

## ABSTRACT

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling: A Critique of Hypermasculinity in American Christianity

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This thesis analyzes the presence of hypermasculine ideals in modern Protestant circles. Since masculinity has only recently become a subject of academic study, I explore the origins of expressions such as *hypermasculinity* and the related terms, *toxic* and *hegemonic masculinity*. I draw from existing scholarship to explain some of the causes and consequences of this behavior and to describe how this phenomenon has reached Protestant Christians in the United States, focusing on modern times with an analysis of John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart*. My thesis shows that hypermasculinity is utterly incompatible with Christianity, therefore I invite churches to resist the phenomenon by constructing a model of masculinity analogous to the way of Jesus Christ.

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SOFTLY AND TENDERLY JESUS IS CALLING:  
A CRITIQUE OF HYPERMASCULINITY IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

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## INTRODUCTION

### My Journey Here

I spent the first three years of my life at my grandparent's house. My parents had been married for seven years, but they were struggling for money and decided to move in with my father's parents. There, the three of us shared a bedroom that could fit all of our possessions. In fact, we had so little that the room even had extra space, thus it also served as a storage place for my cousins' toys. They did not live there, but over the years they forgot toys that ended up being stored in our room, which I was very happy about. I could play with anything as long as I did not break it. In the middle of all the cars and action figures, there was one item that I loved: a doll named Magali. I loved to hold Magali in my arms like a baby, fix her clothes, and feel like I was caring for someone. I played with Magali for months, without any repercussions—or so I thought. Years later, my mother told me that she was uncomfortable every time that I played with that doll. She thought it was strange that her son's favorite toy was a "girl's toy." She had considered taking the doll away, until my grandma told her not to worry about it. So, I continued to play with Magali until I outgrew it. I tell this story not to condemn my mother: I am grateful for this woman who encouraged me to be a kind and nurturing man. Rather, this story illustrates just how deeply hypermasculinity permeates society. Even people who disagree in principle unknowingly perpetuate its practices. It is precisely this reality that this thesis will explore: how Christians, a people called to be kind, meek, and empathetic, have contributed to the idea that men must be competitive, strong, and emotionally detached.

It is not difficult to imagine that a boy who played with dolls did not conform to most traditional standards of masculinity. I grew up as a Brazilian boy who did not like playing sports or taking his shirt off, two very common things in that tropical paradise. Because of my nonconformity, I suffered so much bullying that when I was ten years old I told my mom that I wanted to kill myself. After much therapy and an amazing dog, I overcame the trauma and nearly forgot it until I served as a counselor in a Christian camp in the summer of 2017. There, I participated in a program called “Men’s Night,” an evening in which boys had to take their shirts off, run up a hill, and fight each other with foam weapons. Then, they ate with their bare hands and played sports. Throughout the program, camp supervisors delivered passionate speeches encouraging the boys to “fight like a man” and “eat like a man.” After two hours of that, there was a ten minute devotional in which a leader would say something like: “to be a man is nothing like that, to be a man is to be respectful and follow Christ.” Obviously, the message of the devotional was not what stuck with the campers. Instead, the message that stuck with them was the one demonstrated and reinforced each week at Men’s Night: true masculinity is tied to physical competency and poor hygiene. Although I hated the program from the beginning, I did not understand the source of my feelings until I met Jean, an 11-year-old boy.<sup>1</sup> When Jean heard that he had to take off his shirt and fight the other boys, he immediately started crying. He was afraid of being hurt and uncomfortable with the whole situation. As soon as I saw Jean crying, I realized why Men’s Night was so repulsive to me: it was exactly the kind of situation that had hurt me so much in childhood. Still, this camp was worse than what I had endured. When I was a kid, the few

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<sup>1</sup> To protect his privacy, I am not using his real name.

Christians around protected me from the bullies. At this camp, however, Christians were the bullies. This camp promoted *hypermasculine Christianity*, and after I saw it there I started to see it in many more contexts.

This thesis explores the presence of hypermasculine ideals in Christian environments and explains why they are incompatible with the way of Jesus Christ. The first chapter investigates the definition of hypermasculinity as well as its causes and consequences, both in the Church and in secular society. The second chapter presents a historical overview of hypermasculine Christianity in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, culminating with an analysis of John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart*. The third chapter looks at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ to argue that hypermasculinity is incompatible with Christianity. Finally, the project concludes with practical ways in which Christian men can reject hypermasculinity by constructing a model of masculinity based on the way of Christ.

## CHAPTER ONE

### An Overview of Hypermasculinity

#### *Terms and Definitions*

The 1980s witnessed an increased interest in men’s experiences and their own understanding of those experiences—with the world, with themselves, and with others. Sociologists and other scholars began to use a variety of terms to describe cultural expressions of masculinity, including *toxic masculinity* and *hegemonic masculinity*. Popularized by Daniel Gross, *toxic masculinity* was actually coined by Shepherd Bliss of the Mythopoetic Movement, a movement that campaigned for a psychological rebirth of men. Men were encouraged to pursue personal growth through retreats in the wilderness focused on emotional explorations and male comradery. Bliss led retreats to help men achieve “healing” through the exploration not only of “literal nature, but also the figurative nature of man.”<sup>1</sup> In this context, Bliss used *toxic masculinity* “to describe that part of the male psyche that is abusive . . . that diminishes women, children, other men.”<sup>2</sup> After Bliss and Gross, the term was nearly forgotten, but appeared again in 2005, in an article about the role of toxic masculinity as a “barrier to mental health treatment in prison.”<sup>3</sup> After that, *toxic masculinity* continued to be used inside and outside the

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<sup>1</sup> I am greatly indebted to Journalist Soraya Roberts for the thorough exploration of the origins of the terms *toxic masculinity* and *hegemonic masculinity* in “The Classroom Origins of Toxic Masculinity,” *Longreads* (blog), January 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Bliss in Roberts.

<sup>3</sup> Terry A. Kupers, “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (2005): 713–724.

academia to describe harmful male behaviors, and received much popular attention in January 2019, when razor company Gillette launched a campaign about the issue.<sup>4</sup>

Also during the 1980s, Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell wrote about *hegemonic masculinity*. In doing so, Connell not only popularized a new concept but also created a new field: men's studies. While Bliss's *toxic masculinity* focused on the consequences of a particular type of masculinity and, to a certain extent, lacked scholarly depth, Connell's expression was more academic, evoking the Gramscian concept of hegemony. In this sense, Connell made it clear that *hegemonic masculinity* is not something *about* masculinity, it is a form of masculinity that "embod[ies] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men."<sup>5</sup> To this day, Connell and other scholars continue to make significant contributions to the field of men's studies.

*Hypermasculinity* serves as the third and final term in this semantic domain. In contrast to toxic masculinity and hegemonic masculinity, it is not possible to trace the origins of *hypermasculinity*. While definitions have evolved over time, the term has always been tied to the exaggeration of masculinity. However, that is not much help when we consider that masculinity is not a monolithic concept. Therefore, any definition

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<sup>4</sup> Gillette's campaign does not actually use the term *toxic masculinity* to describe the negative examples of traditionally masculine behavior that the video depicts. However, social media users and news outlets described it as the company's stance against *toxic masculinity*. See Jill Filipovic, "Why Gillette's Ad Slamming Toxic Masculinity Is Drawing Cheers -- and Anger," CNN, January 16, 2019; Alexandra Topping, Kate Lyons, and Matthew Weaver, "Gillette #MeToo Razors Ad on 'Toxic Masculinity' Gets Praise -- and Abuse." The Guardian, January 15, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Connell's understanding of hegemonic masculinity during the 1990s is summarized in an article that she wrote in 2005 reviewing the literature on the topic: Robert W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–859.

of hypermasculinity is confined to the specific context in which it was coined. Currently, the American Psychological Association states that hypermasculinity exaggerates traditional masculinity ideology, which includes “anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence.”<sup>6</sup>

In this work, I use *hypermasculinity* instead of *hegemonic* or *toxic masculinity* for several reasons. *Hegemonic masculinity* has significant academic relevance, being the most referenced among scholars.<sup>7</sup> However, the term focuses on the relationship between different masculinities and essentially denotes the type of masculinity that is in power in a specific context. *Toxic masculinity*, on the other hand, seems inadequate for two reasons. First, recent uses of *toxic masculinity* have caused confusion: it is not uncommon for men to feel offended by the expression because they perceive it as stating that *masculinity is toxic*. Second, the expression is tied to the consequences of a certain type of masculinity, but it fails to describe such masculinity. By contrast, *hypermasculinity* properly describes the issue *and* has not caused interpretation problems, as it clearly denotes one specific type of masculinity.

