

The Masculinist #11: Has the Church Become an Unwitting Enabler of Family Breakdown?

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Is this newsletter resonating with you or stimulating your thinking? Then I need your help. The percentage of people who read these emails is off the charts compared to most email newsletters. I've gotten positive feedback. And very few people have unsubscribed. But to justify the investment of time in this, and the risk I'm taking on by writing some of this stuff, I need to see my subscriber base growing. So although some of this might be too hot to handle for some, please step out yourself and pass it along to those you think could benefit, especially Christian pastors and lay leaders, because I need your help to make this a success.

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My Girlfriend Dumped Me for a Terrorist



Philip Nowell's girlfriend of eight years, Charisse O'Leary, moved out of their home and then dumped him by text. As it happens, she had apparently fallen for London Bridge jihadi killer Rachid Redouane, whom she married just twelve weeks after breaking it off with Nowell. He [can't understand how this happened](#) and thinks Redouane manipulated her in order to get a visa:

Phillip claimed that Redouane may have flattered newly-single Charisse, eight years his senior, and seduced her. 'She was not the impulsive type and the Charisse I knew would not rush into things,' he said. 'I don't know what was going on in her mind at the time, but she might have been lonely having just come out of a long relationship with me. I was shocked and upset when it ended. She may have been the same. I never met or spoke to

her husband but he just doesn't seem to be the type of man she would go for. I don't know how they met or how he got her to marry so quickly.'

How do we make sense of something like this?

What Movie Are You Watching?

We like to view ourselves as rational creatures, but in fact we are subject to a large numbers of biases. One of them is [confirmation bias](#). We tend to notice facts that seem to fit what we already believe. Once we start seeing the world a certain way, we interpret everything we see as consistent with that view.

One way we see this is in gestalt diagrams. Here's a famous one.



Some people see a picture of a young woman, others of an old lady. We can even switch our perspective back and forth consciously. Which one is “really there”? Both and neither.

Scott Adams likes to talk about this in terms of movies. In politics, for example, all of us have a movie playing in our head with our political narrative. And the events that occur are interpreted as being consistent with the plot of our movie. Other people are seeing the same things but watching a different movie, and thus drawing different conclusions. Broadly speaking the Republican movie and the Democratic movie are the two different movies Americans are watching in politics. As with the gestalt diagram, neither of them is objectively correct and both are internally consistent with many observations in the world. Both also evolve over time.

The Church’s Movie About Marriage and Relationships

As I pointed out in *Masc #3* (avail on request), the church’s film since around 1800 stars wives in the role of virtuous, suffering hero and husbands in the role of villain. To quote briefly from British academic Callum Brown:

After 1800, the religiosity of women was paramount to the evangelical scheme for moral revolution. They were regarded as having special qualities which placed them at the fulcrum of family sanctity....Though the female evangelical narrative structure might vary in these ways, there were uniform characteristics. First, women’s conversions were usually taken for granted; the issue was their ability to choose a godly husband or reform an ungodly one. Second, women’s spiritual destiny was virtually never portrayed as a battle with temptation or real sin; fallen women did not appear as central characters, and none of the usual temptations like drink or gambling ever seemed to be an issue with them. The problem is the man, sometimes the father, but more commonly the boyfriend, fiancé, or husband, who is a drinker, a gambler, keeps the ‘bad company’ of ‘rough lads’ and is commonly a womanizer. The man is the agency of the virtuous woman’s downfall; he does not make her bad, but does make her suffer and poor.

This is clearly the screenplay of the church’s film on marriage into the present day. Here are a few of samples to give you a flavor. First from Justin Buzzard of Central Peninsula Church in the San Francisco Bay Area. Here’s what he wrote in his book [*Date Your Wife*](#):

Your wife isn’t the problem. You’re the problem. I’m the problem. Men are the problem. If you want to change a marriage, change the man. If you want to change your marriage, you must first see that you are the main

problem in your marriage... You are what is wrong with you marriage. It's your fault. This is the second most important truth to learn from this book: it's **your** fault.

