

WHERE ARE THE MEN? AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SHORTAGE OF MEN IN
AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

Count the number of men and women in the pews or chairs on Sunday morning. If that congregation is like the majority of them in America, there are likely fewer men in church than women.

This has been a popular subject among Christian authors and bloggers within the past few decades. Men's retreats and men's groups have surfaced as some reactions to the problem. Many theories have been advanced about *why* there are far fewer men than women in American churches and just as many tactics have been suggested about how to reach those men who currently do not consider the church to be a place for them.

After letting the data determine that the gender gap in American churches is reality, this paper will suggest historical developments and modern day barriers that may have contributed to a perception, or misconception, that church is not really a place for men. This paper will also suggest some things to think about as our churches reinvest in the men we have so that they can reach their spheres of influence.

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Introduction

Scan the faces of the people in worship on a Sunday morning and behind many of them, there is a hidden, but very real wound caused by men. Yes, men, or the lack thereof. One woman is in her usual spot, without her husband. He only comes with her on her birthday. He ridicules her for wasting their money on “your stupid church.” Not far away is a husband who was dragged there by his wife, but has everything besides God on his mind, just like every other Sunday. Then there is the older couple who had three boys all leave the church because their careers took precedence. And what about the men who are present? Some have faced ridicule from friends or coworkers for doing something on a Sunday morning that is not perceived to be all that “manly”. Some of them really struggle to come to church and might come out of a sense of obligation. Some do not come often because of shame, others attend little because of apathy and some even stay home at times as an act of defiance against someone who really loves them.

A quick glance over many American sanctuaries on Sunday mornings will consistently make anyone who is paying attention wonder, “Where are all the men?” A longer consideration of this epidemic begs the question, “*Why* don’t men go to church, at least in the numbers that women do?” What lies on the pages ahead will first of all establish that this is a real problem by using present-day data and observations in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, some historical developments and examples of the problem will be considered. Chapter 3 will discuss some major barriers that stand in between men and church. Chapter 4 will offer suggestions of how churches might start dealing with this epidemic.

Why spend all this time talking about men? Men matter to God and to his church and a church that reaches and disciples men will in turn reach those men’s spheres of influence.

Chapter 1-Where’s the testosterone?

Negative perceptions abound when it comes to the way many American men think about church. Charles Spurgeon¹ even complained once that “there has got abroad a notion, somehow, that if you become a Christian you must sink your manliness and turn milk-sop.”²

¹ A famous Baptist preacher in Britain in the 1800s.

² Quoted in Leon Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*, (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 6.

What story does the data tell? The Religious Landscape study done by the Pew Research Center³ in 2015 brings some more clarity to the assertion that men are underrepresented in American Christianity. The first study investigates the belief in God by gender.

The Belief in God by Gender

Gender composition⁴	Believe in God; absolutely certain	Believe in God; fairly certain	Believe in God; not too/not at all certain	Believe in God; don't know	Do not believe in God	Other/don't know if they believe in God
Men	57%	21%	7%	1%	12%	3%
Women	69%	18%	4%	1%	6%	2%

Notice especially that while 69% of women believe in God with certainty, only 57% of men express the same certainty. The next table shows how each gender views their religion.

The Importance of Religion in One's Life by Gender

Gender composition	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too important	Not at all important	Don't know	Sample Size
Men	47%	26%	13%	14%	1%	17,514
Women	59%	23%	9%	8%	1%	17,557

There is an 12% gap between women and men when it comes to the importance of religion in one's life. Also notice that while 6% of women interviewed did not believe in God and 8% of women interviewed did not see religion as important at all in their life, 12% of men did not believe in God and 14% of men didn't see religion as important at all in their life.

The trend continues when it comes to the frequency of prayer in one's life. 64% of women surveyed pray at least once a day, 46% of men. 62% of men would seldom or never participate in a prayer, Scripture study or religious education group, while 54% of women would not. 64% of women reported feeling spiritual peace and wellbeing at least once a week, while 53% of men reported the same. 38% of women saw religion as a source of guidance, while only

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/gender-composition/>

⁴ The sample size of men interviewed was 17,514. The sample size of women interviewed was 17,557.

28% of men reported the same. 40% of women read Scripture at least once a week, while only 30% of men did the same. 38% of men said that the Scriptures were not the Word of God, while 28% of women said the same. 76% of women said they believed in heaven, while 67% of men said the same. One of the only spiritual questions that men were more certain about than women was about the belief in absolute standards of right and wrong. Men edged out women slightly (35% to 31%) when it came to believing that there are clear standards for what is right and what is wrong.⁵

The implications of the gap between men and women in the church are enormous. In 1992, 43% of American men attended church, while in 1996, only 28 percent.⁶ Almost a quarter of married, churchgoing women attend services without their husbands each Sunday.⁷ This means that households are divided at the spiritual level. According to Barna Research, men lag behind women in every area of Christian endeavor (except the senior pastorate).⁸ In other words, men only outnumber women in one area of the sanctuary: the pulpit. Could the Barna Group be correct when they conclude their own similar findings by saying that “Women are the backbone of the Christian congregations in America”?⁹

The evidence becomes even more disheartening when considering what impact an unchurched or minimally-churched father could have on his children. Researchers from Switzerland provide insight into this phenomenon.¹⁰ In their study, when the mother was a regular churchgoer, but the father attended infrequently, just 3% of their children went on to become regular churchgoers. When Mom was regular but Dad never attended, just 2% become regular attendees. On the flip side, (which is the positive side of this study and gives the church something to strive for), when both Mom and Dad attended church regularly, 33% of kids grew up to attend regularly. When Dad was regular but Mom only went once in a while, the figure jumped to 38%. And shockingly, when Dad was faithful but Mom never attended, 44% of the kids ended up as regular church attendees.

⁵ The Religious Landscape study from the Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/gender-composition/>

⁶ Podles, 12. He is referencing George Barna, “The Battle for the Hearts of Men,” *New Man*, 4:1 (January-February 1997): 42.

⁷ David Murrow. “In Spiritual Matters, Kids Take Their Cues from Dad.” *Touchstone*, 2005.

⁸ Murrow. “In Spiritual Matters.”

⁹ <https://www.barna.org/culture-articles/579-christian-women-today-part-1-of-4-what-women-think-of-faith-leadership-and-their-role-in-the-church>

¹⁰ <https://www.barna.org/culture-articles/579-christian-women-today-part-1-of-4-what-women-think-of-faith-leadership-and-their-role-in-the-church>

What about actual church attendance? According to USA Today, women were 20%-25% more likely to attend worship at least weekly.¹¹ An ABC News poll in 2002 found that among all men surveyed, 32% said they attended weekly and 44% of women said they attended weekly, 26% of Catholic men said they attended weekly, while 49% of Catholic women said they attended weekly, and 42% of Protestant men to 50% of Protestant women said the same.¹² Here are similar findings from a study in 2008.¹³

Percentage of members who say they attend services at least once a week:

“Christian” tradition	Male	Female
Evangelical Protestant	46%	54%
Mainline Protestant	31%	38%
Historically Black Protestant	49%	65%
Roman Catholic	36%	45%
Mormon	75%	76%
Orthodox	30%	38%

Although this paper’s scope is primarily on American Christianity, women outnumber men in Christian churches throughout the world.¹⁴ Male absence goes back at least a century in the churches of England, Wales, Spain, Germany, France, Asia, Australia, and Africa.¹⁵

Does the evidence suggest that women are simply more spiritual or religious than men? Many have tried to explain it that way, but is that even compatible with Scripture? “Every inclination of the *human* heart is evil from childhood.”¹⁶ Men and women are just as dead in their sins and spiritually lifeless before God by nature.¹⁷ The Scriptures do not allow the explanation that women have a more religious character within them by nature. Not only are men and women equally lifeless by nature when it comes to spiritual matters, they know just as much about God based on the undeniable testimony that the heavens, the earth, and their consciences give them about the existence of a higher being. Regardless of gender, the heavens declare the

¹¹ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-07-23-males-church_N.htm

¹² <http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/875a2ChurchAttendance.pdf>

¹³ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-07-23-males-church_N.htm

¹⁴ David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 17.

