

Some Thoughts About Masks in Church

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Masks are a new thing in church, right? Or are they? Certainly, these cloth and paper ones are, but there is another kind that is quite common. Medically, if we don't wear the cloth and paper ones, it could lead to the sickness and death of ... others and ourselves. However, there is a mask which, if we wear it, will lead to our sickness and death in another way. Today, while we are wearing Covid masks, there is a kind of mask Christians *cannot* wear ... and live. We pray.

We're in the season of Pentecost, the front end of which is most directly reported in the NT book of Acts. There is much that the Spirit enables and ... there is that which he disables ... both for the purpose of life, real life. Read. Acts 5.

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of

doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.”

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?”

“Yes,” she said, “that is the price.”

⁹ Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

I'd like to point out that we have ushers in our church who carry offering plates but the ushers in this NT church had carrying out duties of a whole other level.

Of course, you may ask, and I think it is the main question that gets asked of this story, “What’s the big deal here? Holding a little back ... holding

back a little money, holding back a little on the truth ... what's the big deal?"

Maybe it isn't so extreme if we ask the corollary question, "What must die in order for ... the church to live?" Or "What must die in order for a Christian life to live?" Did you know that some things cannot be for a Christian life to live? For a church to live?

Our nominating committee is considering who might be elders to help lead the church. I tell them, "Don't give me stingy, sour-puss, controlling, insecure people. Don't do that." Why? Because those people in leadership will kill a church. One of them on a session, probably; two, certainly.

Call it what you want, phoniness or being a fake or pretense, the hard and straight up word for it is lying. Do you know any relationships that can be red-blooded and alive that accept in it lying? "Spouse, lying isn't a problem for our relationship." "Employee, lying to me your supervisor isn't a problem." No---raw, real, healthy, life-giving relationships give *no* room to lying.

Ananias and Saphira were liars. They were interested in being charter members of First Phoniness Church of Jerusalem. They were good with distributing a new member packet that included a mask to hide the real you.

Lying and deception isn't just a killer for a church and for a relationship, it's a killer for the liar. No one can escape the eroding effects of knowing

you are a cheap charlatan. The spiritual gut-rot brings its own personal misery and death of personhood.

Why do people lie? I had a friend call and say, “Our teen got a smart phone we didn’t know about and so couldn’t monitor. When we found it, he frantically removed stuff from it before we could grab it. And then he said he wasn’t deleting anything important.” They asked, “Why would he do that?” I asked, ‘You mean remove stuff and lie? Really? You have to ask that? Why do you do that? Why do I do that?’ There are two reasons we see here.

The first is to project an image. It’s more subtle in it how it works among us and it is constant. To project an image. Ananias and Saphira lied not only to cover up that they had led everyone to believe they were 100% givers when they were actually 50% givers. If they had been 50% givers and let everyone know they were 50% givers, there would have been a different outcome.¹ Moses at one point wore a mask so that people would think he was more spiritual than he was and we all project such things – that we are more together, more knowledgeable, more hard-working than, and on and on.²

¹ Now let’s still realize that half trusting money and half trusting God doesn’t make a whole salvation. Not at all.

² We tell someone we will pray for them and then we don’t. But when we see them again we go, “Oh, no,” and whisper a nanosecond prayer. Then we say, “Hi, I’ve been praying for you.” We look like a prayer warrior when we are not.

But we also lie, not just to project an image but to protect an image. And more deeply, just to protect ourselves. That's what was going on with my friend's son. He had stuff on his phone that he would be embarrassed by and punished for. He did not want the pain and so much so that he would frantically act. We don't want to be found out in terms of the dark or shadow stuff in our lives. It isn't good. But it is. And the way forward with God is to be real about it. No masks with him. To trust his grace and to live in open fellowship with him. This way with him is to become our way with each other.

So, we lie to protect ourselves ... from the truth that would show us up for what's really going on. And in so doing we distance ourselves from the truth ... and here's the kicker, we distance ourselves from the truth which sets us free. We have to, we think, protect ourselves at all costs from having people really know what we have been truly up to. We cover things up. We mask who we are. And, perversely, that secrecy promotes sin and that which shames and shackles us. If you, the moment you had the thought of embezzling at work, stood up and announced at church you were thinking of doing so, would it more or less likely happen than if you kept your thought a secret? Less. And true also for those who heard you be real.

. Would God be loving if he allowed the secrecy and hypocrisy which promotes shame and

shackles? Hardly. He is always challenging this in all its forms.

Protect from shame about who I am on the one hand. Project an image of other than who I really am on the other. Crossing fingers, playing games, being fakes... not going to the mat for being real, honest, authentic, this will kill the organics of a church and it will kill the organics of a life. Don't put up with it in your life or in your world. It's the only way to end up in a genuine and good place.

The most serious thing Ananias and Saphira did (not that the other wasn't very serious) but what they did that was a different level of serious) had to do with God. They lied, the text says, to the Holy Spirit.

I think that means they were saying, by their actions, that God, if he was hardcore there at all, and that was probably a matter of debate for them,³ but if he was, he was the kind of god one could pull the wool over his eyes. Or he was the kind of god who couldn't care less about deception. Or he was the kind of god fine with having what people think of you be more necessary than what he thought of you. However, *all* of that is a grave mistake of the highest order. God does not abide those who think he can be duped, who think their image with others is the key to life. This is not the way it is. God very much and

³ This is shown when the real thought is we are in church but then we leave to go into the "real" world. Here it's fluff, out there it's substance ("real world").

quite seriously cares for the way it actually is and for being real and saying what's what, saying who you are ... struggles, failures, achievements... all.

Unfortunately, as strong a medicine these Ananias and Saphira verses are, the church quite a bit has become practiced at and pretty good at being a few degrees off the truth, of wearing masks (not these cloth and papers ones but "let's put on appearances" kind). I guess the takeaway is that the way it simply works, if you want God's kind of life, many times it's called eternal life, is that there's no way around being constantly, thoroughly, enduringly committed to not making yourself out to be who you are not, committed to not pretending, committed to God's opinion of you being your first priority.

And for that to happen we need courage and faith and love. "God, give us love and more love and more love." Will you work at not wearing a mask today? The word of the Lord.⁴

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor and elders would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com. Also see welovefirst.org or [facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian](https://www.facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian)

⁴ For a life of a singer who lived with a mask and how it nearly killed him, listen to the second half of Pirates Monk Podcast 232 with Grammy winner Russ Taft. And also *Lead Like a Drug Addict* Michael Brody-Waite in Positive Sobriety Podcast 68 (especially the second half.)

