



The Masculinist #17: The Basis of Attraction

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Welcome back the Masculinist, the newsletter about the intersection of Christianity and masculinity. If you find this newsletter valuable, please forward to other Christian men you think could profit from it, because I need your help to spread the word.

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The last few issues have been on more general topics, but this month we get back into the meat of things relevant to men.

I dedicated many initial issues of the Masculinist showing that things are wrong in the church when it comes to thinking about men, women, intersexual dynamics, masculinity, relationships, etc. I reviewed the history of men and the church (Masc #3), false definitions of masculinity (Masc #5), the lack of accountability for failed ministries in these areas (Masc #7), how church leaders and the American elite don't preach what they practice (Masc #9), and how the church might even be an unwitting facilitator of divorce (Masc #11).

I did this to get to you to raise awareness of the problems inside church teachings on men, women, and relationships. And hopefully open your mind to other possibilities. Is your mind open? Today I'm going to start relying on that by laying out alternative ideas for you to consider, starting with the basis of attraction.

I remember the first time I was seriously questioned what I thought I knew about attraction. I had gotten together with a former colleague I'd known since college. She'd always enjoyed a drink so I suggested meeting at a great Belgian beer bar in Chicago. When we got there she ordered a diet coke. She told me she'd stopped drinking. Ok, I thought. People mature and change there. Then she told me something more startling. She'd started going to church. That took me aback as she'd never shown the slightest interest in Christianity, and had been living a life quite contrary to it.

As we talked a bit, it became clear that she was responding to some unhappiness in her life. And one of the major sources of it was that men weren't asking her out on dates. She wanted a relationship or marriage, but she told me, "As this point I'd be happy to just go out on a date."

I couldn't believe it. This was someone who'd been the life of the party as long as I'd known her. She'd always had huge attention from men. She was decently attractive even at her current no longer young age. I couldn't fathom that someone like her wouldn't get any interest from men at all. Of course I wasn't planning to ask her out on an actual date myself. But I couldn't figure it out why nobody else would either. It didn't make sense.

Today I have no problem understanding her predicament.

My own track record with women was also historically very poor. That's an understatement to say the least. Most of that is easily attributable to sin. On the other hand, not all of it was. I actually made a serious attempt to put into practice the Evangelical church's teachings on relationships. They were a disaster. As I discovered, that's because they are flat out wrong.

I rejected those teachings and completely rebuilt my model of relationships and things immediately improved. Just as one example of that, my success at getting women to go out with me increased by at least 10X. That's not an exaggeration. The jury is still out on the long term, so I won't make any claims there. But in the initial stages of meeting a woman through to getting married (and remaining chaste in that relationship until marriage), my new understanding worked very well. (NB: Among other changes, I stopped doing things like getting together at bars with women who were just "friends" like in the case above).

This didn't just help me personally. It also enabled me to explain what I saw around me in other people's relationships and troubles, like that former colleague who couldn't get a date. Explanatory power isn't that impressive though.

Because of confirmation bias, we all tend to believe that the evidence supports our pre-existing opinions. But I didn't just gain explanatory power. I gained predictive power. I am now able to predict with a reasonable degree of accuracy how various relationships are going to play out over time.

The Root of Confusion

Over the next few installments, I'm going to lay out a model of attraction very different from that put forth by the church. You'll find that it is not only more accurate, but it's also actionable. So this issue is not only cultural criticism, it's also "news you can use" yourself, whether you are single or married.

But first I'll note what I think the root of the church's confusion on this issue is. There are three things that we all think about, but which are clearly distinct and must carefully kept separate.

1. What is true
2. What we wish were true
3. What God says we should do

I would submit to you that church leaders went wrong when then took what they wished were true, combined with a lesser extent with what God has told us to do, and presented it as if it were true when in fact it was not.

Keep these categories in mind as we go through this next three month or so series. This month's issue will examine the question of attraction from the woman's perspective.

