

## In the Image of God: The Case for Re-Asserting Masculinity in the Church

By **Garrett Crow**

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A recent book has captured the attention of many pastors who are struggling with the issue of growing their churches. That book, written by David Murrow, is entitled "Why Men Hate Going to Church." Why do men hate going to church? It is such an accepted reality that I doubt anyone would offer many objections to this assertion. This situation has profound effects on the broader society and history itself.

Robert Bly writes of this loss of masculinity in his best-selling book, *Iron John*:

In our time, when the father shows up as an object of ridicule (as he does, as we've noted, on television), or a fit field for suspicion (as he does in *Star Wars*), or a bad-tempered fool (when he comes home from the office with no teaching), or a weak puddle of indecision (as he stops inheriting kingly radiance), the son has a problem. How does he imagine his own life as a man?<sup>1</sup>

Modern attempts by Christians to re-capture some sense of the masculine can at times spin off into the infantile and the absurd. The Promise Keepers for example, have the feel of earlier fraternal organizations with their boyish activities as is demonstrated by this incident from a Promise Keepers event: "Later in the evening, Gary Smalley, another well-known author and speaker, hilariously made his entrance on a kiddie-sized Big Wheel bike, again to the boisterous crowing of the crowd."<sup>2</sup> But this is not the masculinity that has fueled the church through its most precarious hours. This paper

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Abraham, *Who are the Promise Keepers* (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1997), 23.

will investigate some of the causes of the masculine retreat from the church and look at some potential solutions.

### **History of the Problem**

The early church was built in the midst of conflict and persecution and through this, a strong masculine identity was forged. The male Christ was the groom and his church (corporately) was the bride. God the Father provided an overarching sense of male identity regarding the Godhead. Furthermore, Christ's ecclesiastical servants and representatives were males of legendary manliness (Polycarp, Origen, Gregory I). In the East, the idea of Christ, "The Pantocrator" or all ruler, impressed an indelible image of a powerful, royal masculine outline over the church and society. Even as the Byzantine Empire was being overrun by Islam, the idea of a powerful masculine Christ and his earthly servants was a common motif. Marvin Olasky recently spoke of his visit to late Byzantine sites in what was once Cappodocia:

Frescoes in the cave churches have regular biblical scenes but also scenes of "warrior-saints" with swords. One church commemorates the counter-attacks of Nicephorus Phocas, who in the 900s took back Antioch and Tarsus from the Muslims. At the Karanlik (Dark) Church, where you can view by flashlight a wall covered with paintings, one fresco of a muscular Jesus -- big biceps and pecs -- is most prominent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marvin Olasky, "Thinking Long-Term About Christian-Muslim Relations," [online] Townhall, 2004, cited 19 April 2006, available from <<http://www.townhall.com/opinion/columns/marvinolasky/2004/07/15/12360.html>>.

Some of this masculine war-likeness has been retained in Eastern Orthodoxy to this day which may contribute to the fact that it is the only major Christian group that is majority male.<sup>4</sup>

In the West, the early church was filled with martyrs and martyr-apologists but by the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Rome had been Christianized. Even as the Roman Empire collapsed, a manly monasticism took root and was epitomized by the isolated asceticism of the Desert Fathers and the lonely journeying of the Irish evangelists. By the 6<sup>th</sup> Century the church and state had, of necessity, collapsed in upon itself. So one finds that Gregory “the Great” in 593, meets Agilulf, the Lombard, and acting as king, negotiates a peace with this barbarian ruler. The Western church was led by men and, seems to have been well-attended by men until 13<sup>th</sup> Century. It was at this time that the idea of the individual members of the church as the bride of Christ was taken up with fervor and was received by eager female worshippers. Speaking of the teaching Bernard of Clairvaux, the one who popularized of this new strain thought, Leon Podles writes:

In this he continued an allegorical exegesis that goes back to Origen, but his preaching fell on fertile ground, and was taken up by popular piety, which had undergone a mysterious transformation into what we might call affective, or sentimental, piety, although these words are not exact. Emotions and sentiments had always played a part in Christian life, but now for some reason the emotions were those of women.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Leon J. Podles, "Missing Fathers of the Church," *Touchstone* 14, no. 1 (January/February 2001 ): 27.

<sup>5</sup> Leon J. Podles, "Missing Fathers of the Church," 28-29.

This “Bridal Mysticism” became extremely influential, causing the church to take a feminine turn in the West from which it still has not recovered.

In the Medieval period there was split in the life of the church between the spiritual (mystics) and the theological (scholastics). Until the Reformation, the church of the West struggled to deal with this fracture that caused it to no longer produce complex masculine models that fused both theology and spirituality as an Augustine once did. This fracture still exists. The mystical side of the church came to be dominated by women and this effected the perception and experiences the common man had in the church. It was quickly growing into uncomfortable territory for men.