And Glenn Stanton of Focus on the Family wrote his book [Secure Daughters, Confident Sons](#):

If women can't find good men to marry, they will instead compromise themselves by merely living with a make-do man or getting babies from him without marriage. Unfortunately, this describes exactly the new shape of family growth in Western nations by exploding margins: unmarried cohabitation and unmarried childbearing by twenty-, thirty-, and even forty-something women far outpace any other family formation trend in terms of growth over the last ten years. Women want to marry and have daddies for their babies. But if they can't find good men to commit themselves to, well... Our most pressing social problem today is a man deficit.

In this case, not only are men responsible for all problems in a marriage, they are basically responsible for women's sinful behaviors outside of it.

And Matt Schmucker, writing in a book called [Sex and the Supremacy of Christ](#), edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, said:

We do not want a brother standing at the altar on his wedding day looking at his beautiful bride only to imagine behind her the boys and men who took advantage of her and robbed her of the trust and confidence that she now needs for her husband. We do not want a sister standing at the altar on her wedding day looking at her handsome groom only to imagine behind him a string of relationships with girls and women he failed to honor, and knowing that images in his head from pornography use and past flings may stick with him for a long time.

Note that he blames men both for their own sins, and for the acts committed by women. He said men "took advantage of" and "robbed" them.

These sorts of things are very consistent with what I've personally experienced in churches. For example, on Father's Day services I hear fathers described as de facto child abusers. But I've never yet been to a Mother's Day service in which mothers were anything other than unconditionally honored.

Holes in the Evangelical Movie Plot

As with gestalt diagrams, there's a reason we have these movies in our head. They encapsulate at least part of the truth. It's easy for me to personally call to mind stories that fit the Evangelical narrative. For example, I knew a couple named Michael and Maya in a common law marriage where, after they moved back to his hometown, he reconnected with a high school girlfriend and unceremoniously dumped Maya for her, believing that she was his soul mate. It's almost a clichéd story, but it really happened. I can think of more, including husbands who, for example, fell into serious drug addictions and destroyed their families.

Other stories are more ambiguous, but we can still figure out how to make them fit with our storyline. For example, in the news item at the beginning, we can assume that Nowell must have done something wrong to drive his girlfriend away. The news story came from him, after all. He could either be lying or clueless. And of course the terrorist she married could very well have manipulated his ex. Nowell speculates this is the case himself, which means he's probably also watching the same film. So a woman dumping her long-term boyfriend to marry a mass murdering jihadi doesn't need to have any personal blame, but can be a victim of the men in question.

Here's another case. Evangelical superstar John Piper's son Barnabas was [recently divorced by his wife](#) Lesley:

Eleven and a half years- that's how long it lasted. Eleven and half years of marriage and then gone. It ended in death, though nobody died. Just the marriage. I say *just*, but it is a death as much as any person. When she told me she was finished it was like a knock at the door from the police chaplain – utter shock, not real, numbness, anger, fear. Lots of fear. Or was it grief?

In this case we see that she divorced him, and that it came as a shock to him, though he knew the marriage was not in good shape. I googled around and there's no evidence that he had an affair or committed any divorce worthy actions. Not even [Wartburg Watch](#) was able to dig up any marital dirt on him, which is saying something.

Of course, that doesn't prove anything. After all, according to John Piper's own marriage theology, God is going to primarily hold Barnabas responsible for this divorce. And as we know, absence of evidence is not evidence of

absence. It's certainly possible that Barnabas is a flat out bad guy. After all, we'd expect him to hide or downplay anything he did that was bad. That's just human nature. And if he was surprised that his wife divorced him, maybe he's clueless about his own behavior too. So this can fit our film script too.

But there are stories that are a lot harder to make fit, in part because we have personal knowledge. Take my friend Sam. Sam was married for a decade or so. His wife drifted away from her faith and started having affairs. He forgave her and stayed with her, trying to make the marriage work. She continued to have affairs and got pregnant by one of the men she was sleeping with. Sam forgave her, committed to staying with her and raising the resulting daughter as if it was his own. This didn't interest her, and she separated from him, and ultimately divorced him. Sam, who had been trying to be a positive father figure in the little girl's life, had his contact with her cut off. His ex-wife was now on to yet another new boyfriend, and with the girl's father and new boyfriend in the little girl's life, she felt it would be confusing to have third person involved.