¹⁵ Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, 17, 18.

¹⁶ Genesis 8:21

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:1

glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.¹⁸ Men and women are without excuse when it comes to acknowledging the existence of God, since God's eternal power and divine nature have been seen clearly since the creation of the universe.¹⁹ This little jog through the Scriptures shows how cautious Christians need to be when diving into a topic where many deceiving, unbiblical theories will be presented as to why there is a gender gap and what can be done about it.

In addition to the theological disallowance of the explanation that men are less religious, research done on other world religions will not allow the explanation that men are less religious. There are roughly equal numbers of men and women in Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.²⁰

In 1952, the typical U.S. Protestant worship service drew an adult crowd that was 47% male. In 2005²¹ and 2013²², that figure was around 39%. There were 13 million fewer men than women in the pews in 2005.²³

This has been a sampling of research and studies that are rather consistent in their findings: men are noticeably outnumbered on the scene of American Christianity.

Does that make this a recent phenomenon that has carried over from the last half of the 20th century? Or could the emasculation of the Christian church have much more ancient roots?

Chapter 2-An ancient epidemic

The gender gap is not new. "Throughout the 19th century, women outnumbered men in the churches by about two to one, which seems to have been the ratio even in the Second Great Awakening."²⁴ That is a much wider gap than America experiences even today in the 21st century. Why has there been such a disproportionate number of men to women in American churches? Part of the answer might lie in a time well before our nation was ever thought of.

One strand in a web of ancient epidemics

The first stop in the history of Christianity will be at what might seem to be an unrelated epidemic: allegory. Allegory occurs when interpreters of the Bible assign a different meaning to

¹⁸ Psalm 19:1

¹⁹ Romans 1:20

²⁰ Murrow, 13, 14.

²¹ Murrow, "In spiritual matters," *Touchstone*, 2005.
and <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=137>

²² <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=137>

²³ Murrow. "In spiritual matters," *Touchstone*, 2005.

²⁴ Podles, 17.

the words of Scripture other than the clear meaning indicated by the type of genre, the context surrounding the passages, and the vocabulary and grammar of the section. Allegory was a common practice from the time of Origen all the way through the Middle Ages. Not all allegory completely contradicted the other doctrines of the Bible. In fact, since many of the early church fathers knew their Scriptures so well, some of them stated very true principles from Scripture using allegory. The problem was that they were using the wrong proof passages to state things that were very consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Unfortunately, a danger with allegory was first of all that the plain, simple meaning of the words were stretched well beyond the original author's intent. Interpretation was placed squarely into the hands of the interpreting individual. Since the meaning was flexible in the hands of the one handling it, the next danger was that the interpretations could be taken too far and too much could be said. At times, this would mean that some commentators of the Bible would go beyond Scripture. This is what happened with the Old Testament book known as the Song of Songs. It will be argued that the allegory of the Song of Songs has affected the masculinity of the church ever since. The first church father who dealt with the Song of Songs in a questionable way was Origen.

The way the Song of Songs jumps off the page, it is a passionately intimate dialogue between a lover and his beloved. Interpretations vary drastically as to who the lover and beloved are.²⁵ The road of interpretation Origen ended up taking was the allegorical.

One author explains how Origen viewed this book of the Bible. "In his prologue to his commentary, Origen proposes two distinct but complementary approaches to the Song: either we take the beloved as the soul of the bridegroom made in the image of the Word of God, or as the church which the Word has redeemed, or both. These two become the standard approaches within the tradition."²⁶ In other words, Origen didn't want the reader to think about marriage, sex, and intimacy at all, at least between a human man and woman, which is the subject the author appears to be writing about. Instead, he wanted the reader to understand the beloved to be Jesus or the Church of Jesus, or both, which means that he essentially stripped sex out of the

²⁵ Should the Song of Songs be stripped of any sexual meaning, should it be interpreted strictly as a picture of Christian marriage, or should it be some combination of the two? This would be an excellent topic for further study. John Brug lists the most common ways this book has been interpreted throughout the history of the church on page 13 of his commentary. John Brug, *Song of Songs*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 13.

²⁶ F.B.A. Asiedu, "The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 2001: 299-317.

Song of Songs, despite its use of some of the most graphic sexual language in the entire Bible. Some suggest that Origen performed the same operation on this book of the Bible that he had performed on himself: emasculation.²⁷

A big problem with saying that the Song of Songs cannot be talking about human sexuality is that the graphic language has to be awkwardly explained or left unexplained when applied to God and the Church. Here is the conundrum: the words are clearly sexual in nature, but Origen and others would have the Christian reading them not think about marriage, intimacy, or sex, even when appropriate to do so, but would rather have the Christian apply the sexually-charged words to the relationship between God and his church, still without thinking about sex. One might think that a person with such a view would talk very little about the book, but the Song of Songs seemed to be one of Origen's favorite topics to write about.²⁸

This approach did not end with Origen. Ambrose followed closely in his footsteps. "Ambrose often adapts the erotic imagery of the Song to describe the individual soul's ascent to God."²⁹ It seems that he took the interpretation one step further than Origen. Instead of only saying that the Song of Songs is about Christ and the Church, he said that it is about Christ and the Christian. With a pastoral heart, he wanted new converts to consider themselves betrothed, married, to Christ. He used the Song of Songs to demonstrate what this union was like: a close and mysterious one. His followers came to view the entire Christian faith as a mystery.³⁰ Here is one example of how he used the Songs when referring to the baptisms of the new converts.

And Christ on seeing his church in pure vestments beholds pure souls washed in the waters of regeneration and says to her 'Behold, thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair, thy eyes are as a dove's.' At the same time, 'God the Word,' says Ambrose, 'is able to speak to the Church in the passionate language of the lover: Why art thou made beautiful and sweet, O love, in thy delights? Thy stature has become like the palm, and thy breasts as clusters of grapes (Song of Songs 7:6,7, 13). The Church responds in the words of Song of Songs 8:1,2: Who shall give thee to me, my brother, sucking the breasts of my mother? I shall find thee without and shall kiss thee, and no one shall despise me. I shall take hold of thee and bring thee into my mother's house, and into the secret place of her who conceived me. You will teach me there.'³¹

²⁷ Origen castrated himself. One educated theory as to why he did so is that he wanted to avoid any rumors of inappropriate behavior because he was teaching women.

²⁸ Brug, 15. Origen wrote ten volumes on the allegorical interpretation of the Song.