The choice of *hypermasculinity*, however, is not free from complications. The understanding that hypermasculinity is the exaggeration of one particular form of masculinity, among many existing ones, points to the idea of gender as a social construct. Proponents of this view argue that gender and gender roles are completely constructed

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<sup>6</sup> American Psychological Association, “Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People,” *American Psychologist* 70, no. 9 (2015): 3.

<sup>7</sup> A Google Scholar search conducted on October 19, 2019, returned approximately 129,000 entries for *hegemonic masculine*, while searches for *hypermasculinity* and *toxic masculinity* returned 20,020 and 27,100 entries, respectively.

and perpetuated by societies.<sup>8</sup> Although this theory has much truth to it, I do not *fully* accept this view. While I acknowledge the influence of society and culture in the multiple expressions of masculinity, I also recognize that males and females usually present characteristics that differ according to sex. These differences can be engendered by the biological particularities of each sex that lead to distinct gender experiences.<sup>9</sup> That is part of God’s design and self-impression in humanity, and it *does not* mean that any sex is favored; together, they bear the image of the Creator, for in God’s own image “male and female He created them” (Gn. 1:27).<sup>10</sup> Hence, some of the causes of hypermasculinity that I will present next are directly tied to natural human development, while others are the consequences of social issues.

### *Causes of Hypermasculinity*

In this section, I will explore three potential causes of hypermasculinity: one psychological, one social, and one theological. While these three causes can overlap, I will focus primarily on the theological one. Ultimately, I will show how certain Christian groups have absorbed the psychological and social factors into their religious frameworks and, I hope, offer a healthier solution.

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most seminal scholar to propose gender as a social construction is Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2002). However, for an introduction on the topic see Judith Lorber, “‘Night to His Day’: The Social Construction of Gender,” in *Paradoxes of Gender* (Yale University Press, 1994), 13–36.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description of how this process occurs for most men and women, see Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 100–112.

<sup>10</sup> All biblical references are based on the New International Version, except for when they are part of another author’s quote.

*The Psychological: Archetypal Categories*

One of the long-existing causes of hypermasculinity is directly connected to human development. Research shows that while infants and toddlers do not hold many gender stereotypes, once children reach a certain age, they “hold more gender stereotypes than adults.”<sup>11</sup> Using Jungian scholarship, Warren Steinberg explains that it is part of our archetypal nature to perceive the existence of gender categories and act in such ways as to identify with one. In this sense, Steinberg explains that once children reach this point in their development, they tend to divide personality traits into two large categories: instinctive/active and expressive/passive. Seeking to “concretize symbols . . . [and through] the socialization process that occurs in family and society,” children associate the first category with men and the second with women.<sup>12</sup> That explanation suggests that the idea of gender is entirely a social construct, using the archetypal categorization as a means through which the construction happens. As I stated before, I do not fully agree with that position. Instead, I argue that the association of males with the instinctive/active dimension occurs, in part, because men are more likely to present such characteristics. That realization, however, does not deny the archetypal tendency to categorize traits in those two fields and to associate each field to a biological sex. If contained within the proper phase of development, this tendency is not problematic. The problem arises when such children grow up and do not develop beyond those early categorizations.

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<sup>11</sup> Warren Steinberg, *Masculinity: Identity, Conflict, and Transformation* (Shambhala Publications, Incorporated, 1993), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Steinberg, 24.

*The Social: Devaluing the Feminine*

The tendency to devalue expressive/passive traits also plays a role in this binary categorization. As Steinberg explains “the characteristics traditional to the feminine gender role are devalued and do not bring increased social status, thus the man who displays them loses value in his own eyes and in the eyes of the collective.”<sup>13</sup> Both men and women can be stigmatized for stepping out of the “characteristics traditional” to their gender. In the last 40 years, however, due to the efforts of feminist movements toward gender equality and women’s liberation, women have gained more freedom to express instinctive/active characteristics, such as taking leadership roles in the workplace. This same freedom has not occurred for men. Because expressive/passive characteristics have long been associated with lower social status, men “are encouraged by their sociocultural environment to identify [only] with the instinctive/active dimension.”<sup>14</sup> Because of that, many men never grow past the childish binary categorization of gender character traits, thus emphasizing their instinctive/active attitudes and holding the expressive/passive dimension as a taboo.

The shame and oppression associated with the feminine make men afraid of being perceived as feminized. Nate Pyle offers this clarifying word: “men do not fear being women . . . [men] fear being not-man.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, many men adopt *hypermasculine* behaviors believing that is the only way to assert that they are not homosexuals. A common example of that tendency is the use of the expression “no

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<sup>13</sup> Steinberg, 140.

<sup>14</sup> Steinberg, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 30.

homo.” This term first appeared in hip-hop songs “by members of The Diplomats, Juelz Santana, and Cam’ron” during the 1990s and is shorthand for “I am not a homosexual.”<sup>16</sup> A recent analysis of hundreds of posts in the microblog service Twitter shows that men tend to use the term “no homo” whenever they express something that could be perceived as not masculine enough.<sup>17</sup> While this fear is present among males of multiple ethnicities, nationalities, and religions, it is especially prevalent among conservative Christians.

### *The Theological: Gender Ethics*

Christian denominations hold a variety of perspectives concerning sexuality and gender. In recent decades, America has seen the growth of churches and denominations that adopt an open and affirming position on sexuality. This rise is directly related to the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which opened up space for non-heterosexual individuals to find their voices in society. As a consequence, non-binary sexualities became more common throughout the country, a tendency that continues to this day and inevitably influences Christian communities. That influence, however, can also generate the opposite outcome. Thomas J. Lineman analyses the phenomenon through the lens of movement-counter-movement theory, asserting that any “growing, successful, and controversial movement will invariably lead to the rise of a counter-movement.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the social progress of non-binary communities has led a “groundswell of conservative Christians [to] protest against sexual immorality [that]

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<sup>16</sup> Joshua R. Brown, “No Homo,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 3 (February 22, 2011): 300.

<sup>17</sup> C. J. Pascoe and Sarah Diefendorf, “No Homo: Gendered Dimensions of Homophobic Epithets Online,” *Sex Roles* 80, no. 3–4 (2019): 123–136.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas J. Linneman, “Homophobia and Hostility: Christian Conservative Reactions to the Political and Cultural Progress of Lesbians and Gay Men,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 1, no. 2 (2004): 57.

began to surface in the 1970s—largely as a reaction to the perceived values of the ‘permissive sixties.’”<sup>19</sup> For these communities, any challenge to traditional Christian sexual ethics (e.g. heterosexual monogamous marriage) is a direct challenge to Christianity and must be confronted. In their attempts to oppose homosexuality, some of these Christian groups engage in a kind of homophobic discourse that, directly or indirectly, encourages men to conform to traditional masculine ideology.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, such discourse also encompasses the two causes of hypermasculinity discussed in the previous section. It is not rare to see Christian leaders using children’s strictly binary gender behavior to argue for confining teenage boys into the instinctive/active role. Christian leaders then reify this philosophy in tangible ways through church teachings and programs. For these leaders, infants are like blank slates uncorrupted by the dangers of gender fluidity, therefore they should be the models for masculine/feminine behavior. Similarly, some Christian communities use (or rather misuse) Scripture to justify the devaluation of traditionally feminine characteristics. In Chapter 2, I will explore this more in depth, providing specific examples. For now, I offer some of the consequences of hypermasculinity.

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<sup>19</sup> Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 28.

<sup>20</sup> A case study of this specific phenomenon can be found in Elijah G. Ward, “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the US Black Church,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7, no. 5 (2005): 493–504. Meanwhile, Parrott et al. provides statistical data to support the correlation between homophobia and hypermasculinity: Dominic J Parrott, Henry E Adams, and Amos Zeichner, “Homophobia: Personality and Attitudinal Correlates,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 32, no. 7 (May 1, 2002): 1269–78.

## *Consequences of Hypermasculinity*

The consequences of hypermasculinity are different for women and men. While I will focus on the problems that it creates for men, it is worthwhile to mention some of the consequences for women.