Then there's my own former pastor Kevin of New Life Community Church West Lakeview in Chicago. Kevin was married with five children. Three years ago he was struck by a hit and run driver while riding his scooter. This caused a traumatic brain injury that nearly killed him and left him permanently disabled. His wife in short order ended up having at least one affair, then after a year and a half shipped Kevin back to his parents and divorced him.

These last couple stories are a lot tougher to make fit with the Evangelical script. So what did the church do? In the case of Pastor Kevin, the divorce appears to have been mostly swept under the rug. It was some time after Kevin was back with his parents before most people even found out for sure she was divorcing him. It's treated like a dark family secret everyone knows but nobody mentions. His ex-wife actually still receives public support and affirmation on social media from people in the church. (I actually don't know where or if she attends church today, but I assume she is no longer actually attending the church Kevin pastored).

Surveying the Statistics

The plural of anecdote is not data, as they say. What do the data say about divorce? It's well established that [women initiate the bulk of divorces](#), around 65-70% of them. This is a huge disparity. If women filed for divorce at the same rate as men, this would eliminate 40% of all divorces!

I'm curious: were you aware of this fact? Have you seen it talked about in the church? I don't know if I've ever seen it directly referenced. For example, in *Masc #9* I mentioned Tim Keller's book [The Meaning of Marriage](#). Although it is replete with statistics, I didn't see this one in there – and I was looking. And Keller is considered by many the gold standard.

Who files for divorce is an important marital stat. But the more important question is why they did it. After all, if women are divorcing husbands who are having affairs or beating them, most people wouldn't have a problem with that.

What does the literature say on this topic? It's easy to find studies finding that women file for divorce for opportunistic reasons. For example, a widely-cited study by Margaret Brinig and Douglas Allen called "[These Boots Are Made For Walking: Why Most Divorce Filers Are Women](#)" found:

Our results are consistent with our hypothesis that filing behavior is driven by self-interest at the time of divorce. Individuals file for divorce when there are marital assets that may be appropriated through divorce, as in the case of leaving when they have received the benefit of educational investments such as advanced degrees. However, individuals may also file when they are being exploited within the marriage, as when the other party commits a major violation of the marriage contract, such as cruelty. Interestingly, though, cruelty amounts to only 6% of all divorce filings in Virginia. We have found that who gets the children is by far the most important component in deciding who files for divorce, particularly when there is little quarrel about property, as when the separation is long. [emphasis added]

An [interesting study](#) from last year by Alexandra Killewald at Harvard found that divorce was associated with men's failure to live up to the gender stereotype of breadwinner.

Financial considerations—wives' economic independence and total household income—are not predictive of divorce in either cohort. Time use, however, is associated with divorce risk in both cohorts. For marriages formed after 1975, husbands' lack of full-time employment is associated with higher risk of divorce, but neither wives' full-time employment nor wives' share of household labor is associated with divorce risk. Expectations of wives' homemaking may have eroded, but the husband breadwinner norm persists.

This would be consistent with the case of my former pastor, who became unable to work after his disabling injury. It's well known that men who experience longer term unemployment are at greater risk of divorce. New York Magazine had a [nice writeup on this study](#).

Michael Rosenfeld at Stanford also did some [interesting research](#) that found that while women initiate the bulk of divorces, when it comes to non-marital relationships, men and women equally initiate breakups. (The paper itself appears to be embargoed at this time so I'm not going to quote from it, but is coming out later this year).

There are many reasons why this might be. Men might behave worse as husbands than they do as boyfriends, for example. But in light of the Brinig and Allen study findings above, the ability to appropriate joint assets (or in some cases even today to be awarded alimony) through divorce vs. an inability to do so in dating breakups looms large as a potential driver. (It may also be that men are more committed to marriage vows than women, or somehow that marriage actually makes women less happy than being in a non-marital romantic relationship, but these are speculative).