²⁹ Asiedu, 300.

³⁰ Asiedu, 301.

³¹ Asiedu, 302-303.

There is extreme awkwardness when trying to apply that kind of intimate, sexually charged language to the relationship between Jesus and his people, which includes men. Even if a woman is reading this, why should she be thinking of Jesus in such an uncomfortable, even inappropriate way?

Nevertheless, an allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs has had a longstanding acceptance in the Christian church, especially among Lutherans.³² Why has such an interpretation dominated for so long? Take into consideration that the Second Council of Constantinople condemned the literal approach to interpreting the Song of Songs in 533.³³ Here is an additional explanation. “The weight of tradition against the sexual interpretation is impressive. But it must be remembered that the allegorical interpretation established its dominance during the centuries when human sexuality was depreciated and celibacy was exalted. The Song was a favorite book of the ascetics and monastics, but their commentaries cleansed the Song of every reference to real human sexuality.”³⁴ So, not only did the church officially speak against the literal, sexual interpretation of the Song of Songs, but celibacy was seen as a better route to go for the Christian man during a long period of the church’s history.³⁵ It is possible that these factors could have had such an impact on the church at large that even Lutherans have historically interpreted the Song of Songs allegorically.

Origen and Ambrose’s impact did not go away. Bernard of Clairvaux brought it front and center again during the Middle Ages.³⁶ He even resolved to become a monk after having an arousing experience in which he exchanged admiring glances with a young lady and promptly dunked himself in an icy pond until the feelings subsided.³⁷ Afterwards, Bernard wholeheartedly embraced the monastic life and exchanged the possibility of a natural relationship with a woman for an odd relationship with God, which he spells out in his devotional works on the Song of Songs. What was especially peculiar about his way of explaining the Song of Songs was that he made sure that people realized he was equating the “beloved” to the individual Christian. This

³² This is also true in Judaism. The Targum and many Jewish commentators feel the same way.

³³ Interest in the literal interpretation resurfaced again in the 18th century. Brug, 14.

³⁴ Brug, 15.

³⁵ The view that celibacy is a better, more God-pleasing way has still not left the church. Although, it is interesting to note that according to a Univision Poll of 12 countries in 2014, 50% of all Roman Catholics surveyed wanted priests to be allowed to get married. feeds.univision.com/openpage/2014-02-06/la-voz-del-pueblo-portada-en

³⁶ He was a French abbot and member of the Cistercian Order. He lived from 1090-1153.

³⁷ Brug, 15. 1 Corinthians 7:9 comes to mind here, “it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

way of talking about God and the Christian was very appealing to some women at the time.³⁸ The way he explained the Song of Songs carried over into the way he pastored those under his care. “He referred to himself as ‘a woman’ and advised his monks to be ‘mothers’—to ‘let your bosoms expand with milk, not swell with passion.’”

This type of metaphor did not occur in historical isolation. The Puritans in America during the 17th century continued to use this uncomfortable type of language when talking about the relationship between God and man.³⁹ Cotton Mather⁴⁰ spoke this way, “Our Savior does marry himself unto the Church in general, but he does also marry himself to every individual believer.”⁴¹ Thomas Shepard⁴² said that “all church members are and must be visible saints...virgins espoused to Christ.”⁴³ And in the 18th century, Thomas Foxcroft⁴⁴ spoke of the grave as a happy place in which “the Saints shall be impregnated” and from which they would arise “as some happy Bride from her Bed of Perfumes, call’d up to meet her royal Bridegroom.”⁴⁵ Even Promise Keepers (an organization launched in the 1990’s to reengage men for Christianity) spoke to men in a feminine way, “we were created to be in a love affair with Jesus” and “Scripture tells us the only way to please God is to be passionately in love with Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ Podles makes an interesting guess at why all this romantic language turns men off to church, “Bridal language used to describe a Christian’s relationship with God has homosexual overtones to many men, unless they engage in mental gymnastics and try to think of themselves as women.”⁴⁷ What began as allegory during the time of Origen in the 3rd century A.D. has influenced the way some Christians have talked about their relationship with God ever since.

A well-meaning Christian might object and interject that the Bible talks about Christ’s love for his church in other places. In Ephesians 5, when Paul is talking about human marriage, he interjects, “This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”⁴⁸ In Revelation 19, John writes, “the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself

³⁸ Podles, 103.

³⁹ Podles, 116.

⁴⁰ A 17th and 18th century Puritan minister

⁴¹ Podles, 116.

⁴² American Puritan minister and a significant figure in early colonial New England.

⁴³ Podles, 116.

⁴⁴ A Puritan minister who pastored First Congregational Church in Boston for more than 50 years.

⁴⁵ Podles, 116.

⁴⁶ Podles, 117.

⁴⁷ Podles, 119.

⁴⁸ Ephesians 5:32

ready,”⁴⁹ clearly referring to the whole Christian church as the bride. “Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.”⁵⁰ The church is also called “the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”⁵¹ Then what is the matter with the way Origen, Ambrose, and Bernard of Clairvaux explain the Song of Songs? None of these passages take the illustration of marriage to the extremes that those men did. And while the Song of Songs does not specifically refer to Christ and the church, these passages and their context actually do. Even Augustine, another church father who allegorized, was uncomfortable with Ambrose’s erotic use of the Songs. “Augustine does not show any willingness to use the Song as an elaborate template in describing the love of God and the individual soul in the way that Ambrose does.”⁵²

After considering Origen, Ambrose, and Bernard of Clairvaux, there seems to be a relationship between the messy web of asceticism, celibacy, monasticism, and the allegory of the Song of Songs. As a result, the Song of Songs is stripped of its natural, sexual meaning, and an awkward, uncomfortable meaning takes its place. Not only are they allegorizing, but they are taking one of the most sexually explicit sections of the Bible and are applying it in disturbing ways to the relationship between God and man. They are saying things about that relationship that are said nowhere else in Scripture.

Why did they talk that way about the Christian faith? Were they searching for the intimacy they had decided to stay away from? Did they truly have the gift of celibacy that Paul speaks about, or would they have done far less damage to the church as married men?⁵³ We may never know. All we have are the commentaries and devotionals they wrote that leave many of us with the kind of discomfort that it seems Augustine had with the allegorical approach to the Song of Songs. Should Christians really talk about themselves and God like that? Wouldn’t it be far better to apply these words to marriages, where that kind of language is appropriate and even helpful? It seems as though something was horribly amiss in their understanding of God’s great blessings of marriage, marital intimacy, and marital sex.

Why does the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs matter in a discussion about men and church? This goes back to “perception”. The precedent that these monastic Bible interpreters set could have affected how people throughout the ages have thought about

⁴⁹ Revelation 19:7

⁵⁰ Revelation 19:8

⁵¹ Revelation 21:9

⁵² Asiedu, 317.

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 7:7

Christianity. When similar language appears in the way some Christians today talk about how they relate to God, people could perceive Christianity as something very strange and irrelevant. The precedent that the monastic Bible interpreters set could also have affected how people think Christians view sex. There is a common perception that Christians view sex as something dirty. Why would men want to be a part of a religion that talks in strange ways about God and makes sex into something dirty? Why would men want to be part of a religion that applies sexual language to a relationship with God? In this case, perceptions people have about Christianity do not accurately represent true, biblical Christianity. But perceptions do represent the message that some Christians, including some early church fathers, have promoted intentionally or without a full realization of the implications.