The Church's Incorrect "Servant Leader" Model of Attraction

First, let's take a brief look at what the church teaches on attraction. What does it say a woman finds attractive in a man? What does she want? While we will consider attraction generally, let's especially consider sexual and romantic attraction. What does the church teach on this?

Here is what Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a council member of the Gospel Coalition, [has to say](#) on the topic:

Consider the fact that a woman has every right to expect that her husband will earn access to the marriage bed.....Therefore, when I say that a husband must regularly "earn" privileged access to the marital bed, I mean that a husband owes his wife the confidence, affection, and emotional support that would lead her to freely give herself to her husband in the act of sex.

God's gift of sexuality is inherently designed to pull us out of ourselves and toward our spouse. For men, this means that marriage calls us out of our self-focused concern for genital pleasure and toward the totality of the sex act within the marital relationship.

Put most bluntly, I believe that God means for a man to be civilized, directed, and stimulated toward marital faithfulness by the fact that his wife will freely give herself to him sexually only when he presents himself as worthy of her attention and desire.

This presents a typical pastoral view of female attraction. In Mohler's view, a husband, by being a man of personal sexual fidelity and otherwise gaining the confidence of his wife through his character, and by providing her with affection and emotional support, will generate sexual attraction and passion in her.

Family Life Today, a subsidiary ministry of Cru, has a series by Dave and Ann Wilson called "[The Mystery of Intimacy in Marriage](#)" that similarly says, "[A] man's relationship with God is key to unlocking the mystery of marital intimacy."

The Christian, marriage-themed film [Fireproof](#) by the Kendrick Brothers of Sherwood Baptist Church expounds the same model in fictional form. It tells the story of a fireman named Caleb (played by Kirk Cameron) whose wife Catherine is going to divorce him to take up with a doctor because he has an internet porn habit and would rather spend their savings on a boat for himself instead of medical equipment for her mother. The husband cleans up his act, kicks his porn habit, starts treating his wife better, and even secretly pays for her mother's medical equipment. When Catherine discovers that it was Caleb instead of her doctor lover who paid for the medical equipment, she decides to recommit to her marriage. In other words, once Caleb became the man God wanted him to be, Catherine's attraction to him was reignited.

This is the "godliness is sexy" paradigm of attraction. Matt Chandler, writing at John Piper's "Desiring God" web site,

makes this point explicitly:

I keep saying it: Godliness is sexy to godly people....The culture tells us physical/sexual attraction is first, then character, godliness, and compatibility follow. I think we get it backwards. I think once character, compatibility, and godliness are there, those fuel attraction in the way that pleases God, and is much safer for our souls.

It's worth noting that elsewhere Chandler has also said, "Attraction is a strange, ambiguous force."

Dennis Rainey, CEO of Family Life Today, gave an extended treatment of this paradigm in his two-part blog post called "The Irresistible Man" (parts [one](#) and [two](#)) on the web site "Stepping Up (A Call to Courageous Manhood)." According to Rainey, what makes a man irresistible over the long term in a relationship is an ability to provide his wife with security, acceptance, and emotional connection (similar to Mohler's take above). This involves being sexually pure himself, protecting her, being financially secure, not trying to "fix" her, affirming her, regularly praising and complimenting her, listening to her talk about her feelings, and asking for her counsel.

In conservative church circles, ones that generally hold to the so-called "complementarian" view of marriage in which the husband is the head of the home, the Rainey template is packaged under the rubric "servant leader," so I will refer to it as the servant leader model of attraction and relationships.

In summary, the church maintains that women are attracted to godly men of high character who will provide for, affirm, serve, emotionally support, listen to, and validate the high worth of their women.

A More Accurate Model of Attraction

If the servant leader model is wrong, then what's the right model? What are women really attracted to in a man?