There's more I could go through, but it doesn't matter. What matters is the movie we are watching in our heads.

If you are watching the Evangelical movie, my examples can either be made consistent with the plot, or treated as individual exceptions driven by some kind of extreme circumstances or "brokenness." You can also reassure yourself with many examples you personally know that confirm your plot.

Any studies are likewise irrelevant. You can assume I'm cherry picking. In fact, the studies I cited, though by researchers at gold standard schools like Harvard, don't fully agree with each other. If you click [this google search](#), you'll find studies galore finding all sorts of different primary drivers (infidelity, etc) of divorce. If there's one thing we know, it's that you can find a study to support almost any position you want. Facts, statistics, and studies almost never convince anyone. In all my years of writing, I've never once had someone who challenged me to provide a citation for a statistic that I used change his mind after I provided it.

I also don't claim that I'm somehow soaring above it all, looking down at the real world. I'm watching a movie too, no matter how nuanced I might like to think I am. I'm just as subject to confirmation bias as everybody else.

Where I differ from the sort of post-modern, post-truth worldview that says all of us are simply consuming competing narratives, that one view is as valid as another as with a gestalt diagram, is that I do believe there's an objective truth out there. And we are going to be held accountable for our stance towards it. That's doubly true for those who hold teaching positions in the church.

So what I'm doing is putting these "plot holes" out there. It's up to you as to whether you want to just integrate them back into your existing script, or reconsider whether your screenplay needs to be revised.

What Happens If We Watch the Wrong Movie?

Does it really matter what movie we are watching? Actually, it matters a lot. Because that movie is how we decide what actions to take.

Let's just do a thought experiment. Let's assume that the church's movie is wrong. Rather than divorce and family problems being caused almost exclusively by men, let's assume a more modern and up to date view of 50/50. That is, that women and men are equal and equally fail in relationships and marriage.

What would that mean?

Well, for one thing, the church's approach to divorce is rooted in its view that men are the problem. So whenever a divorced or divorcing woman shows up in a church, especially if she has kids, they assume she's a victim and do everything they can to help her. It's easy to find [voluminous information](#) about this. Some programs are for single parents, but single mothers are clearly more in view. (77 out of 100 of single parent households have single mothers).

Single mothers (or even just single women – see below) are also often compared with widows, with all that this implies based on scripture. Some churches, such as the now-infamous Mars Hill of Seattle, used to explicitly encourage men to marry single-mothers. I have personally watched multiple pastors' eyes light up as they told me what their church was doing to help some single mother (or single mother to be).

I have nothing personal against single mothers or helping single mothers. In fact, my own mother is a single mother. But if the church is providing unconditional emotional, physical, and even financial support to every single mother or divorcing woman that walks in under the assumption she's a victim, and their movie is wrong, then they are unwittingly underwriting and even subsidizing the breakup of families in some cases. It seems highly likely to me that if Sam or Kevin's ex-wives walked into an Evangelical church for example, they'd be welcomed, validated, and supported with open arms.

The consequences, in short, of watching the wrong movie aren't getting some arcane points of drama wrong. They carry real world consequences including increased family destruction.

We can think of this as similar to co-dependency in addiction. We keep forgiving our alcoholic brother and constantly bailing him out of the trouble he gets himself in. Then one day we realize that we aren't really helping him. We're just subsidizing and enabling his alcoholism. And we've been drawing our sense of identity from doing so.

The same is true of the church. It has functionally become an enabler of family breakdown in many cases, and draws part of its identity from that enabling.

Does that mean women are to blame for family breakdown, or are to blame 70% of the time for divorces or something? I'm not claiming that at all. What I am saying is that preachers have been doing their husband and father-bashing routines for ages without apparent effect. I would hope that they are open to at least questioning whether or not they've actually got it right, or whether they need to send their screenplay back for a re-write to better reflect reality. Because ultimately they will have to give an account for their actions.

In the Culture

Sen. Ben Sasse (R-NE) is an Evangelical favorite, and [his Father's Day video](#) this year is an interesting window into the Evangelical mind on fatherhood. It's called "Happy Father's Day to the Flawed Fathers (Like Me)." Note the resemblance to a Communist struggle session, in which Sasse ritually confesses all of his flaws without ever once mentioning anything he personally did right – "I'm often lousy in this calling", etc.