### *For Women*

One of the most detrimental consequences of hypermasculinity is the oppression of women. When masculinity is only associated with the instinctive/active dimension, consequently, femininity is only associated with the expressive/passive dimension. That rationale encourages men to feel superior and thus behave in patriarchal ways, assuming that men are superior to women and therefore have the right to oppress them in many different spheres, including politics, the workforce, and sex. For over a century, feminist movements have fought these issues and achieved significant victories, such as the right to vote, equality before the law, and better positions for women at work. Unfortunately, there is still a lot more that needs to improve in all areas. In the last few years, society has seen, for example, that despite all the victories in the public spheres, women continue to suffer sexual harassment on a daily basis. The #MeToo movement has spotlighted the horrors that are rooted in the hypermasculine ideal, namely, that men view themselves as sexual machines who are entitled to sexual intercourse, regardless of a woman's desires.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The consequences of patriarchy for women is beyond the scope of this project. However, much work has been done in this area by prominent feminist writers, as it is evident in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage, 1997); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 2012); and Bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Pluto Press, 2000).

## *For Men*

While women are significantly impacted by hypermasculine behaviors, I focus primarily on the ways in which hypermasculinity affects men, including: the crippling of emotions, the utilitarian view of man, the father wound, and suicide. Where necessary, I will differentiate between men who engage in hypermasculine behavior and those who do not.

*Crippling of Emotions.* The first consequence of hypermasculinity is the crippling of emotions. When men are only associated with the instinctive/active dimension, most emotional expressions are unacceptable. That way, “patriarchal mores teach a form of emotional stoicism to men that says they are more manly if they do not feel” and those “men who feel, who love, often hide their emotional awareness from other men for fear of being attacked and shamed.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than expressing an array of feelings, hypermasculine culture encourages men to demonstrate all their emotions through anger. Thus, a man is not frustrated because he failed an endeavor, he is angry because being successful is an essential part of his identity. A man is not sad because a woman refused to have sex with him, he is angry because in the hypermasculine mindset he is entitled to sex. Eventually, all that anger has to go somewhere. Sometimes, this anger results in the atrocities the #MeToo movement has brought to the surface. In other instances, men succumb to a utilitarian view of themselves, focusing all their time and attention in the

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<sup>22</sup> bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 25-31.

workplace, which can also have disastrous consequences, ranging from hurting their children to killing themselves.<sup>23</sup>

*Utilitarian View of Men.* Additionally, hypermasculinity promotes an overly utilitarian view of men: their value is tied to their ability to provide financially for the household. In the workplace, men accustomed to hypermasculine ideals believe that their worth is directly tied to their success, which in this competitive framework means success over others. Therefore this model of masculinity discourages men from forming meaningful connections at the workplace because their main goal is to be better than their colleagues. This way of engaging work affects home life as well. After working long and unsatisfying hours, men are “too tired to deliver the emotional goods,” and they have no emotional energy to be fully present with their wife and/or children.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, for many of them, the only possible solution is to completely detach themselves emotionally from their loved ones, causing their children to suffer from a hurt that is so prevalent that it has its own name: the father wound.

*The father wound.* The father wound is the most widely recognized consequence of hypermasculinity. It is perhaps one of the few things on which evangelical theologian John Piper, Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, and womanist writer bell hooks would agree.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> hooks, 34.

<sup>24</sup> hooks, 104.

<sup>25</sup> Piper published several essays addressing this topic in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 2006), two of them being George Alan Rekers, “Psychological Foundations for Rearing Masculine Boys and Feminine Girls,” and Weldon Hardenbrook, “Where’s Dad? A Call for Fathers with the Spirit of Elijah;” The father wound and its consequences are the main topic of Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos, *From Wild Man to Wise Man: Reflections on Male Spirituality* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005).

All these authors point out that men often avoid spending time with their children, and that has severe consequences, especially for boys. Fathers who have had their emotional range reduced to anger and its variants are “unable to share with their sons that they are afraid.”<sup>26</sup> In one way, these men fear not measuring up to their sons’ expectations. In another way, these adult males are jealous of their boys who “ha[ve] not yet severed [their] relation to feeling[s].”<sup>27</sup> But fathers have no time to deal with this, so they avoid communicating and retreat to their long work hours, leaving boys with an emotional void to fill.

As the wound grows, despite the efforts of their mothers, teenage boys seek healing of the father wound through interactions with other males. As Rohr explains, these boys feel the need to be initiated into manhood by another man.<sup>28</sup> In fortunate cases, that void may be filled by someone like an uncle, a teacher, or a coach (no wonder Hollywood has produced so many good movies with the same story). However, when those mature and responsible male figures are not present, or when a boy is so wounded that he is filled with anger and frustration, the father wound may lead young men to join gangs and other unhealthy organizations looking for connections and outlets to express their anger.

*Suicide.* The ultimate and most grieving consequence of hypermasculinity is suicide. A man may take his own life for several reasons: repressed emotions, dissatisfaction in the workplace, and disconnection from the family (in the present and in

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<sup>26</sup> hooks, *The Will to Change*, 159.

<sup>27</sup> hooks, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Rohr and Martos, *From Wild Man to Wise Man*.

the past, since most fathers also feel such disconnection toward their own fathers). In the United States, the female-to-male ratio of completed suicide is 1:6. In a review of literature crafted in 2008, Payne et al. analyzed several publications on the issue of suicide, giving special attention to the role of gender. From their findings, the authors suggested that men are more likely to commit suicide because they feel socially pressured to “tak[e] risks and [to] adopt traditional notions of being the ‘stronger’ sex.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, several characteristics of traditional masculine ideology can lead some men to take their own lives.

### *Conclusion*

In this first chapter, I explained that the exaggeration of traditionally masculine characteristics, which I call *hypermasculinity*, is caused by psychological, social, and theological factors and has detrimental consequences for women and men. In the next chapter, I will explore how and why some Christian communities and authors have encouraged men to engage in hypermasculine behavior.

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Payne, Viren Swami, and Debbi L. Stanistreet, “The Social Construction of Gender and Its Influence on Suicide: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Men’s Health* 5, no. 1 (2008): 23–35.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Christian Hypermasculine Movements

In this chapter I will explore prominent examples of hypermasculinity in Christian contexts. Such examples can be found in any period of time in church history. However, I will begin in the middle of the nineteenth century since the movements of Christian hypermasculinity from that time influence the current state of affairs the most. Therefore, I will address Muscular Christianity, the Men and Religion Forward Movement, Billy Sunday, and the Promise Keepers; then I will move into a detailed analysis of the most recent example of Christian hypermasculinity: John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart*. Ultimately, I will show that hypermasculine movements are always present in the life of the Church but strongly diverge from the teachings of Jesus.

#### *Muscular Christianity*

The term “Muscular Christianity” originated in Victorian England, where literary critics used it “to describe the novels of Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley . . . [who] believed that the Anglican Church of their days was becoming overly tolerant of physical weakness and effeminacy.”<sup>1</sup> Hughes and Kingsley sought to correct these perceived flaws by creating literary characters that would model manliness. Kingsley believed that the Anglican Church should be “a suitable agent for British imperialism,” which meant that it had to be “infuse[d] . . . with enough health and manliness.”<sup>2</sup> Kingsley encouraged

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Putney, 1.

churches to incorporate gyms into their buildings and to create programs for young men to exercise. As this movement grew, it moved out of churches and into public schools, where it transformed “unruly boys, [who were now] disciplined through athletics, and through athletic metaphors were taught the essential manliness—and therefore palatability—of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Out of this emphasis in athletics, the Victorian Muscular Christianity gave birth to several institutions that exist to this day, including the YMCA, an initiative that was especially successful on the other side of the Atlantic.

Americans were initially exposed to Muscular Christianity in the early 1870s, when Thomas Hughes spoke at Harvard College on “Muscular Christianity and Its Proper Limits.”<sup>4</sup> Hughes criticized Americans for their lack of exercise and poor physical health, particularly targeting Protestant churches who “taught ‘that physical vigor and sanctity were incompatible.’”<sup>5</sup> Proponents of Muscular Christianity juxtaposed clergy with secular professionals, arguing that clergy were “pallid, puny, sedentary, and joyless . . . while the ruddy, the brave, and the strong are promptly assigned to a secular career.”<sup>6</sup> Although that critique resonated with some Americans, others adopted a less literal and more metaphorical interpretation of Hughes’s ideas.

As the movement grew, Muscular Christianity moved beyond physical health as the sole expression of strength. Character building also became an important way to express one’s strength. For the *North Carolina Presbyterian*,

muscular Christianity . . . expresse[d] the idea of that robustness and vigor which ought to characterize those who are strong in the Lord and the power of His

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<sup>3</sup> Putney, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Putney, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Putney, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Putney, 21.

might. It [was] suggestive of force and that high-strung, nervous energy which by constant exercise has developed its possessor into the stature of a perfect man in Christ Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly enough, both of these strands of Muscular Christianity reappeared in other Christian hypermasculine movements of the twentieth century.