The gap begins and grows

Some might wonder when women started to eclipse men in church attendance. Scholars like Leon Podles suggest that participation remained quite equal up until the 13th century.⁵⁴ This was also the time period when more women than men were inducted into sainthood in the medieval church's practice of the veneration of saints.⁵⁵ The proportion of female anchorites also increased during this time.⁵⁶ What we cannot know for sure is exactly what caused the shift towards a higher number of females.⁵⁷ Along with what has already been said about Bernard of Clairvaux, Leon Podles suggests another movement in the Middle Ages that was related to the growing gender gap.

There was a women's movement that took place around the 12th and 13th centuries. Women started to enter the religious orders and become involved in churchly activities more than ever before. Remember that the church of this time emphasized monasticism and church involvement much more than they emphasized the Christian life in the home and in society, which is one emphasis that the Reformation restored.⁵⁸ The idea was portrayed that these men were pursuing a "better" way to please God. Some orders, like the Cistercians, were extremely

⁵⁴ Podles, 102.

⁵⁵ Podles, 109

⁵⁶ Podles, 109.

⁵⁷ Male mortality in almost every society is higher than female mortality. Were there just more females than males in the population at the time? Were men off at war instead of in the church? There could be any number of explanations for why it seems that more women started attending church than men in the 13th century. That is why it will not be stated that "here are the exact reasons why male attendance went down." Rather, possible explanations will be given.

⁵⁸ Luther often spoke of this emphasis on the faithful Christian life in the home and society as "vocation."

opposed to this influx of women into the religious orders.⁵⁹ But their attempts to bar their doors were futile. The shift had taken place and women rolled into the religious orders like a tidal wave.

There are a few possible causes to consider that could be responsible for this great influx of women into the religious orders. There were many single women due to a high rate of male mortality and women could move around more easily than ever before.⁶⁰ Perhaps the greatest motivator of all, though, was how much the Middle Age church pushed the monastic life and church involvement as superior to all others ways of living. It seems that women were simply trying to be the best Christians they could be according to the definition of “Christian” that the church was projecting at the time.

Scholasticism’s impact

The next topic to consider is what role Scholasticism could have played in the growing gender gap between men and women in the 12th and 13th centuries. “The Scholastics thought according to the rules of logic and prayed according to the rules of faith, which was more and more a matter of the heart and emotions rather than the mind. Spirituality was thenceforth divorced from academic theology.”⁶¹ Theology in scholastic circles became much more of a science by copying the Aristotelian model of speculation and deduction.⁶² The academic side of faith was at times divorced from the spiritual side of faith. Either a person was interested in the academic side of theology or the emotional side of spirituality, or both. But what about those people who were neither drawn to academics or to the emotional side of spirituality? Was there a place for them in the church? Was Christianity really for them? Did they have to become more academic or more emotional to be Christians? Is this a perception that the church gives off in our day, that you need to be either an academic or an emotional person to be a good Christian? If it is, someone could understand why some men, and women for that matter, are not drawn to Christianity if they lack either of these interests or temperaments.

Even within conservative churches where the Bible is accepted as the actual Word of God, the Christian faith could be presented almost unilaterally in an academic way on the one hand or an emotional way on the other. When the Christian faith in Bible classes and Catechism

⁵⁹ Podles, 108-109.

⁶⁰ Podles, 108.

⁶¹ Podles, 110.

⁶² Podles, 111.

classes is taught primarily as doctrinal facts and terms with no application to a person's every day walk, this could be a modern version of Scholasticism.

But, some churches may realize this danger and overcorrect in the other direction and teach little or no doctrinal concepts or terms and may solely emphasize the emotional side of the Christian faith. There will certainly be people who feel all sorts of emotions when praying or worshipping and who maybe even claim to feel close to God at times. There may be other people who rarely feel this way. When the emotional side of faith is overemphasized, people start looking for their certainty in personal, subjective feelings, and their faith has essentially turned inward upon itself for certainty. This is "faith in faith", instead of being faith in "the Rock who is greater than I."⁶³ Modern Christianity could still be dealing with the same divisions that Scholasticism introduced in the Middle Ages; a division between the academic and emotional sides of faith.

Perception

The longstanding TV show "The Simpsons" portrays Ned Flanders, Homer's Christian neighbor. He is the evangelical known most intimately to non-evangelicals.⁶⁴ He is an odd, superstitious fellow who is an object of satire in nearly every show. Ned is just one of many "Christian" caricatures in the media that gives people a perception of Christianity. How many people's perceptions of Christianity might be a result of how the media portrays Christians? In a similar way, perceptions of Christianity have been developed throughout history.

The perception that church is not all that manly of an activity has been rather dominant ever since the shift that occurred in the 12th and 13th centuries. This perception came over to America with the Puritans, it is reflected by the gender gap in almost every nominally Christian denomination, and it appears to be sticking around. Even Masonry has claimed that the lodge was for men, the church for women.⁶⁵ Substitute any number of places, activities, or the lack thereof for Masonry, and the church will still be for women, or at least many people think of it that way.

This is a brief sampling of some of the historical developments and factors that have possibly led to a lower percentage of men in church today, or at least to the perception of many that church is a more suitable place for women and children than for men. How can the church

⁶³ Psalm 61:2

⁶⁴ Mark I. Pinsky, "Blessed Ned of Springfield," *Christianity Today*, 2001.

⁶⁵ Podles, 175.

counteract these perceptions that may be a result of the kind of erotic language used to describe the Christian and their Savior, among numerous other candidate causes? That will be addressed in Chapter Four. But before potential solutions can be offered to reengage men, it is time to consider the mutations of barriers that stand in between men and God on the American church scene today.

Chapter 3-Man-made Barriers

“That’s my church.” He isn’t necessarily talking about a community of people that gather around the sacred Scriptures on a weekly basis. But he could be talking about watching the sun rise from the front stern of his new boat as the fog floats above the water early on a Sunday morning. He may be talking about one of the enormous stadiums where 70,000 plus people are cheering for their favorite team, the top of a mountain he just climbed, or coaching his kid in a club league. He could even be talking about his gym, the place he feels he can be himself and be real with people. Ask men what they would really like to be doing on a Sunday morning, and if they are honest, you might get these answers and a whole lot more.

It is reality that there are actually men doing these things and a whole lot else besides church on Sunday mornings. Why is all that more appealing than the spiritual, eternal treasures God gives us where two or three come together? Let that be the question we ask as we consider the barriers that separate men from church. And instead of seeing this as an “Us versus Them” kind of exercise, we will strive to be honest about how many of these used to stand in between us and church in our youth, which ones still do today, and which ones might try to stand in our way sometime soon.

In Old Testament times, God chose Israel to represent him to the world. It would be a fanciful misrepresentation of Old Testament history to say that they did a good job at that. It would be more accurate to say that they were so bad at it that God was actually *mis*represented to the world because of how they often bought into the lifestyles of the cultures around them. In New Testament times, God calls his people “a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.”⁶⁶ He also encourages us to live such good lives among the pagans that they may glorify our Father in heaven.⁶⁷ But how often do we misrepresent God, just as Israel did,

⁶⁶ 1 Peter 2:9

⁶⁷ 1 Peter 2:12

and how often are we actually the ones putting up barriers against both Christians and those outside the church? The first barriers we will consider are the barriers the church itself puts up against men.