I also want to highlight one body language thing you might miss. Note his thumbs in his pocket. This body language conveys low confidence. As a media-savvy politician, he surely knows this, so it's likely intentional, to convey that he's been a bad boy and knows he screwed up. (I recommend against putting your hands in your pockets, but if you do it, remember, thumbs out=high confidence, thumbs in=low confidence).

Noteworthy

Very low US fertility rates are now making news. The [WaPo's says](#) falling birth rates are causing some demographers to “freak out.” Governing magazine [details the public policy consequences](#).

What is the church, the people who are supposedly pro-family, doing about this? Claiming that it should do more to support singles in their singleness. See this [piece by Gina Dalfonzo](#) in Christianity Today, the Evangelical flagship publication, called “What the Single in Your Pew Needs from You: Singles are on the rise. Here’s what forward-looking churches need to know.”

Single people make up more and more of the church body, which means forward-looking local churches benefit from understanding us and incorporating us meaningfully into community life. Although single and married believers are in the same boat together—we’re all at church to worship and serve God—nonetheless singles have unique needs. We want to be visible; we want to belong. We also have unique contributions to make in advancing Christ’s kingdom. So how can your local church create a welcoming space for singles?

Read the whole thing. Note that she never once suggests that singles might want to change anything at all about themselves in order to get married or better fit in. She just wants the church to make singles more comfortable as they are. (You’ll also note that while she quotes one man, she’s clearly talking about female singles – the article is even posted in the CT Women section. And notice that she makes an analogy between single women and widows).

Being single is acceptable theologically and this is a free country - people can do whatever they want. But that doesn't mean that organizations like the church that no one is obligated to belong to should reorient themselves in order to cater to the desires of single people. This is another example of how the church may be unwittingly promoting family decline. If you want to make singles maximally comfortable in their status, fine. That’s a valid choice. But then stop whining and complaining about the results.

The Telegraph (UK): [A shortage of eligible men has left women taking desperate steps to preserve their fertility](#)

A dearth of marriagable men has left an “oversupply” of educated women taking desperate steps to preserve their fertility, experts say. The first global study into egg freezing found that shortages of eligible men were the prime reason why women had attempted to take matters into their own hands. Experts said “terrifying” demographic shifts had created a ‘deficit’ of educated men and a growing problem of ‘leftover’ professional women, with female graduates vastly outnumbering males in in many countries.” - 20% of women childless at end of fertility

Researchers found that in more than 90 per cent of cases, the women were attempting to buy extra time because they could not find a partner to settle down with, amid a “dearth of educated men”. Experts said the research bust the myth that “selfish career women” were choosing to out their fertility on ice in a bid to put their careers first. They said sweeping social changes meant that many professional women now struggled to find a partner that felt like an equal match. In recent decades, the gender balance at British universities has tipped dramatically. In 1985, 45 per cent of UK students were female, but by 2000, 54 per cent were women.

This article is about women freezing their eggs because they can't find an "eligible" man. One could write a treatise analyzing this article. All of the women, of course, are presumed to be themselves eligible mates. The root of the problem is said to be a widening gap in higher educational attainment. Implication: women are strongly averse to marrying someone of lower education, and by extension anyone lower status in general. This means by virtue of their own marriage preferences, women dramatically shrink the pool of "eligible" mates as their status gets higher (remember the pyramid shape of the status hierarchy). Also, note that men failing to keep up with women in education is presented solely in terms of how it affects women negatively.

Think about this math for a minute. Imagine a 35yo single professional Christian woman in New York City or similar global city places. How many men in NYC are there who are a) age 33 or older? 2) single 3) straight 4) Christian 5) of a compatible theological/denominational background 6) of same or higher social status? Now do the math if she's age 40. That's a tiny pond to be fishing in. And that even includes men who are divorced (possibly with kids), physically unattractive, nerdy, etc. Filter those men out and you are practically looking for a unicorn.