Muscular Christianity was short-lived in the United States, however. Whereas Victorian England had already experienced industrial revolution and a “feminizing” of Protestantism, America had not yet faced such changes. But, in less than fifty years, America caught up to England. When these social changes finally occurred, America also became a ripe soil for Muscular Christianity. Then, Muscular Christianity took various forms, including the Men and Religion Forward Movement.

#### *Men and Religion Forward Movement*

In the beginning of the twentieth century, industrialization, urbanization, and the Women’s Suffrage movements were among the main external factors that led some to call for an awakening of Christian men.

Whereas in the late eighteenth century industrialization was not yet a reality in all parts of the United States, the dawn of the twentieth century saw this phenomenon across the nation. As large corporations consolidated and expanded their plants in the cities, more and more people moved to urban centers to supply the demand for labor. Many men who, till then, had always worked on their own businesses were now seeking employment in large industries since the industrial methods produced goods at lower

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<sup>7</sup> Putney, 22.

prices, driving small manufacturers and family farms out of the market.<sup>8</sup> While industrialization and urbanization may not seem to create an immediate moral problem, many thought otherwise. First, “many people feared that urbanization and the disappearance of the *frontier* threatened the nation . . . [with the] erosion of the instinctiveness, individualism, competitiveness, and drive for success that had traditionally characterized American life.”<sup>9</sup> Until then, the myth of the self-made American man had been closely related to the taming of the wild nature as he moved further into the country to obtain a land of his own. Now, men traded the dangers of the frontier, which were thought to build character, for the comforts of the city. This reality, coupled with women’s growing influence in society, proved problematic for men’s growth in strength and character.

The industrialization of cities augmented the role of women in society. During the second half of the nineteenth century, several female colleges were chartered, and by the turn of the century, women were pursuing education more than ever. The subsequent rise of big corporations that needed men working with the machines, opened spaces for women to work in clerical positions. Concomitantly, many of these women were also organizing movements to fight for civil rights, especially the right to vote, granted through the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, an unquestionable landmark of the increased influence of women in society.

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<sup>8</sup> Some sessions of this chapter are adapted from Joao Moraes, “TheoMasc,” *TheoMasc* (blog), theomasc.blogspot.com.

<sup>9</sup> Robert F. Martin, *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862-1935* (Indiana University Press, 2002), 81.

By 1910, some male Christian leaders began to feel uncomfortable with many of these changes. They thought that women were influencing society so much that even the church was becoming “overly feminized,” which explained why by 1910 two-thirds of church attendants were women.<sup>10</sup> These men, led by Fred B. Smith, created the Men and Religion Forward Movement (MRFM), which they believed would serve both as a wake-up call for Christian men and as a reformation of Protestantism.

For MRFM leaders, the fault for declining church attendance among men did not rest on men’s shoulders. Instead, the churches were entirely to blame. As a result, MRFM leaders sought “to regain the church for men” with two key proposals: reduce the influence of women in church, and replace the “feminized religiosity with a virile, militaristic Christianity.”<sup>11</sup> MRFM leaders considered men to be emotionally restrained, to prefer action over reflection, and to seek efficiency. Therefore, they sought to substitute boys Sunday school classes, usually taught by women, for practical activities led by older men such as sports leagues and community service opportunities. The MRFM also supported the YMCA, which had come to America from England during the first wave of Muscular Christianity, and the Boy Scouts, which did not have explicit Christian affiliations but promoted similar values of virility.

In their efforts to make Christianity more attractive to men, thus “regain[ing] the church for men,” MRFM leaders also relied upon militaristic imagery to portray the Church as manly.<sup>12</sup> Thus, they compared Christian life to a war because they “believed

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<sup>10</sup> Fred S. Goodman, “A Survey of Typical Church Bible Classes for Boys and Men,” *Religious Education* 5, no. 4 (1910): 363.

<sup>11</sup> L. Dean Allen, *Rise Up, O Men of God: The Men and Religion Forward Movement and Promise Keepers* (Mercer University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, 73.

that many men felt a proclivity to warfare.”<sup>13</sup> Leaders of the Movement used such language to refer to both internal and external affairs, explaining the “MRFM as a campaign whose objective was to recruit more men so that the church could become ‘ready to battle for the Lord’” and the “mission fields [as] battlegrounds in which churches could become ‘successful against Islam abroad and Mammonism at home.’”<sup>14</sup> That way, the MRFM championed hypermasculine ideals in two key ways: in emphasizing that a man must be “active” rather than “passive”; and in downplaying the value of femininity and emotional expressions of the self. Those ideals also influenced Billy Sunday, another important figure in hypermasculine Christianity.

### *Billy Sunday*

Billy Sunday had several things in common with the MRFM, including a passion for sports and the use of militaristic imagery in sermons. Sunday served the YMCA from 1891 to 1896, and he also played professional baseball for the Chicago White Stockings. When Sunday became a full-time preacher, he used masculine, athletic metaphors in his sermons to explain key theological concepts such as faith: “Faith will put the ball over the fence in the last half of the ninth inning, score 3 to 0, two men out and two strikes and three balls called on you.”<sup>15</sup> Sunday firmly believed that sports were the way to the masculine soul, but when the athletic metaphors were not strong enough, he appealed to militaristic images.

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<sup>13</sup> Allen, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Robert F. Martin, “Billy Sunday and Christian Manliness,” *The Historian* 58, no. 4 (1996): 820.

Like the leaders of the MRFM before him, Sunday also relied heavily on military imagery. Sunday “believed that Jesus Christ intended his disciples to be ‘militant as well as persuasive’ and prepared ‘to fight as well as pray.’”<sup>16</sup> That is why in “Sunday’s cosmology, the devil was a formidable foe,” to be combated by “Gospel grenadiers who would battle for righteousness with strength and courage.”<sup>17</sup> Sunday believed that the virile tone of his message was essential to tackle the effeminacy of Christians who thought that “a Christian has to be a sort of dish-rag proposition, a wishy-washy, sissified sort of galoot that lets everybody make a doormat out of him.”<sup>18</sup> As Sunday prayed that more men would hit the sawdust trail after one of his highly energetic sermons, he also asked the Lord to “save us from off-handed, flabby-cheeked, brittle-boned, weak-kneed, thin-skinned, pliable, plastic, spineless, effeminate, ossified three-karat Christianity.”<sup>19</sup> Sunday embodied the Christian hypermasculinity of the movements that preceded him, but the next significant hypermasculine movement took a different turn. Thus, we will jump 60 years to the end of the century to look at the Promise Keepers.

### *Promise Keepers*

The Promise Keepers (PK) movement holds many parallels to the MRFM, including the historical context in which it started. The end of the twentieth century was marked by socioeconomic changes in the United States. Among these changes, the deindustrialization of America was undoubtedly the most impactful. As companies went

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<sup>16</sup> Martin, 817.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, 815.

<sup>18</sup> Martin, 815.

<sup>19</sup> Sunday in Martin, 815.

global, they moved their factories to areas with cheaper labor costs. With fewer factories in the US, men were forced to move to the service industry, where they were paid significantly less.

Another important change concerned the role of women in society. Since the beginning of the century, women had increased their participation in the workforce and by the 1990s, most women were working outside the home even after they had children. Moreover, the feminist movements that were now in their third wave had gained momentum inside Christian circles. There, women fought for leadership roles in churches, gender inclusive language when referring to God, and challenged scriptural interpretations of women's submission.