Barriers the church puts up against men

Sarah Hale, an influential American writer in the 1700-1800s, made a stunning statement about how men could improve their situation and their world. “To bring about true Christian civilization...the men must become more like women and the women more like angels.”⁶⁸ No church in America would ever say this today. But could American Christianity be preaching this sermon without words in the way they relate to men sometimes?

An overemphasis on Jesus’ gentle side is one possible barrier that might make men check their testosterone at the church door. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, the Word made flesh⁶⁹ and the very Son of God. The church’s primary job is to declare the praises of the entire Jesus, who he is and what he did, to our desperately dying world. But do people always get the versatile Jesus from the church, or just one facet of his personality? Do pastors apologize for how Jesus acted when he cleared out the temple courts (on two occasions, nonetheless),⁷⁰ or do they point to his intense zeal for his Father’s house instead?⁷¹ Do they bring out how confrontational he could be with the religious leaders and even his disciples at times because he cared about them and love is tough? Is Lent about feeling sorry for Jesus, the “victim”, and is Good Friday about mourning his death, or is the church brought to its knees in repentance as they watch the heroic God-man stand between them and God’s wrath over their sin?

Consider depictions of Jesus in pictures and even on the movie screen. He has soft features and long, flowing hair. That image of Jesus speaks a thousand word sermon to men without saying a word. Those who have grown up in the church may not realize it because that is the way Jesus has always been portrayed visually, but it could still have an effect on how Christians think about Jesus. One author describes what has happened this way, “The church has very efficiently pared the claws of the lion of Judah, making him a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.”⁷²

One author reminds us of the bold, heroic side of Jesus.

⁶⁸ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 108.

⁶⁹ John 1:14

⁷⁰ John 2:12-25 gives the account of the first temple clearing. Mark 11:12-19 gives the account of the second.

⁷¹ John 2:17

⁷² John Eldridge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the secret of a man's soul*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2001), 26.

“He works with wood, commands the loyalty of dock workers. He is the Lord of hosts, the captain of Angel armies. And when Christ returns, he is at the head of a dreadful company, mounted on a white horse, with a double-edged sword, his robe dipped in blood (Rev. 19). Now that sounds a lot more like William Wallace than it does mother Teresa. No question about it, there is something fierce in the heart of God.”⁷³

At the same time, Jesus displays perfect gentleness and compassion. He weeps at Lazarus’ grave.⁷⁴ He welcomes the little children.⁷⁵ He is truly the complete person, the perfect man. All sides of him beg to be proclaimed.

Another barrier could be the language used to speak about God today. God in general is spoken of in generic and even un-masculine ways. Some translations and even baptismal formulas have substituted Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are even churches in our country that have been so influenced by feminism that they have started to refer to God in a way that the grammar in the Scriptures never allows: as a female.

Another topic that comes up when thinking about how the Christian God is portrayed is Christian radio and television programming. These media platforms give Christianity the potential to have a broad and far-reaching impact. Yet, here in this arena too, female listeners outnumber male listeners 63% to 37%.⁷⁶ Barna research has found that women are the “primary users of all forms of Christian media” and that the older the woman, the more likely she is to watch.”⁷⁷

Due to their largely female audience, K-Love, American’s largest Christian music radio network, “targets its programming at eighteen to forty-five-year-old females” and “two-thirds of K-Love listeners are women.”⁷⁸ With this in mind, someone might wonder if the higher percentage of female listeners is due to the female-targeted programming or if the female-targeted programming is a reaction to the likelihood of there being a larger number of female listeners. Both of those possibilities could be true. Media platforms like this are known for doing their research to stay on the air and if stations like K-Love are reading the same surveys and research that we have found, there is no surprise why they are expecting a female-majority

⁷³ Eldridge, 29.

⁷⁴ John 11:35

⁷⁵ Matthew 19:13

⁷⁶ Eldridge, 66. He cites “The Explosion of Christian Music,” *Radio & Records*, 19 April 2002, 46.

⁷⁷ Eldridge, 66. Barna Research Online, “Christian mass Media Reach More Adults with the Christian Message than Do Churches,” July 2, 2002, www.barna.org.

⁷⁸ Eldridge, 66.

audience. By creating content that appeals to that type of audience, it is no wonder why their gap in listeners is female-heavy. Is it possible that this type of a cycle not only exists in radio and television, but in some local congregations as well?

Christian media outlets merely reflect the gender ratios found in American Christianity at large. Then why talk about this? This issue of a shortage of men in the church does not exist in isolation. It is an all-pervasive epidemic that affects nearly all of Christianity in this country in some way. While television and radio efforts do what they know how to do and reach people with a message that sounds biblical, some of their efforts could actually be repulsive to men.

Could it also be that men who consider themselves Christians see the Christian faith as little else than simply believing in Jesus as Savior without seeing the implications that has on their worldview and their life? We need to do more than simply convey the facts. We need to help people, as the Scriptures do, see how God's working in history changes the way Christians think and live on Monday.

These barriers are an introduction to the many ways that the church has struggled to reach and engage men. Once a person recognizes a few, it is easier to spot them everywhere, to be careful not to add to them and to deal with the ones that are already in place. Still, these are merely symptoms of a much worse barrier that will be discussed later. But, before the core issue is discussed, there is another category of symptomatic barriers to consider.

Barriers men put up against the church

David Murrow, who has made it his life's work to understand the gender gap in American Christianity, gives some thoughts to how some men view church. "Church involvement is good for men. But since when do men do what's good for them? Men regard churchgoing like a prostate exam: it's something that can save their lives, but it's so unpleasant and invasive, they put it off. Others see the worship service as their weekly dose of religion, a bitter elixir they must swallow to remain healthy, but not something to look forward to."⁷⁹ This anecdote sends us down an endless minefield of barriers that men put up against the church.

All of the barriers that follow could be put under the heading of Proverbs 16:25, "There is a way that seems right to a man but in the end it leads to death."

Think of the Old Testament men of Israel. At times, they married outside of their nation, which God forbade for the very good reason of protecting them from paganism, unbelief, and

⁷⁹ Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, 23.

eternal death. But they went ahead and did it anyways and fell for foreign women and the idols of those women. Have men fallen for idols today? Even a Christian man with half a conscience and a good honest look at his life would probably admit that idols fight for his loyalty at every corner.

What idols have men fallen for today that act as barriers between them and God? At some point, any man, already a Christian or unconverted, has probably almost or totally convinced himself that any number of the following idols is to be desired more than anything else. Men have replaced Christianity with other religions. Many of them on the American scene are not official world religions. Sex has become the religion of much of the Western world, and usually not the kind of sex the Song of Songs actually promotes between husband and wife. Moreover, men are distracted by career setbacks and career success, family deterioration and family obsession, clean leisure activities and culturally frowned upon entertainment, laziness and ambition, pleasure and inaction, violence and passivity, sports, hobbies, and yes, even non-profits!

Anything can become an idol for a man when it consumes him and takes his eyes off the true God. He carries some idols in his back pocket or his briefcase. He carries others on his shoulders. “Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles.”⁸⁰ Men worship idols that they must carry instead of worshipping the God who wants to carry them from spiritual death to eternal life.