In the writings of some the more popular female mystics we encounter a strange erotic and distinctly feminine experience of Christ. For example, Gertrude of Helfta says of a vision she had of Jesus, that he was, “a youth of about sixteen years of age, handsome and gracious. Young as I then was, the beauty of his form was all that I could have desired, entirely pleasing to the outward eye.”<sup>6</sup> Margaret Ebner, speaks in explicitly erotic terms of being pierced through with a “spear of love” by her spouse Jesus so that she feels his “wondrous powerful thrusts against my heart”. Also, she says Jesus spoke these words to her:

Your sweet love finds me, your inner desire compels me, your burning love binds me, your pure truth holds me, your fiery love keeps me near...I want to

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<sup>6</sup> *Gertrude of Helft, The Herald of Divine Love*, ed. Margaret Winckworth (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 95.

give you the kiss of love which is the delight of your soul, a sweet inner movement, a loving attachment.<sup>7</sup>

This will set a trajectory that carries over even into Protestant Puritanism.

In Puritan New England, a time and place associated with austere masculinity, the feminine ideals of mysticism lived on. Podles writes of Thomas Hooker that he took, “into New England Protestantism the central ideas of medieval mysticism: the total union of God and the soul, a union best expressed by the erotic imagery of marriage and the assimilation of eating.”<sup>8</sup> So Cotton Mather can write at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in New England:

I have seen it without going a Mile from home, That in a Church of Three or Four Hundred Communicants, there are but a few more than One Hundred Men, all the Rest are Women, of whom Charity will Think no Evil.”<sup>9</sup>

This trend, of a diminishing male presence in the American church, will continue on into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It will persist with little abatement through the First and Second Great Awakening and through WWI and WWII.

### Modern Currents

The 20th Century saw some of the same gender trends that we have already looked at continue but a new dynamic has been the erosion of the male (and masculine) clergy in mainline Protestant circles. This happened with the admission of women to

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Ebner, *Major Works*, ed. Leonard S. Hindsley (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 122.

<sup>8</sup> Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent*, (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Co., 1999), 116.

<sup>9</sup> Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (Boston, MA, 1692), 44-45.

the ordained ministry. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it occurred among the Methodists and continued with Pentecostals (1914), Baptists (1920's), Presbyterians (1956), and Episcopalians (1976).<sup>10</sup> As this has worked itself through the local church, men have increasingly left the mainline Protestant denominations. Recently, a new factor has appeared with the ordination of homosexuals. This will have the effect of a further deterioration of a masculine presence in the church as females and feminine males come to take a larger leadership role at all levels of those denominations.

### **Biblical Masculinity**

In Genesis man is created and the woman is taken from his side. Adam is male and Eve is female which are distinct categories of being. They are equal as persons before God and in the New Covenant, in particular, this equality is clearly affirmed: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) That being said, there is more nuance in gender than this. There is the more fluid measure of sexual categorization of "feminine" and "masculine" since no one is ever purely one or the other. Podles says that "Maleness is a physical quality, masculinity a cultural and spiritual one, although one that is connected with the physical realities of being male."<sup>11</sup> Of course, the same can be said of femaleness and femininity. Thus, while male and

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<sup>10</sup> Staff, "Chronology of Women's Ordination," [online] Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership, 2006, cited 27 April 2006, available from <[http://www.com/Chronolgy\\_Ordination.htm](http://www.com/Chronolgy_Ordination.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent*, 37.

female are exclusive, it is possible to have a masculine female or a feminine male. So why did God create two distinct sexes and what are their proper roles in creation?

Though God has revealed himself with various attributes that could connote a feminine side, he has revealed himself primarily in masculine ways. This is not a question of maleness or femaleness, which suggests biological categories in regards to his essence, but of the way he uses gender language to disclose himself. The Bible clearly declares that God is not a man. First, God reveals himself by the masculine title of אֱלֹהִים. While his personal name יהוה has no gender it is often combined with אֱלֹהִים. Second, God discloses himself with various personal and masculine motifs. These, among others, include king (Psalm 5:2), warrior (Job 16:14), and husband (Hosea 2:16). Third, God appeared through personal theophanies, all of which are male. These include the “man” who wrestled with Jacob (Genesis 32:24), the man who reveals himself to be “the commander of the Lord’s army” (Joshua 5:13-15), and the “man of God” who ascended up through the flame of Manoah’s offering (Judges 13). Fourth, the New Testament clearly divulges God in the persons of the Father and the Son, but also as the Holy Spirit who is spoken of by Christ as “he” (ESV, John 14:26). Fifth, and ultimately, the Son of God is incarnated eternally as the man Christ Jesus. These clear facts make it difficult to speak of God in other than masculine terms.

When it comes to man (male), he is to be the peculiar reflection of God’s masculine characteristics as husband, protector, and provider. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:7-9:

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

Though both men and women are called to bring forth masculine characteristics (in imitation of Christ) it is men who are called to lead the church. This pattern of masculine leadership is set in the Old Testament with priests, Levites and tribal heads, all of whom are male, and continues with the male elders of the New Testament (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). As we have seen earlier, this male leadership was also distinctly masculine through the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in the West and this created a stable environment for male participation in the church.