While some regarded those changes as progress, others perceived a "moral crisis" centered on the role of men. These individuals believed that because so many things were changing, men had lost their positions of leadership at home and in society at large. All of these issues were associated with the Mythopoetic Movement mentioned in Chapter 1 and, in the Christian sphere, gave rise to the Promise Keepers, a men's movement created by football coach Bill McCartney. In the words of McCartney, Promise Keepers sought to "witness a tremendous outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon men" that would change society, a clear call to reclaim male leadership.<sup>20</sup>

The movement relied on large gatherings as its main venue of communication with men. While the MRFM had hosted small eight-day-long gatherings in several cities at the same time, the Promise Keepers hosted hours-long conferences in large venues

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<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Rise Up, O Men of God*, 186.

such as stadiums.<sup>21</sup> They held their first rally in 1991, with 4,200 men in attendance.<sup>22</sup> The movement grew exponentially over the years, reaching its peak when 700,000 men rallied at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. for a six-hour conference that included prayers, worship, and spoken addresses. Then-president Randy Phillips explained that the organization and the men who supported it believed that “the answer to the healing of the moral deterioration of society . . . is found in our willingness as men to confess our sin to God and to be servants in our homes, workplaces, churches, and communities.”<sup>23</sup> For the Promise Keepers, “God has given [men] the mantle of leadership” and not until Christian men take on that mantle will society be fixed.<sup>24</sup>

While the male leadership may sound openly patriarchal, the influences of the Mythopoetic Movement contributed to nuancing the Promise Keeper’s teachings. Whereas, for example, previous hypermasculine movements encouraged a stoic repression of emotions, the Promise Keepers advocated for emotional vulnerability among men as they “pursue vital relationships with other men,” the second of the Seven Promises of the Promise Keepers.<sup>25</sup> But the Promise Keeper’s focus on male leadership has led many “critics [to] argue that its real purpose is to turn the clock back on women's

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<sup>21</sup> Gail Bederman, “‘The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough’: The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism,” *American Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1989): 432–465.

<sup>22</sup> Sean F. Everton, “The Promise Peepers: Religious Revival or Third Wave of The Religious Right?,” *Review of Religious Research*, 2001, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Randy Phillips, “Stand in The Gap” (Promise Keepers, Washington, D.C., October 4, 1997), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?92262-1/promise-keepers-rally>.

<sup>24</sup> Phillips.

<sup>25</sup> The Seven Promises represent the main tenets of the movement, but a discussion of them is beyond the scope of this project. They can be found at “7 Promises | Promise Keepers,” accessed January 24, 2020, <https://promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/7-promises/>.

rights” and “help Christian men retain their sense of male supremacy, now couched as ‘leadership.’”<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, this nuancing of ideology has led Promise Keepers to receive criticism from all sides. While feminists perceived the movement as a threat, some conservative Christians asserted that teaching men to be “good boys . . . [who] keep their promises” was a huge mistake.<sup>27</sup> By the time Promise Keepers had lost momentum at the turn of the millennium, John Eldredge had emerged as the new voice of Christian hypermasculinity.

### *The 2000s: John Eldredge*

Today, Christian author and counselor John Eldredge is the primary representative of hypermasculine Christianity. His popular book *Wild at Heart* was first published in 2001, in part as a response to the Promise Keepers movement. Eldredge was displeased by the vulnerable male leadership proposed by the Promise Keepers. In his view, that model does not describe the true nature of a man. In *Wild at Heart*, Eldredge attempted to define what he believed to be the God-given characteristics of a man. The book was a huge success and, as of 2017, “the English language version has sold over 4.5 million copies.”<sup>28</sup> In January 2020, the book held second place in Amazon’s Best Seller in Christian Men’s Issues and in Amazon’s Men’s Gender Studies ranks.<sup>29</sup> In an age

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<sup>26</sup> Everton, “The Promise Keepers,” 53; Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (Guilford Press, 2000), 210.

<sup>27</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Harper Collins, 2011), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Philip T. Duncan, “Nurturing Voyeurism, Vibrant Sexism, and Violence: Why We Can’t (Yet) Afford to Forget about Wild at Heart,” *Priscilla Papers* 31, no. 1 (2017): 3.

<sup>29</sup> “Amazon Best Sellers: Best Christian Men’s Issues,” accessed January 24, 2020, [https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Christian-Mens-Issues/zgbs/books/7259417011/ref=zg\\_bs\\_nav\\_b\\_3\\_12333](https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Christian-Mens-Issues/zgbs/books/7259417011/ref=zg_bs_nav_b_3_12333); “Amazon Best Sellers: Best Men’s Gender Studies,” accessed January 24, 2020, [https://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/11262/ref=pd\\_zg\\_hrsr\\_books](https://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/11262/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_books).

where everything changes so quickly, Eldredge's work remains a key text for discussions about hypermasculine Christianity. For that reason, I will analyze *Wild at Heart* for its focus on gender essentialism, looking at Eldredge's conception of God's design for men and the role that churches must play in light of that. Where relevant, I discuss other works that display similar characteristics and rely on Eldredge's teachings about gender or parenting.

### *Essentialism*

Eldredge believes that God creates men fundamentally different from women. In his words, "there is a masculine heart and a feminine heart, which in their own ways reflect or portray to the world God's heart."<sup>30</sup> As explained in Chapter 1, I am not opposed to the core of this idea: I believe that God creates women and men with different characteristics. However, Eldredge's essentialism eisegetes his views of gender roles into Scripture. Such a move starts with an understanding of Creation that only considers Genesis 2.

Eldredge believes the "wildness" of the masculine heart can be traced to the Garden of Eden, better yet, to outside the Garden. Eldredge interprets Genesis 2:7-8 to mean that "man was born from the outback, from the untamed part of creation. [Only] afterwards he is brought to Eden" and that is why "ever since then boys have never been at home indoors, and men have had an insatiable longing to explore."<sup>31</sup> Here, Eldredge implies that Adam was never at home in Eden. The first man was already frustrated by a "tamed world," which would mean that God's decision was less than good. Like other

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<sup>30</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Eldredge, 4.

prominent essentialists, Eldredge ignores the Creation narrative of Genesis 1, in which there is no mention of a Garden, thus no separation between tamed and untamed.<sup>32</sup>

Through his selective reading of Scripture, Eldredge sanctifies traditional masculine behavior, a technique that he uses throughout the book.

Eldredge's particular interpretation of Scripture shapes his essentialism into three main masculine desires: "a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue."<sup>33</sup> Men crave a battle to fight because "aggression is part of the masculine design" because "the man is made in the image of God . . . [and] 'the Lord is a warrior' (Ex 15:3)."<sup>34</sup> For Eldredge, violence among men is justified by the very character of God. This is why he not only normalizes but even praises one of his sons who manages to punch him so hard as to cause Eldredge to bleed.<sup>35</sup> For him, this behavior is not something to be punished or discouraged, it is something that comes directly from God and must be celebrated as such.

The second thing that men need, according to Eldredge, is an adventure to live. This is intrinsically tied to his interpretation of Genesis 2. The first man was uncomfortable in the tame environment of the Garden, because adventure is "a deep spiritual longing written into the soul of [every] man."<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Eldredge believes that modern men are uncomfortable in tame urban environments, which is why he narrates his

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<sup>32</sup> For examples of this essentialist move, see John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Eldredge, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Eldredge, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Eldredge, 5.

own journey into the wilderness “looking for [his] heart.”<sup>37</sup> But the sense of adventure goes beyond just being in touch with nature; Eldredge and his followers believe that adventure is anything that offers a certain degree of challenge for a man, which is necessary to keep him entertained. David Murrow, one of Eldredge’s disciples, follows this rationale to assert that “men fear heaven because it sounds so dull. No challenge. No uncertainty. No fun. In heaven there’s nothing to do” because all will praise God forever; thus he asks: “Guys, which sounds better to you: eternal singing or eternal sex? Is it any wonder why Mormonism and Islam are growing so rapidly and are so popular with males?”<sup>38</sup> To support his beliefs about masculinity, Eldredge and his supporters not only eisegete their ideas into Scripture but also dismiss unapologetically other parts that do not fit their definition of fun.

The third aspect of the masculine identity in *Wild at Heart* is a beauty to rescue. In this section Eldredge explores romantic relationships between men and women, arguing that “the deep cry of a girl’s heart is am I lovely? . . . This is core to her identity, the way she bears the image of God”<sup>39</sup> Eldredge’s essentialism reduces women to objects of a benevolent patriarch who acts like a fairytale prince. Eldredge believes that it is “under the shadow of a man’s strength [that] a woman finds rest”<sup>40</sup> Of course, this rhetorical move only works because Eldredge’s scriptural bibliography remains limited, excluding characters like Deborah (Jdgs. 4) and the women who financially supported Jesus’s ministry (Lk. 8:1-3).

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<sup>37</sup> Eldredge, 3.

<sup>38</sup> David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Thomas Nelson, 2011), 87.

<sup>39</sup>Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 182.

<sup>40</sup> Eldredge, 187.