Many a Christian or unconverted man has had addictions that serve as barriers between him and church, between him and God. Here is how one man defines an addiction,

“For years all my daily energy was spent trying to beat the trials in my life and arrange for a little pleasure. My weeks were wasted away either striving or indulging. I was a mercenary. A mercenary fights for pay, for his own benefit; his life is devoted to himself. ‘The quality of a true warrior,’ says Bly, ‘is that he is in service to a purpose greater than himself; that is to a transcendent cause.’”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Isaiah 46:6,7.

⁸¹ Eldridge, 142.

It is enough to say that unhealthy addictions that control men are not limited to drugs, alcohol and pornography. It is also enough to say that addictions are barriers both for those who would not step foot in a church and for those who attend with frequency. Some realize they are consumed by idols and are bothered by it and confess it to their God week in and week out, even day after day. Others never realize it and go blindly towards the grave.

The kind of father a man had could be a barrier between him and church. Many a man has grown up without a father or with a father who was not very active in his life. But there are also men who had very caring, involved fathers who took an extremely active role in their lives. Still, if that father did not attend church, studies, like the one referenced earlier from Switzerland, show that the sons most likely will not either. Another conclusion from the study done in Switzerland that was discussed in Chapter One is that if Dad goes to church, children are twenty-two times more likely to become lifelong churchgoers.⁸² Certainly, many men are still in church despite their upbringing. But the lack of a church-going father can be an enormous hurdle for a man to overcome.

It is not as if the men of the Bible always got it right either. In fact, they failed in many of the ways the church fails today. Consider three men of the Bible and how they went wrong with their sons. David failed to discipline his son Absalom and his son got out of control and even started a civil war against his father.⁸³ Eli, the high priest, seemed more concerned about his sons' faith after they were dead than when they were alive.⁸⁴ Isaac favored one son more than the other.⁸⁵ One of the reasons God recorded the failures of these men is so that we can learn from them, confess our failures, and correct them.

Some men in the church today have let the next generation down in these ways and more. Some fathers and leaders in the church have fallen into horrible public sins and have caused much confusion for the next generation about why church is actually important if some of the most prevalent members do horrible things that many unbelievers would not do. Some fathers have dumped the instruction of their sons' faith off on other people without bringing it up much or at all in the home. Fathers have let their sons down as they go off to college by failing to set a good example of regular church attendance or by failing to discuss how their son will continue to

⁸² David Murrow, "In spiritual matters, kids take their cues from Dad," *Touchstone*, 2005.

⁸³ 2 Samuel 13-15

⁸⁴ 1 Samuel 2-4

⁸⁵ Genesis 25:28

grow in his faith once he is far away from home. Do not underestimate the damage that fathers and male leaders of our churches can have on the next generation's faith. Do not underestimate the impact that fathers and male leaders have on the next generation's faith, glory be to God.

What if a man is simply spending his Sundays recovering from a hard week and re-gearing for the next? He might finally have the chance to spend some time with the family or catch up on some non-profit work he's been doing or get away from the hectic world he lives in. Church may not be anywhere on a man's radar because the distractions are endless! There is so much else to get done, so much else to enjoy, so much else that could benefit him, or even so many projects that could benefit others! And the truth is that there are many reasonable, even wise, ways to spend a Sunday. But after the relaxation, enjoyment, self-improvement or charity work is done, a man is still missing something. As great as these all are, they are all focused on the here and the now and not the eternal. A Sunday of getting away or spending time with family or doing some charity work will not show a man who he really is, a lost and condemned creature who has been purchased and won back by his champion on the cross.

Perhaps this division of barriers the church puts up and barriers men put up has been simplistic. The barriers could be nuanced even further; barriers a man's family or upbringing puts up against church. And after a closer look, many of these barriers could be classified not so much as barriers men put up against the church, but barriers men put up against God. That brings us full circle and we see that, while it is wise to recognize the variety of barriers and who or what is constructing each barrier, there is much more than meets the eye to the dark fortresses that surround the hearts of men.

The barrier of barriers

All of these barriers are symptoms of a much deeper, darker problem. Recall how our forefather Adam was involved in turning the world upside down. Certainly, he took the fruit from Eve and ate it as well. But one preposition in the Hebrew that equals two words in English tells us where he was in relation to Eve when the serpent was spinning his lies and leading her down the road to death; he was "with her".⁸⁶ Adam, her husband, the one whose rib God used to form "woman", the one who was taken out of man, was right there with his wife. His silence and passivity contributed to the fall into sin. Taking the fruit into his mouth was simply confirming what he had already done. He had already failed his wife and his Creator by doing nothing.

⁸⁶ Genesis 3:6

One chapter later in Genesis, we see the opposite of male passivity: male brutality. Cain took matters into his own hands and killed his brother out of jealousy and hatred, and effectively split his family up. Now he and his descendants would be separated from their greater family tree all because he gave into the sin that was creeping at his door.

When they are boiled down, many of the barriers men put up against church are about men staying away because they are turned off by the church, they are indifferent or they are distracted. This is what much of the literature and research in the bibliography has dealt with. While these resources have been helpful, many of their conclusions only scratch the surface.

There is another cause. This is not obvious to us by nature, since this is a hard truth to accept, but the Scriptures reveal it and John Eldridge, an author who targets Christian men with his books, sums it up well, “God wouldn’t want us to overlook the greatest barrier of them all: the sinful nature. The sinful nature is hostile to God. The Christian who wants to reach out to others must always be aware of this nature that still resides in him or her and in the people they intend to reach. Part of the sinful nature is that it wants the easiest way out.”⁸⁷ He later adds that, “traitors occupy our own hearts, ready to side with every temptation and to surrender to them all.”⁸⁸

Men are staying away from God because they are so entangled in their sinful ways of life that they do not want to be brought into the light to have the darkness of their hearts exposed.⁸⁹ Many of the barriers mentioned are symptomatic manifestations of this larger epidemic. It is helpful to consider the symptoms the way we did because those are smoke screens that prevent men from seeing the gospel. Do not be mistaken though. Men and women have much more than a smoke screen clouding their eyes to the truth. Men and women are born blind and even hostile to the truth of God’s grace, the very grace that would draw their hearts and minds closer to God.

This is the deeper problem. It must be understood from Scripture’s diagnosis of the total wickedness of man and woman by nature. This is the core issue and can only be addressed with the Word that God promises will not return to him empty.⁹⁰ No matter how many solutions someone might try from Chapter Four or make up on their own, the double-edged sword of the Spirit, the messages of sin and grace, the gospel that is the power for salvation, must be applied

⁸⁷ Eldridge, 143.

⁸⁸ Eldridge, 143.

⁸⁹ John 3:20

⁹⁰ Isaiah 55:11

to men somehow, somehow in each situation to come. We want to recognize and deal with whichever symptomatic barriers are present and then get to what men and women really need, Christ crucified for the forgiveness of their sins. If we treat the barriers as symptoms and not as the core problem, we will be able to ultimately address the wickedness of the human heart and the separation of that human being from God, just as we were once separated from God and dead in our transgressions. We recognize the barriers and work through them and around them and do our best to apply God's Word to each situation, which is also our situation by nature. We pray for God's Spirit to convince them of their wickedness, their need for a Savior, and comfort them with the certainty that God has provided just that.