So what is the import of all of this? Well, unfortunately, it seems the “slippery slope” argument is germane here. Not only has the leadership of Protestant churches come to be more female but its entire structure and feel have come to be more feminized. As noted earlier, this is not a new trend but a slow move toward an overwhelmingly female church. One place where this is readily apparent is in the worship of the church. Much of the music, prayers, and sermons in all denominational settings trends toward a feminine and receptive orientation. For example, Holly Pivec states:

Typical praise songs refer to Jesus as a Christian’s lover and praise his beauty and tenderness. Rarely do they praise his justice or strength, or refer to him as

the head of an army leading his church into spiritual battle, like "Onward Christian Soldiers."<sup>12</sup>

The message conveyed to men is that they individually are helpless and passive victims, the personal receptive brides of Christ. Pivec further asserts, "The result of this feminization is that many men, even Christian men, view churches as "ladies clubs" and don't go – or they often go to please their wives."<sup>13</sup> Thus, measures must be implemented to re-assert the essential masculine side of the church.

### **Suggestions**

As we have seen, the church has rather gradually lost its masculine flavor and this has caused a decrease in the male presence in the body. The following are some suggestions for re-asserting masculinity in life of the church:

1. *Re-Orient the worship of the church in a masculine direction.* The most essential and fundamental activity that the church engages in is the corporate worship of God. Worship is etched into the very creation itself as the Sabbath Day, a day of worship, completes the creative work of God (Genesis 2:1-3). Worship also appears as the primary activity following God's great redemptive acts and before God's people respond with holy deeds. This pattern is seen with Noah following the Flood (Genesis 8:20), the Israelites before the sacking of Jericho, the

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<sup>12</sup> Holly Pivec, "The Feminization of the Church," [online] Biola Connections, 2006, cited 28 April 2006, available from <<http://www.biola.edu/admin/connections/articles/06spring/feminization.cfm>>.

<sup>13</sup> Holly Pivec, "The Feminization of the Church."

sacramental beginning of the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 5:1-10), and the 120 in the upper room before the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the establishment of the New Covenant church (Acts 1:13-2:1). The church is the very center of God's cosmic attention and the central occupation of the church is worship. For all the reasons already delineated, the church's worship needs to be well balanced and this includes a robust dose of masculinity. The prayers offered, the songs sung, and the sermon preached should all include the masculine biblical motifs of kingly rule, conquest, and Gospel progress. The church is not in stasis but is advancing powerfully and nothing will stop its progress (Luke 18:13-21). Undergirding all of this should be a liturgical structure that clearly moves in steps through the service of worship, the goal of which has traditionally been the Eucharist. Men don't typically like the fluid uncertainty of a free-flowing worship service.

2. *Emphasize masculinity in regular activities.* Pancake breakfasts followed by long Bible studies geared toward expressing one's feelings do not resonate with the majority of men. An emphasis should be made in the local church to have regularly scheduled men's meeting. This would be a time of masculine fellowship where a man can feel free to sip a pint of Guinness stout while the fellowship meeting is in progress. Other activities would include tangible work in caring for "widows and orphans" via manual labor and strategic planning.

3. *Prepare the next generation of men for masculine leadership.* Rites of passage have been lost in the modern West. These essential crossroads where a young man

definitively breaks from the overarching care of his mother and joins the tribe of men has been a valuable feature of societies from time in memoriam . In the past, men found this initiation rite through early entry into the workforce or military service but in an age of specialization and increasing soft-skills, the crossover from boyhood to manhood has become almost imperceptible. A young man must be prepared (be a man already) in order to unite himself to a woman in marriage. Genesis 2:24 says that it is “a man” (אִישׁ) who “shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife.” Leon Podles suggests that a Christian rite of passage be implemented in which a boy is challenged both physically and spiritually and then permanently welcomed into the fellowship of men.<sup>14</sup> This fellowship includes both rights and responsibilities. Time does not permit the fleshing out of this concept.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has set forth that the problem of a lack of masculinity in the church is not a modern phenomenon but is rooted deep in the Western Religious tradition itself. In order to correct this problem the church must come to grips with this historical trajectory and not propose stop-gap measures that are based on a short-sighted perspective of the dilemma. The solutions I propose likely appear to react in an overly masculine direction but this is perhaps necessary as a corrective at this time in history. I

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<sup>14</sup> Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent*, 198-199.

admit this and the fact that the suggested solutions are highly tentative and need to be worked out in more detail.

This paper is admittedly narrow in focus and I hope the reader doesn't fault me for what I have not addressed. I have not addressed the issue of biblical femininity, the other half of the equation as that is the subject matter for another paper. But I do believe the crisis that now confronts us in the church of the West is a loss of masculine identity. Without this masculine identity the church will not withstand the twin attacks of hyper-modernist gender confusion and resurgent militaristic world faiths, most notably, Islam. Masculinity must be re-asserted in the church or it will not survive as a major and influential factor in the West.

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