## *The Problem with Christianity*

John Eldredge's main critique of churches is that they ask men to be "nice guys," because "the church wants a tamed man."<sup>41</sup> Since "tamed" is the opposite of Eldredge's conception of masculinity, he believes that churches are unable to reach men because what they preach and do is simply not attractive for the masculine soul. For Eldredge, that problem is deeply rooted in Christian tradition. He argues for example, that most, if not all the pictures of Jesus, look like a "gentle guy with children all around. Kind of like Mother Teresa."<sup>42</sup> Those images are unable to captivate men and fail to capture the nature of Jesus. While he does not say it explicitly, Eldredge implies that churches must change the way they think about Jesus and the gospel story in order to reach men. Eldredge's suggestion may seem extreme and unrealistic, but several Christian communities have adopted parts of it.

In the two decades following the publication of *Wild at Heart*, Eldredge's influence has continued. Across the United States, other outspoken hypermasculine preachers have emerged, and men's ministries have been reshaped. John Eldredge has published several supplemental materials on *Wild at Heart*, including a facilitator's guide for Bible studies. He also leads a biannual "Wild at Heart Boot Camp," which he describes as a "no-BS trek into the deep passions and desires of a man's heart."<sup>43</sup> Eldredge has also inspired men like Mark Driscoll, who became a celebrity pastor in the 2000s by repeatedly talking about sex and criticizing men for their effeminacy. In a

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<sup>41</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Eldredge, 22.

<sup>43</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart Facilitator's Guide*, Large Print Edition edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004); "Wild at Heart Boot Camp | Ransomed Heart," accessed January 25, 2020, <https://www.ransomedheart.com/events/wild-at-heart-boot-camp>.

forum post under the pseudonym of William Wallace II, Driscoll declared that “we live in a pussified nation” and called “Promise Keepers homoerotic worship loving mama’s boy sensitive emasculated neutered exact male replica evangellyfish.”<sup>44</sup> Years later, during a church planting training, Driscoll declared that “the Church is almost completely effeminate in America . . . and those men who do go to the church are effeminate, worthless men.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, Eldredge’s Christian hypermasculinity encouraged churches all around the country to create “fight clubs.”<sup>46</sup> In some churches, the name is metaphorical and shapes the rhetoric of the men’s ministry; in others, the fight club is very real.<sup>47</sup> The hypermasculine Christianity popularized by John Eldredge has certainly influenced the Church in many ways, but it is still the exception rather than the rule.

### *Conclusion*

From the nineteenth-century until today, hypermasculine movements have influenced Christianity, but they are always transient: a movement goes and another comes, without ever exerting lasting changes. All of these movements pointed at similar issues and proposed similar solutions: men are not attending church because Christianity is not masculine enough, therefore Christianity must change. Their cries are heard and

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<sup>44</sup> William Wallace II in Jessica Johnson, *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll’s Evangelical Empire* (Duke University Press, 2018), 52; Mark Driscoll confirmed to be William Wallace II in Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from An Emerging Missional Church* (Zondervan, 2009), 129.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *Biblical Porn*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Rebecca W. Poe Hays and Nicholas R. Werse, “Evangelicals and The Film Fight Club: A Cultural Comparison of Masculine Ideology,” *The Projector* 17, no. 2 (2017): 16–32.

<sup>47</sup> The Men’s Ministry of First Woodway Baptist Church, for example, calls its discipleship groups “Fight Clubs” and their larger meetings “Fight Night,” when they study the Bible but also do activities like axe throwing: First Woodway, “Men’s Ministry,” *First Woodway* (blog), July 5, 2016, <https://www.firstwoodway.org/men/>; For the more literal approach, see; Bryan Storkel, *Fight Church*, Documentary (Film Harvest, 2016).

churches take action in the suggested direction, but eventually things go back to how they were until a new movement appears. Underneath these temporary hypermasculine expressions, Christianity remains unchanged: preaching the love and kindness of a savior who, although “being in very nature God . . . humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

Why does hypermasculinity keep reappearing? Why do people keep looking for ways to adapt the faith to serve the desires of men? This is not a new phenomenon. The People of God have expected the faith to be masculine from the beginning. Jews expected a political Messiah who would overthrow Rome, yet the Nazarene carpenter disappointed them. While the hope of liberation amidst political oppression is justifiable, their image of a political Messiah was not just an image of hope. Because the People of God have always struggled to resist external influences, their Messiah was conceptualized as one powerful enough to rival Rome. Time and again, God’s People tried to adapt their worship to match what their neighbors were doing, so that it was more tangible, palatable, and attractive. It has been this way since the Golden calf, the altars in high places, and commerce in the Temple. The idea that churches need to do something different to regain men is an attempt to adapt Christianity according to the hypermasculine messages sent forth by media and society at large.

We cannot pretend that there is not a difference between the ways in which Christians are called to live and the ways in which society calls men to live. If we keep ignoring this paradox, the trend of hypermasculinity movements in the Church will continue, causing hurt and resentment. The answer is neither passivity nor reaction, but construction. Christians must develop constructive frameworks that explain why we

believe that men are also called to be kind and tender. And to do so, we must look at the  
One who called us to be Disciples.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Way of Jesus

What Would Jesus Do? This question served as a practical guide for young Christians in the late 1990s and well into the twenty-first century. Youth camps and church gift shops sell WWJD bracelets which remind wearers that Jesus is the supreme moral guide. The simple, yet meaningful nature of WWJD has encouraged many youth to seek to imitate Christ genuinely. Nonetheless, the simplicity of this movement is also a pitfall. “What Would Jesus Do?” is a complicated question, one that may not provide a simple answer for someone trying to make a particular decision. Jesus did many different things and, at times, had seemingly contradictory responses to similar situations. In Luke 22, for example, Jesus tells the disciples to buy swords and later chastises one of them for using the weapons. Moreover, the Gospels narrate the life of Jesus in first-century Palestine under the power of the Roman Empire, a context very different from twenty-first century America. Therefore, any attempt to follow Jesus Christ faithfully must take into consideration these complexities. Reflecting on “What Would Jesus Do?” is a good start, but Christians need a robust model of how to live ethically in light of that question. In this chapter, I introduce the concept of *analogical imagination* as a framework for Christian Ethics, offering two examples of how Jesus’s messages address the problem of hypermasculinity.

### *Analogical Imagination*

*Analogical imagination* is a method that interprets Jesus's actions in light of 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman society and imagines ways to reproduce analogous actions in our own context. In *Go and Do Likewise*, William Spohn explains that the Gospel is a narrative in which Jesus "does not come teaching timeless truths or moral principles but proclaiming a radically new initiative of God."<sup>1</sup> That being the case, "the story of Jesus cannot be copied univocally, like a timeless blueprint." Rather, Christians must "discover in the details of parables, encounters, and sayings patterns that normatively guide us in new situations."<sup>2</sup> Spohn's method holds in tension both the imitation of Christ as a supreme moral guide and contextual differences which require creative adaptation. Thus, Spohn's analogical proposition is this: as the incarnate life of Jesus is to His context, so must be the life of modern Christians to their context. Hence, our first step is to understand the relationship of Jesus to His first-century Palestinian context.

The four Gospels are the starting point for any Christian seeking to imitate Jesus analogously. There, we can identify teachings and actions that characterize Jesus's response to the people He met and the spiritual-sociopolitical environment in which He lived. Often, such indicators are repeated several times throughout a gospel narrative, and that is why reading each Gospel as a continuous textual unit, instead of dividing the text into chapters and verses, may be helpful. The goal is not to find "abstract considerations of doctrinal or moral principles" that can be taken out of context and still make sense, but

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<sup>1</sup> Spohn borrows the concept of *analogical imagination* from David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (Crossroad, 1998); William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 50–56.

to understand what the incarnate ministry of Christ represented for His context.<sup>3</sup> In the next section, I look at Jesus's attitudes toward specific aspects of His context as described in the Gospel of Luke. This reading will show that Jesus proposes a fundamentally countercultural lifestyle, challenging hegemonic behaviors that we now understand as hypermasculine.

### *How Jesus Challenges Hypermasculine Behavior*

The most countercultural words of Jesus are found in the Sermon on the Mount, or in the Lukan account, the Sermon on the Plain. Earlier, Jesus had declared that the Lord had sent Him "to proclaim good news to the poor . . . to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). Soon after, in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus expounds upon this important statement (Lk.6:20-26). If the ministry of Christ was to the poor and oppressed, as He had declared, here the Lord clarifies that He did not come to raise them up according to hierarchies of the time. Rather, Christ blesses their current state of powerlessness. Jesus communicates that His kingdom will bring change of life for them, but not in the ways that they may have imagined. For the followers of Jesus, transformation would begin with a change of their own attitude in face of the current state of affairs. Such a novel message takes Jesus's disciples by surprise, and they fail to understand it in many instances (Lk 9:46-48; Lk 9:55-56). Nevertheless, Jesus maintains the consistency of His "upside down" framework, repeating the same teachings through words and deeds all throughout His ministry. Below, I explore two examples: the call to powerlessness and the call to non-violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Spohn, 51.