Realize what we are up against because what we are up against is what every man is up against. His greatest enemy is himself. That is why we pray for something so bizarre and so necessary in the Lord's Prayer, "Deliver us from evil." Part of that prayer is wrestling with God to deliver us from ourselves and the evil inside that seeks to kill our faith and throw us into the everlasting fire. We pray that line with all fear and trembling because even the smallest of faiths can trust that God will do what he has promised. That same God can overcome all of these barriers and any others left unmentioned. And one way he does that is by equipping his church to overcome them, as we will see in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4-Reach men

Some suggest that the 19th century temperance movement in America was a joint effort by women and their pastors to work together against men who were harming their women and children by their over-indulgence in alcohol.⁹¹ There could certainly be some truth in this assertion. But the very mention of such a theory is a reminder to us of how men have substituted all sorts of things that they think are masculine for true, godly masculinity. Instead of doing what God designed them to do, men have exchanged their God-given roles as fathers, husbands, leaders, providers, patriarchs, and protectors, for their own man-made roles.⁹²

So is it either be a Christian or be a man? That seems to be the choice some men are convinced that Christianity presents them with. But, consider what Jesus did for Paul. He converted one of his most violent and persistent enemies. Paul went on to immerse himself in the Christian faith for three years in Arabia before being commissioned with a team to traverse the

⁹¹ Podles, 32.

⁹² This is not intended to be an exhaustive, dogmatic list of men's roles.

globe and preach Christ crucified and raised for our justification. Along the way on his mission, he is beaten with rods three times, pelted with stones, thrice shipwrecked, and he spends a night and a day in the open sea.⁹³ At times, he takes it into his own God-given man-hands to make enough money to support him and his mission crew by making tents, and he connects with people like Aquilla and Priscilla, who worked in the same trade. If that is not masculine, adventurous, challenging, thrilling, difficult, horrendous and incredible all at the same time, what is? Masculinity and Christianity are compatible. All things can be made captive and obedient to Christ.⁹⁴

Podles makes this bold assertion, “Christianity has within it the resources that allow it to appeal to men, to show that not only will Christianity not undermine their masculinity, but it will also fulfill and perfect it.” And as Robbie Lewis says, ““You cannot feminize the church and keep the men, and you cannot keep the children if you do not keep the men.”⁹⁵ Now is the time to discover and utilize those resources that will engage men, because if the church is going to continue to reach the world, the church must reach the men of this world. 1 Chronicles 12:32 tells us that the “tribe of Issachar consisted of men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” We must understand our times, make plans, and actually implement them, because God calls Christian men to act and not just to write about it or talk about it.

Paul had an academic, genius brain that worked out his faith with dirty hands and a lot of sweat. Faith is a matter of the head and a matter of the heart. Faith is what is believed and what is done as a result of what Jesus has done. Using the stories of the men given in Scripture is one way to reengage men.

Consider one author’s assessment of how Luther reacted to the emasculated spirituality of the Middle Ages,

“The believer is never at rest, but is in incessant combat against the “flesh,” the “world,” the “devil.” These three powers are opposed to God and his word. It is not always possible to distinguish them at the level of their action on Christians. The evocation of the devil by Luther is something more than a simple medieval heritage. If he spoke of the devil so often (and more deeply than was done in the Middle Ages), it is because he understood the whole of the history of the world as a battle of demonic power against God the creator and redeemer. Evil is not simply moral or a weakness of people, but

⁹³ 2 Corinthians 11:25

⁹⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:5

⁹⁵ Robbie Lewis, "The Truth About Men and Church," *Touchstone*, 2003.

transpersonal, bound to that mysterious power which Luther called, with the tradition, Satan or devil.”⁹⁶

Rather than soften the Christian religion, Lutherans talk about the realities of life and how God equips men to deal with them. What if we talked the way Luther did about public ministry and Christian service? “How much more should you rejoice if you have raised a son for this office of preaching in which you are sure that he serves God so gloriously, helps men so generously, and smites the devil in such knightly fashion? You have made of your son such a true and excellent sacrifice to God that the very angels must look upon it as a splendid miracle.”⁹⁷

The church’s definition of the Christian life must be thorough. The fruits of faith that a Christian does flow from a forgiven, renewed and thankful attitude and those fruits are different and various for each person. A church certainly needs to emphasize a man’s role as husband, father, and friend. But only talking about these relational areas of a man’s life could alienate those who are not fathers or husbands. What about discussing topics such as careers, success, friendship, wealth and hobbies and talking about the cautions in each of those areas, but the ways a Christian man could advance God’s kingdom in those areas of his life? Talking about those subjects and how a Christian might have success and accomplishments while emphasizing the relationships in all the areas of his life could be extremely practical for men.

Consider the opposite approach to the inch-deep Christianity found in popular Christian media outlets such as radio and television. Media outreach efforts like Issues Etc. and Worldview Everlasting do not avoid doctrine and confrontation. Issues Etc.⁹⁸ is an internet radio broadcast that attempts to do exactly what its name suggests: address societal, ecclesiastical, and personal issues with Scripture alone. Instead of avoiding confrontation, this program seeks it out as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. Worldview Everlasting⁹⁹ is a Lutheran website that uses audio and visual media to proclaim the Gospel clearly by bringing up teachings of other American churches and theology and comparing them with Scripture. Instead of backing down from confrontation and preaching a watered-down message, these programs confront the

⁹⁶ Podles, 152.

⁹⁷ David Peter, "A Timely Word from Luther on Recruiting Young Men for Pastoral Ministry," *Concordia Journal*, 2014: 15-19.

⁹⁸ A parasynodical organization of LCMS. Past shows are available for listening around the clock. Issuesetc.org.

⁹⁹ A website maintained by LCMS pastors that is “Committed to knowing nothing but Christ, and Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins... and wondering why the Church in America has forgotten.” worldvieweverlasting.com

audience and make a case for Christ. This is the kind of strategy Jesus used when he sent out the 72. Paul also used this kind of strategy by going to the Jewish synagogues right off the bat when entering a new town. He talked to people who had some background in theology and brought the Gospel and its implications up against what they had been brought up with. Is it possible that the church is leaning towards non-confrontation in its evangelism methods? There's middle ground between being too confrontational and not confrontational enough. Jesus words come to mind, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes, as innocent as doves."¹⁰⁰

So can we just talk about sports all the time in church or have "Wild Game Dinners"? Absolutely, if those are the kinds of men we are ministering to and if we are not faking it. But realize that not all men will be intrigued by these things. Engaging men is not only about talking about manly sounding stuff, but it is about explicitly referring to the difficulties that men face.¹⁰¹ Is it fair enough to say, just be real with men? Do not "sugar-coat" the real challenges of life. Do not give false, fake optimism or hope. Speak as God does to the challenging topics of life. Talk about the things 21st century men struggle with, discuss controversial subjects that men are bothered by or confused about and consider with them what God says and what God is doing about it all. Get in the ring with men and wrestle with God about these topics, as Abraham bargained with God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah¹⁰² and as Jacob wrestled with the pre-incarnate Christ.¹⁰³

In Genesis 2:15, God put man in the Garden to work it and take care of it, so that it could be his home base for filling the earth, subduing it and ruling over the creation. Help men to see the fields of responsibility and influence God has given to each of them. Help them to see that work is not just about getting a paycheck or grinding it out, but that "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men!"¹⁰⁴

Portray the triumphant Jesus of Revelation 19 whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose armies follow him as he rides on the white steed, armed with a sharp sword, and with a tattoo on his thigh that reads, "King of Kings and LORD of LORDS." Also, portray the Jesus who let the little children come to him. Talk about the Jesus who kicked the business-people out of the

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 10:16

¹⁰¹ Podles, 200.

