mark.

I believe this mindset is not just possible but probable.

Why? Because the result of this attitude is pride. That pride then produces astronomical levels of rule-following. Self-righteousness and judgment quickly follow.

My generation has been frustrated and hurt by a Christian community and subculture that sometimes values perfection over faith. And it makes sense—our struggles are often not heard or welcome. Instead of grace being the common thread, the church has replaced it with moral and religious standards.

Many times we experience doubt or struggle with sin, yet we feel alienated from the church. We know the standard expected of “Christians” and we've fallen short. Like something unclean, no longer worthy of God or His church, we are ignored. This usually continues until we can “clean up” our lives enough to return.

But isn't that the gospel? Sinners redeemed by grace in order to extend grace? Shouldn't the church be seeking those people?

Michael Frost, author of *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, does well in describing this experience in the church. He talks about the millennials as a generation who have a “built-in, shockproof” detector for dishonesty and pretense. This awareness, cultivated by our generation's culture, leads us to see the inauthentic show often being put on by the church.

He goes on to speak about the alienation felt by audiences when pastors and worship leaders speak with overly spiritual language consisting of “hyper-real images and unlikely expectations.” “Public Christian discourse seems to regularly concern itself with happy Christian families, answered prayers, and parables with an obvious moral inserted in the punch line.”

Later in the chapter he continues, “Perhaps there are many shiny, happy people in the church, but those of us who aren’t shiny and don’t feel perpetually happy eventually develop a strong sense of alienation. We’re not able to play the game with any sense of integrity.”<sup>2</sup>

A friend of mine, also a millennial, expressed a similar sentiment. He described the church as always having a “perpetual focus on joy and happiness.” As someone who has experienced Christian community in Bible college, he talks about the constant pressure to be happy. With that focus, much of Christianity is centered on moralism and emotion rather than faith. This veneer of a perfect life has little room for doubts.

As a generation, we are frustrated at the language the church uses to express faith. Preachers and teachers who use perfect stories about “God showing up” don’t often seem to acknowledge their struggles with faith. As a generation of people who speak their mind, and yearn for what is true, we cannot match the perfection presented in church.

And we question whether any of it is even real.

Anne Lamott, in her book *Bird by Bird*, talks about the necessity of writing truthfully. As she narrates the plot and develops characters, her constant focus is on describing what is real. She warns young writers of creating characters devoid



of humanness. “They shouldn’t be too perfect; perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting.”<sup>3</sup>

As a millennial, few things are as frustrating as inauthenticity, especially in relation to faith. Those who disguise or cover up what is real often find acceptance in the church. Yet this version of communal conformity does nothing to produce authentic faith.

We see this and it has caused many of us to walk away from Christian community and even the church. Living our faith outside the context of the church has become an attractive alternative.

### ONE-DAY WORKWEEK

Much of the disillusionment I feel as a Christian is connected to the lack of holistic living present in the church today—be it work, family, or our interaction with unbelievers.

Case in point: the one-day workweek. It sounds like a new book on how to get rich, but more accurately it describes how the church often approaches faith. Faith becomes a segment of their life, set apart and holy, for Sundays (maybe Wednesdays too, if you’re really dedicated).

This waffle-like approach to faith allows us to place our faith in one section, our work in another, and our hobbies in another. They are disconnected, without the ability to influence each other.

This is our experience in the church. Families go to worship, sing songs, listen to the sermon, and go home. For them, what continues throughout the rest of the week is anything but “church.”

Matt Chambers blogged about his neighbor's experience with Christians who live a segmented life. After asking a neighbor why he never went to church, his neighbor said, "Matt, when I go to the strip club, sometimes there's another group of guys there. They say all the same things I say to the women, but during the day, they're in class studying to become pastors. Why do I need to believe what they believe when we all end up at the same place anyway?"<sup>4</sup>

If you grew up with that parent or pastor, I am sorry. Most of us didn't.

But my point, and the feeling shared by many of us, is that the church and Christian community often don't teach or exemplify a faith that affects your life outside of Sunday morning. And if they do, it's based off moralistic teaching of "perceived" spirituality and piety. This produces believers who simply are playing a game, not living out faith.

We see this as simply lip service. Spirituality should never be isolated to a two-hour slot each week. If faith can be scheduled and put on a checklist, it isn't faith.

### **YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?**

Contrary to common thinking, a shallow version of Christianity is not compelling, relevant, or attractive to us. In fact, it's the thing that often drives us away from the church.

Living in Dallas, Texas, for two years gave me firsthand experience of the "Bible Belt." When friends in Chicago mention their frustration with cultural Christianity, I laugh to myself. They simply have no clue.

Everyone in Dallas goes to church. Every. Single. Person. It's a documented phenomenon.