## *The Role of Power*

The first sentences of the Sermon on the Plain, known as the Beatitudes, establish a categorical reversal that favors people traditionally disenfranchised. In the four Beatitudes, Jesus deems “blessed” those who are poor, hungry, crying, and ostracized. Although each of these groups can be analyzed separately, it is also possible to generalize them as the ones whom society views as most unfortunate, the powerless. That is why it is surprising that Jesus calls them “blessed” (μακάριος). As David Garland notes, this term “was usually ascribed to those who had the things that were judged to make for earthly happiness.”<sup>4</sup> However, Jesus reassigns meaning to the term when He points to a future hope. After the Beatitudes, Jesus pronounces antonymous Woes, clarifying that the condition of those who were usually seen as fortunate was actually not a desirable one. Together, the Beatitudes and Woes establish that Jesus’s followers should not seek after power according to this world. Such a surprising message took much repetition for the disciples to understand.

Soon after the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus explains His ideas about powerlessness twice. First, Jesus questions the apostles about their understanding of His identity, and Peter answers correctly, saying that Jesus is “God’s Messiah” (Lk. 9:20). Likely, Peter’s answer assumed a typical Messianic hope “that God would come and straighten out this world; it was not longing for life in some transcendent realm.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, when Jesus announced that He would suffer and eventually die, He was “challeng[ing] their traditional framework and categories for understanding what God’s Messiah . . . must

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Garland, *Luke*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 2012), 275.

<sup>5</sup> *Go and Do Likewise*, 77.

do.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus goes on to explain that a similarly hard future was also in store for the disciples, who would have to “deny themselves and take up their cross daily to follow [Him]” (Lk. 9:23). As several scholars have commented, during Jesus’s time, taking up the cross was a literal image of dying by the worst form of death.<sup>7</sup> Persons carrying a cross knew that they would inevitably die in what the Romans considered the “extreme penalty,” reserved for the worst criminals.<sup>8</sup> Rather than ascend in the worldly ranks of power, the disciples were called to a path that would result in the most shameful type of death.

Jesus’s second declaration directly responds to the disciples’ argument about “which of them would be the greatest” (Lk. 9:46). Joel Green points out that “persons in any gathering in Greco-Roman antiquity would naturally be concerned with questions of relative status,” but Jesus intervenes in their conversation, effectively demonstrating the futility of their debate.<sup>9</sup> Placing a child into the center of their conversation, Jesus reverses their understandings of power. In that context “children had no power, no status, and no rights,”<sup>10</sup> yet Jesus calls the disciples to “welcome” them as “a social equal or one whose honor was above one’s own.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus’s conclusion goes right to the heart of the matter as He declares that “it is the one who is least among [the disciples], who is the

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<sup>6</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 390.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bolling Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2008), 284; Garland, *Luke*, 390; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 373.

<sup>8</sup> Vinson, *Luke*, 284.

<sup>9</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 391.

<sup>10</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 404.

<sup>11</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 391.

greatest” (Lk. 9:48). Despite Jesus’s clarity, a very similar argument arises during the Last Supper.

Jesus’s response to the argument at the Last Supper is a reinstatement of the countercultural nature of His ministry first laid out in the Sermon on the Plain. In Luke’s record, the disciples are arguing over “which of them was considered to be the greatest” (Lk. 22:24). Jesus’s response to their quarrel establishes a stark difference between “the kings of the Gentiles [who] lord it over them” and the disciples. Following Christ’s example, “the greatest among [them] should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.” (Lk. 22:26). This categorical reversal comes at the end of Jesus’s ministry and is consistent with everything that He had taught the disciples before. As we look at Jesus for a model of masculinity, His teachings about power indicate that He is aware that we may be tempted by the hegemonic characteristics of traditional masculinity. Nevertheless, He calls us to reject them in favor of a life of humility and service.

### *Non-Violence*

Another remarkably countercultural teaching that first appears in the Sermon on the Plain is the call to resist evil with love. As noted in Luke 6:22-23, Jesus is aware that many of His followers will suffer persecution or hatred, and here He provides specific guidance on how they are to respond. He tells them to “love [their] enemies and do good to those who hate [them]” (Lk. 6:27). This command is followed by detailed instructions to clarify that loving enemies is “expressed in doing good—that is, not by passivity in the face of opposition but in proactivity.”<sup>12</sup> Amidst these detailed instructions is the biblical

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<sup>12</sup> Green, 272.

text most often connected to non-violence: Jesus's call to "turn the other cheek" (Lk. 6:28). In Jesus's context, "the blow to the cheek is more for humiliation than for injury."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, one who offers the other cheek is performing an act of "active non-retaliation" showing that "one is not humiliated and that one does not need to strike back."<sup>14</sup> Hence, Jesus's calls to non-violence is more than a call to passivity, it is a call for concrete actions that break the chain of evil and bring healing to the world. It is a radical message that Jesus teaches both in theory and in practice.

Jesus faces violent opposition several times throughout His ministry, yet His actions remain consistent with His teachings. Toward the end of His earthly ministry, however, it almost seems like Jesus has changed His mind, as He says to the disciples: "if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one." (Lk. 22:36). Among biblical scholars, this statement has proven puzzling because it appears to contradict Jesus's previous teachings about non-violence.<sup>15</sup> However, the next scene in which swords are mentioned offers the clarity we need to solidify our understanding of Jesus's teachings on that matter. When Judas arrives in the Garden of Gethsemane followed by a mob, one of Jesus's disciples thinks that he knows exactly what to do and strikes the servant of the high priest on the ear with the sword. Yet, Jesus breaks his expectation and instead of joining the fight, He "touched the man's ear, and healed him" (Lk. 22:51). Jesus's non-violent response not only does tangible good to His enemy, aligning with His previous

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<sup>13</sup> Vinson, *Luke*, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Vinson, 187.

<sup>15</sup> Garland and Vinson explore different interpretations for this passage and both suggest that a metaphorical interpretation is the most plausible. Garland, *Luke*, 870–71; Vinson, *Luke*, 686–88. Green, however, does not even mention other possibilities, asserting that the very "mention of the need to purchase a sword adds to this picture a metaphorical reference to the coming reality" Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 774–75.

teachings—it also foreshadows His “dying request that his enemies be forgiven (Lk. 22:34).”<sup>16</sup> The way of Jesus is surprising because it not only avoids non-violence, avoiding negative reciprocity—it also requires *active goodness*.

### *What About Violent Jesus?*

I would be remiss, however, to ignore those passages in which Jesus sounds or acts violently. The first problematic passage is found in Luke 12, where Jesus declares that He has come “to bring fire on the earth,” not coming “to bring peace on earth . . . but division” (Lk. 12:49-51). At first glance, this self-portrait of Jesus seems to be at odds with the “one who earlier characterized his ministry as ‘good news to the poor,’”<sup>17</sup> and whose nativity was asserted to bring “peace on earth” (Lk. 2:14). However, the larger context of this passage indicates that Jesus’s “fire” and “division” are negative images, but not violent ones. As Garland explains, “the strife Jesus describes is the inevitable result created by preaching the gospel,” but it is not a call for Jesus’s followers to engage in violent behavior.<sup>18</sup> The countercultural good news of Christ would naturally disrupt the sense of peace sustained by the status quo of an oppressive system, and the followers of Jesus should be prepared for that.

Moreover, this passage is embedded in an eschatological context that must be taken into account. Most of Luke 12 addresses things related to the final judgment, death, and God’s sovereignty through it all. Verses 49-53 are preceded by parables regarding the coming of the Son of Man and followed by Jesus’s calling for his listeners to “evaluate

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<sup>16</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 7

<sup>17</sup> Green, 508.

<sup>18</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 531.

this time” according to the signs they are seeing (Lk. 12:57). Jesus is not calling His followers to enact the final days but to acknowledge its imminence and be prepared, so that they may be found doing the will of the Lord (Lk. 12:42-43). Furthermore, as Spohn notes, “the interpretation of biblical images and stories needs to be defended on theological grounds,”<sup>19</sup> and orthodox Christian theology asserts that the enacting of final judgment belongs to God, not to us. Therefore, the fire-thrower Jesus of Luke 12 cannot be used as the ideal image of Christian masculinity, nor can other eschatological images of Jesus. In *Wild at Heart*, John Eldredge tries to use the warrior depicted in Revelation 19. Eldredge asserts that the sword-bearing Christ of John’s vision looks “a lot more like William Wallace than it does Mother Theresa” and therefore is more relatable to Christian men.<sup>20</sup> However, we are not called to act as the judge of nations, we are called to act as faithful and prudent servants.