¹⁰² Genesis 18:16-33

¹⁰³ Genesis 32:22-32

¹⁰⁴ Colossians 3:23

temple courts and talk about why he did it, and also talk about why he was born of a virgin and gave up the full use of his divine powers. Here is another way to talk about the birth of Jesus, “Yancey calls the birth of Christ the Great Invasion ‘a daring raid by the ruler of the forces of good into the universe’s seat of evil.’ Spiritually speaking, this is no silent night. It is D-day.”¹⁰⁵ In order to do all this, the pastor needs to know the full picture of Jesus and the pastor needs to know men, which means he must know himself and he must get to know men from all the classes and backgrounds within his area.

Jesus did not talk about the Christian life as an endless walk through fields of flowers and butterflies. He talked about the intense opposition his disciples would face.¹⁰⁶ They would be like sheep among wolves. They would be put on trial and flogged. But they would be given the words to say by the Spirit and they would not fall outside of the Father’s care, since even the very hairs on their head were known to their Father. This is the same world we live in today. We have the same promises from Jesus that he gave his disciples. The church’s rhetoric today must challenge the world we live in and the opposition we will face, as Jesus’ rhetoric did. The church’s rhetoric must be full of God-given promises, as Jesus’ rhetoric was.

It is also important to equip men to reach other men inside of their circles of influence, because no matter how hard the pastor tries, he is not going to be able to connect with each and every man who steps through the doors. Paul speaks about being the spiritual father of Timothy.¹⁰⁷ Men can have an enormous influence on other men as Paul did. Jesus met away from the crowds with his disciples. It is healthy for Christian men to work on projects together, to adventure together, and to dig into the Word together. That being said, always have a purpose in mind for each ministry you do with men.

There are some additional words of caution when reacting to the gender gap. Those in the church who realize the gender gap in American Christianity need to be cautious about extreme or surface-level solutions to the shortage of men in the church. Feminists have seen men fail their families, their communities, and their societies for too long. They have watched men do nothing and they have watched men get their way with brutality. They rightly notice a horrible problem about men: that some men are either entirely uninvolved or that men are involved in a brutal way. But their solutions have sadly made the problems even worse. When women seize the

¹⁰⁵ Eldridge, 169.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 10:16-30

¹⁰⁷ 1 Timothy 1:2

reigns, men become more committed to their lack of involvement because someone else is taking care of things or they become more fierce in their brutality because they have been challenged and they want to have it their way. Feminism does not provide long-term, effective solutions, nor biblical solutions, to male passivity or brutality.

An overreaction by the church to the gender gap could easily make Christianity look more like Islam. Islam has a male-majority, but their entire religion is based on “submission.” This submission is not motivated by respect, love and thankfulness for the one being submitted to. Rather, it is a submission out of fear and terror. This is how many Muslims relate to their God, who only makes demands and does not give freely as the God of the Bible does. This is also how many Muslim women relate to Muslim men: out of fear and terror.

That is not the point of Ephesians 5. Paul says, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” That last phrase is key. Paul implores wives to submit to the Lord of the Bible, not the Lord of Islam. The Lord of the Bible made all things very good, watched the apple of his eye choose death over life, and still, out of sheer, one-sided grace, directed the entire course of history to make sure that the “Serpent-crusher” could hang on a tree and be cursed in humanity’s place. That is the God to whom we submit. Paul says, wives, the same way as you submit to the Lord of grace and mercy, submit to your husbands. In the previous verse, Paul says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”¹⁰⁸ This applies to the way men and women, single or married, view and treat each other. And then he goes into what this looks like in a marriage, which includes ongoing self-sacrifice on the part of the husband for his wife.

Christianity must not hide these words from people out of fear or embarrassment. That would be submitting to men rather than to the Lord. What is there to be embarrassed about? The other alternatives are more embarrassing. In one alternative, men stay silent and passive and back down as they watch women work themselves into exhaustion. In the other alternative, men dominate and “lord it over” women by using intimidation, manipulation, and the like. Christians, this cannot be! God gives us better than that!

Conclusion-Reach men, reach God’s world

The data identifies that there is a significant gap between how many men and women are going to church in America. Studies may continue to churn out similar results for the remainder of our lives. Scholars will try to explain “why” by piecing together historical developments from

¹⁰⁸ Ephesians 5:21

now until Judgment Day. And yet, there will be disagreements and different theories as to what really has caused the gap. People will talk about symptomatic barriers, like playing golf on Sunday mornings, and the barrier of barriers, the sinful nature, and scratch their heads over what can be done about all this. Well-meaning Christians and pastors and local congregations and church bodies will pour enormous resources and efforts into reaching men. But will all of this talk and action really make a difference?

Did God leave Paul when he was carried to Rome as a prisoner heading to execution? Or was Paul still wearing the full armor of God even then? The visible evidence may suggest that God left Paul defenseless, but we know that the reality is much different. Paul wore his armor as he walked into eternal life. Paul's impact has long outlived him because he used the weapons that God designed for the battle for souls. While the data may make it seem like the church is heading for its execution, the church's efforts will make a difference when the church uses the weapons that God has designed for the battle for souls, the Word and Sacraments. We are at our strongest when we get to know those weapons and how to use them better.

We are also at our strongest when we get to know our men better. We must reengage the men we already call our brothers before we can reach the men in our communities. Before Jesus handed himself over in the garden, he made sure to spend the hours prior with his disciples. He prepared them for what was about to happen. He corrected them. He prayed for them. He gave them his very body and blood. He invested in the men who would carry the news of what was about to happen all around the world. God blesses our efforts to get to know our men better, and he blesses us, their families, and their friends through them. God gives us the weapons to equip them for battle. God gives them various occupations and fields of responsibility in which to use the weapons in ways that only they can, since God has prepared specific works for them to do.¹⁰⁹

When men are equipped with the weapons that hold the keys to heaven and hell and are given the situations in which to use them, men reach God's world. They reach the family they may have been neglecting or steering in the wrong direction for a long time. They reach the friends that they once saw as a way to have a good time, but now see as people who need the treasures of God that have made them rich. When they realize their Christian calling to be the feet and hands of Christ, they do so in whatever positions God has already placed them and will

¹⁰⁹ Ephesians 2:10

place them. They literally see their world in a whole different way. Everyone in their world becomes someone to whom they can show Christ.

Paul yearns for heaven but stays to fight because to live is Christ. Christian men, get back in the fight because God has placed us on the front lines, just as he placed his disciples there with the certainty that he would be with them always, even to the end of the age. God equips us for battle and God sends us into battle.

John spoke directly to the men of his congregations, and these words were meant for us as well,

“I am writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”¹¹⁰

Heavenly Father, arm us and send us to reach men so that we can continue to reach the world until you come again. Amen.

¹¹⁰ 1 John 2:12-14

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