This version of Christianity looks very different than that of LA or Seattle. In Dallas, it's cool to go to church. There is little negative social pressure against being "Christian." If you smoke pot, have tattoos, or are openly gay, you go to church. I knew people of each variety who went to Bible-believing churches and were even involved in small groups.

But in this type of "Christian" culture, the message and life of faith quickly falls to the lowest common denominator. Dallas could easily win the award for the most "Sunday-only" Christians.

As I lived there I was often asked what caused so many young believers to attend a particular megachurch. While most churches in Dallas are large, this church had an uncanny ability to attract our generation—and it wasn't flashy.

What I said was simple. Their version of Christianity is not cheap.

When you're drowning in a culture of Christianity that approves of everyone, people will look for more. Why? Because cheap Christianity, with low expectations, is virtually meaningless.

I would argue our generation desires a significant faith. We want a Sunday morning message to challenge us to something deeper than tutoring a student or cleaning up the neighborhood. Those things are important and should happen, but when disconnected from a compelling vision of God, they are simply acts of service.

Our morality and service should never be the motivation

for following Jesus. They must flow from deep, gut-wrenching truth about who God is, and what He deserves from us. Often the church presents a version of Christianity that awards a gold star to those who “serve” the most. If that’s Christianity, I want out.

Compelling faith sees God as powerful and someone to be feared. Compelling faith knows we play a small part in relation to this world and will never deserve God’s favor or grace. It realizes that, in light of His compassion and love, we are shown mercy.

Hearing a message on the nature, character, and power of God inspires us. We want to be challenged to love the unlovely, share our possessions with the poor, or give our lives to something that matters. That is what inspires our generation.

We don’t want a watered-down version of God’s Word. We don’t accept a three-point checklist to complete this week. Token Christianity has nothing to do with following Jesus.

We want to start and end with God.

### **SOMETIMES I WANT TO FALL DOWN**

Our generation is young. At the upper end, we’ve been walking this world for thirty years. That’s not long, but it’s not insignificant.

One of the greatest frustrations among our generation today is the church’s overprotective culture. Whether in ministry or leadership, we are often told what can’t be done. While it might indeed be true that what we want to do can’t be done, the rejection simply turns us off to the church.

We are a generation with a unique set of gifts, values, and

experiences. We have grown up in a technological age unlike anything previous. We value the environment and are the most socially conscious generation in recent history. We are optimistic about the future and how God is working.

Not only that, we are dreamers. Every generation has thinkers and those who break through previous norms. I would argue our generation will set new standards on what is possible in arenas of church, parachurch, and business.

Charles Lee is CEO of Ideation, a unique group of innovators in the area of social good. He is described as an ideation strategist, networker, and compassionate. In a recent piece about millennials he wrote, "The creative implementation of innovative ideas is at an all-time high. Rapid advancements in technology and human networks have exponentially opened up new pathways to actualizing one's passions. Unlike in past centuries, people no longer need to wait for 'permission' from the established institutions to pursue a dream."<sup>5</sup>

We want the chance to step out on a limb for an idea, and if necessary, fail. What leads to frustration is when we're prevented from both.

Our generation is coming up with new ideas to engage culture, make disciples, share our faith, do missions, and take care of the poor. Many of these come out of a cultural background different than our parents'. Some ideas are more extreme than others.

Yet the church is not always a place that encourages this entrepreneurial spirit. Instead of empowering us, we are often pigeonholed into what is tried-and-true. We are told ministry is not the place to experiment with ideas. The

church is a place for stewardship, and thus, proven methods for ministry are best.

The church is daily losing the most creative people to other arenas. Many of my friends have started businesses and nonprofits, seeking to care for the poor, feed the hungry, and further the kingdom. These are the same leaders and thinkers who were not welcomed by the church. Their ideas were too messy and untested. In the context of the church, they were seen as “too radical.” So they leave, taking their passion and creativity into other arenas.

The church has yet to see the depth of this mistake.<sup>6</sup>

In light of our experience, we are often frustrated to the point where we simply want the freedom to mess up. Being “careful” is not an attractive option for us anymore. It is this fear-based guarding, which if left unaddressed, will bury everything once effective in the church. This type of restriction will not keep creative people in the church.

Ken and Deborah Loyd, pastors and authors, elaborate on this issue: “What if we older, more established church leaders who hold the authority, property, money, and other church resources were to hunt down eclectic, somewhat ragtag, young women and men, and give our power and stuff to them with the instruction, ‘We choose you precisely because you are *not* like us. Here is your charge: Go after those who are seeking God. *Do not* copy our ways. *Do not* do what we have done. Innovate. Try. Fail. Succeed. Forge a new path. Build new kinds of churches and communities.”<sup>7</sup>

Our generation needs encouragement and empowerment. We need to be affirmed in the new ways we are sharing the gospel and reaching those without Christ. We need opportunities to continue thinking and leading amidst a generation that despises “church services.”

We need the freedom to fail.