The second complicated passage is Jesus’s cleansing of the Temple. Whereas the abstract nature of the previous text could distance Jesus from violent actions, here Jesus actively “drive[s] out” the sellers from the Jerusalem Temple (Lk 19:45). It is a concrete action that other evangelists even depict with physical details, such as the overturning of tables (Mk. 11:15; Matt. 21:12). Luke may describe the scene in less detail than both Mark and Matthew, but the expression “drive out” alone conveys a sense of hostility, since in other instances it refers to the exorcism of demons (Lk 9:40; Lk 11:14). Nonetheless, the cleansing of the Temple can also be understood as an action of judgement that is reserved for God. On one level, it can be read as a “prophetic sign” of

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<sup>19</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Harper Collins, 2011), 29. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 29.

the Temple's future destruction and of God's final judgment.<sup>21</sup> On another level, it is an action of "God pronouncing judgement" against a corrupt system that oppressed the poor at that very moment.<sup>22</sup> In any case, those are *divine* actions that call Jesus's followers not to act in the same manner, but to respond by correcting our ways and realizing the radical character of Christ's gospel, which has no space for practices that oppress and exclude people. We are followers of Jesus, called to imitate Him, but we can never forget that we are not God, to whom judgement is reserved.

### *Application*

The faithful reading of Jesus's life, coupled with sound theological principles, must create a model for modern-day disciples to follow analogously. Incarnate in first-century Palestine, Jesus challenged cultural ideas about power and violence, as well as many other things that I did not include in this analysis, such as the role of women<sup>23</sup> and the place for persons with disability in society.<sup>24</sup> But what do those challenges mean for Christian men in twenty-first century America? Paying attention to the differences in context and role, we cannot do the exact things that Jesus did, but our actions ought to "be analogical because they will be partly the same, and partly different, but basically similar to the relevant portion[s] of the story of Jesus."<sup>25</sup> If Jesus blessed the powerless

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<sup>21</sup> Vinson, *Luke*, 607.

<sup>22</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 775.

<sup>23</sup> While this is not the focus of my project, this is an extremely important issue. For one of the most seminal treatments of the subject, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christology: Can a Male Savior Save Women?," in *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 116–38.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of Jesus's attitudes toward persons with disability, see Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (InterVarsity Press, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 54.

and disenfranchised and called all His followers to non-violence, Christian men ought to challenge the hegemonic masculinity of the West by rejecting hypermasculine ideals such as violent behavior, the will to power, the devaluing of women, and the crippling of emotions.

## CONCLUSION

### Reimagining Masculinity

Hypermasculinity prompts the modern man to see every day as a battle, other people as either enemies or allies, and himself as a warrior. However, an imaginative reading of the Gospels demonstrates that those messages are not what God intended for us. Hypermasculinity marked my childhood with bullying and doubts about my worth as a man. Many years later when I saw that boy at camp crying because Christians were encouraging him to behave like a stereotypical man, I realized that the Church needed to address this problem. Thus, what can we, as Christians, do to reject hypermasculinity in light of Christ's teachings?

### *Practical Solutions*

#### *Reject Violence*

Christians ought to reject the ideals of a violent society. Boys need to hear from their parents, and especially from their fathers, that violence is not a marker of masculinity. Adult men who were raised to believe that justice warrants violence must realize that the Kingdom of God repudiates this belief. Jesus rejected the norms of a violent society and adopted the image of flourishing that God has envisioned for humanity from the beginning. As Nate Pyle points out in *Man Enough*, God put the first man and the first woman in a garden to *care for it*. Adam was a gardener; Jesus, the New Adam, was mistaken for a gardener (Jn. 20:15).<sup>1</sup> Men, we are called to care for God's

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<sup>1</sup> Pyle, *Man Enough*, 200–201.

creation and to care for one another. Therefore, boys need to hear that it is not shameful to lose a fight, it is shameful to enter a fight, because our goal is love one another, not to compete for honor and power.

### *Substitute competition for collaboration*

Christian men must be willing to give power away even though hypermasculine culture encourages them to hoard it. We need to reconsider the ways in which the lust for power affects relationships among men, because physical violence is not the only thing that harms people. Following in the steps of Jesus, we ought to reject unhealthy competition in the workplace that only reinforces utilitarian views of men and hinders real friendship. We must create environments of genuine collaboration in which men celebrate each other's accomplishments as their own. We must respond to Jesus's call to serve one another in humility and love. Undoubtedly, such attitudes will not please certain firms or industries in which competition seems to be the only practical way to success; but the way of Jesus never *seemed* practical or even successful.

### *Empower women*

As competition gives way to collaboration, Christian men must also to reconsider the ways in which we treat women and relate to traditionally feminine characteristics, like expressing feelings. Jesus values women as God's image bearers, thus He takes time to listen to their requests (Mk. 7:24-30), to praise their actions (Lk. 21:1-4), and to teach them (Lk. 10:38-42). Likewise, modern Christian men are called to shine light into the darkness of sexism that leads to unequal opportunities, harassment, and abuse. We are called to be *feminists*. Although this term may cause discomfort in many Christian

circles, it is not as loaded as many think. To be a feminist is simply to be “an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women.”<sup>2</sup> The goal is not to put women in the seat of oppressive power that men have held for centuries. Instead, the goal is to break such hierarchies between “male and female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

### *Express our feelings*

A secondary consequence of gender equality is that men are encouraged to express our feelings. As explained in Chapter 1, men fear being perceived as not masculine because society tends to devalue characteristics traditionally associated with women, such as demonstrating emotions. Thus, when we reject this hypermasculine idea and value women as equals, we are free to express our own emotions, just like Jesus cried when he entered Jerusalem and foretold its fate (Lk.19:41-44). Displaying fear and boldness, disappointment and gratitude, sadness and happiness, we are true to ourselves and free from the weight of wearing a mask every day. Consequently, we are able to connect with our children and break the cycle of the *father wound* that causes so much hurt. In fact, it is only when we vulnerably express our feelings that we are truly able to connect with anyone. Responding to the divine invitation, we come as we are to the presence of Christ in the face of our brothers and sisters.

### *Talk about hypermasculinity*

Churches must acknowledge that men *are* receiving hypermasculine messages both in culture and in some Christian circles. This issue needs to be addressed by local congregation. Contrary to what advocates of hypermasculine Christianity argue, churches

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<sup>2</sup> “Feminist, Adj. and N.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/69193>.

do not need change in order to attract men. However, churches do need to explain why Christianity is incompatible with the hypermasculine ideals prevalent in modern society. A 2015 study concluded that while Christian men could identify hypermasculine ideas in traditional media, they “had difficulty recalling specific messages from the pulpit about masculinity and manhood.”<sup>3</sup> The few Christians that talk about issues of masculinity do so to promote hypermasculinity rather than to rebuke it. That needs to change. Churches that have understood the problem of hypermasculinity must speak against it clearly and directly. This conversation needs to happen in men’s ministries, where leaders can create safe spaces for members to ask questions and to discuss their thoughts. Concomitantly, accountability groups should ask its members how they have been dealing with issues of hypermasculinity on a weekly basis. Churches can no longer afford to remain silent about hypermasculinity, they must have these conversations openly and often.

### *Form Christians*

All these practical solutions are expressions of the primary task of the Church: Christian formation. The Church must shape modern disciples into followers and imitators of Jesus. If we want to challenge hypermasculine frameworks, all the practices listed here must be interwoven with the spiritual disciplines. Therefore Christian communities ought to do what they have been doing for millennia: teach, preach, serve, pray, praise, and worship. Gathered or scattered, Christians encourage one another to practice these disciplines that form us into followers of Christ. The telling and retelling of the Gospel stories, the humility of service and prayer, and the surrender of adoration tune

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<sup>3</sup> Stewart M. Hoover and Curtis D. Coats, *Does God Make the Man?: Media, Religion, and the Crisis of Masculinity* (NYU Press, 2015), 157.

our spiritual ears to Christ's frequency so that we can "spot the rhyme between present experience and the sayings and stories of Jesus."<sup>4</sup> Then, Christian men, we can follow the steps of the One who calls us softly and gently, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 63.

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