Related to the previous piece, what is truly the most loving thing to do for single women who are in a church in a

market like this, who seriously want to get married, and are facing this kind of bleak math?

National Review recent did [a story about the surprising popularity of Canadian psychology professor Jordan Peterson](#). Peterson has [329,000 YouTube subscribers](#) and often draws over 100,000 views per video. He pulls in over [\\$50,000 per month via Patreon](#). He's become a sort of self-help and intellectual guru to young men.

Countless men are grateful to Jordan Peterson for having the courage to speak his mind on a contentious social matter. This temporal issue brought him many enemies, but his timeless messages earned followers that vastly outnumber them. The sheer numbers testify that he is the right man at the right time, someone capable of showing young men that cleaning up their room has cosmic significance, and that imposing a little order upon chaos is good for the soul, which in turn is good for the world.

Why are young men turning to Peterson? One reason is his moral courage. Peterson made big headlines when he announced he would refuse to comply with pending Canadian legislation making it a crime to refuse to address someone by pronouns like "ze" or "xir."

I don't have time to detail his objections, and their rationale or whether he is right is irrelevant. What is relevant is that he's taken a stand on a view with extreme risk to his personal and professional standing. That's what gives him moral courage. He's a tenured professor, so can't easily be fired, but he did have this year's research funding denied. It's probably only a matter of time before there's a campaign to try to get Patreon to kick him off the platform.

How many people in the church demonstrate moral courage these days? And no, speaking out against Trump or talking about how dads are screwing up doesn't count. If you think it does, you're part of the problem.

Sociologist Rodney Stark makes a big deal about how the moral courage of early Christians was key to Christianity taking hold. The Roman masses knew they would never personally be willing to die for Zeus. So when they saw Christians dying in the circus for their God, it made them think, "These guys must really be onto something if they are willing to die for it."

Today we see the inverse, where the people with moral courage are those whose beliefs, though they may be accurate in important ways, are wrong where it matters most. No wonder the church is increasingly irrelevant and ignored. To wit, that three minute Fathers Day video from Sasse, a US Senator, that was was plugged by CNN, the Hill, Red State, the Washington Examiner, was watched less than Jordan Peterson's [two and a half hour lecture on Genesis 1](#) that received no mainstream external promotion (130,000 vs. 210,000 views).

Daily Mail: [Climbing Kilimanjaro. Shopping in Zara. And lots of sex! Six inspirational baby boomers prove how you can explode the myth of ageing: Now that's what 70 looks like!](#) - It looks like Boomer narcissism will follow them all the way to the grave.

NYT: [Men can be so hormonal](#)

WSJ: [Who Pays on the First Date? No One Knows Anymore, and It's Really Awkward](#) – NB: dates arranged via Tinder

Australian Broadcasting Company: [Blind recruitment trial to boost gender equality making things worse, study reveals](#)

Institute for Family Studies: [Age at first marriage predicts votes for Trump](#)

Coda

The difference between satisficers and optimizers raises a few questions. We know that people of a happy disposition tend to be of the satisficing kind, with a set idea of what they want in life and an ability to stop upon gaining satisfaction. Their goals and desires do not move along with the experiences. They do not tend to experience the internal treadmill effects of constantly trying to improve on their consumption of goods by seeking higher and higher levels of sophistication. In other words, they are neither avaricious nor insatiable. An optimizer, by comparison, is the kind of person who will uproot himself and change his official residence just to reduce his tax bill by a few percentage points. (You would think that the entire point of a higher income is to be free to choose where to live; in fact it seems,

for these people, wealth causes them to increase their dependence!) Getting rich results in his seeing flaws in the goods and services he buys. The coffee is not warm enough. The cook no longer deserves the three stars given to him by the Michelin guide (he will write to the editors). The table is too far from the window. People who get promoted to important positions usually suffer from tightness of schedules: Everything has an allotted time. When they travel, everything is “organized” with optimizing intent, including lunch at 12:45 with the president of the company (a table not too far from the window), the Stairmaster at 4:40, and opera at 8:00. - Nassim Taleb, *Fooled by Randomness*

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