First consider that women face a very different "sexual equation" from men. A man is really only needed for one act of sex to father children. He produces millions of sperm per day and can quickly "reload." One man can father children with a large number of women. In fact, history suggests this is the normal pattern. About 80% of all the women who have ever lived reproduced, whereas [only about 40% of men](#) did. Less than half of the men who ever lived fathered children. One study estimated that around 8,000 years ago [17 women reproduced for every one man](#). That's astounding. As we see from the Bible, high status men could accumulate multiple wives (or even large harems as in the case of Solomon), leaving a lot of lower status men with nothing. In fact, this appears to be the human norm. An estimated [85% of all human societies in history have been polygamous](#).

A woman can only have a limited number of children in her lifetime compared to the number of children a man could theoretically father. What's more, she needs nine months to have a baby, much of which time she is herself vulnerable. Then she gives birth to an infant who is nearly helpless himself for many years. So not only does a woman need a high quality man to get her pregnant, she also needs a man who will stick around and care for and invest in her and her children for the long haul. (We had a son six months ago and I can assure you that caring for a baby is more than a full time job).

So in terms of marriage, women's need in men falls into two broad categories of characteristics: *mating* and *long-term investment*. The mating side of this formula is attraction, especially sexual attraction. What drives this attraction? Attraction is driven by four basic factors, in priority order:

1. Power and Status
2. Charisma and Confidence
3. Appearance (Looks, Style, etc)
4. Resources (especially Money)

It's easy to see many examples of women drawn to men who have these characteristics:

- Monika Lewinsky being attracted to Bill Clinton (power)
- Amal Alamuddin marrying George Clooney (celebrity status, looks)
- Melania Knauss marrying Donald Trump (celebrity status, money)
- V. Stiviano (age 33) becoming the mistress of 81yo LA Clippers owner Donald Sterling (money)
- High school girls dreaming of being with the quarterback (status, athleticism)

The list could go on. While you might quibble with things like whether charisma should be rated higher than looks, I would hope it's beyond obvious that women are attracted to powerful, high status men, rich, good looking guys, etc.

They certainly aren't chasing ugly, low status guys with zero charisma who are too insecure to venture out of Mom's basement. I'm confident we can all see this operating around us among the people we know.

This isn't just a form of surface attraction either, but appears to operate at a more primal level. For example, researchers have found that there's [a positive correlation](#) between a man's wealth and the number of orgasms his woman experiences. And these characteristics map well to a man's ability (if not actually the willingness) to do the two things a woman had historically needed: *protect* her and *provide* for her. What's more, powerful men are more likely to have powerful children, who themselves are more likely to have kids. (Remember, only 40% of men in human history ever had children). In the past, women may have had limited choices in who they married, but today there's still an incentive to marry (or have sex with) the most powerful, rich, etc. man. (Sure beats a broke loser, that's for sure).

Or as the lyrics of a John Cougar Mellencamp song put it:

*You got your eye on the cheerleader queen / You're walkin' her home from school
You know that she's only seventeen / She's gonna make you a fool
You know you can't touch this stuff / Without money or a brand new car
Let me give you some good advice young man / You better learn to play guitar*

Musicians, ballers, rich dudes, very good looking guys, politicians, celebrities, corporate CEOs, and, yes, even a number of high profile pastors routinely have women who pursue them for sexual liaisons. It's unsurprising that they are often caught in affairs. Unlike the average American man, these guys – the “Alpha males” if you will – have women pursuing them instead of vice versa.

For these kinds of super-high status men, their standing and appeal is obvious. But similar effects exist on down the line, though women often have to do more detective work to figure out if a man is really someone she wants to be with. Hence men try to make it easy for them, by signaling, for example, their wealth by driving a Porsche or wearing a Rolex. While some of this is cringe worthy – such as the pathetic bragging we often see the stereotypical “bro” engaging in – there is an underlying reality there.

The other side of the formula is long-term investment. It's important to note that this only comes into play when someone is looking for marriage or a long-term relationship that might involve children. Today, when casual sex is socially acceptable for women as well as men, women can feel free to hook up or casually date attractive men who are poor marriage material. For example, here's what Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg said in her number one *New York Times* bestselling book *Lean In*:

When looking for a life partner, my advice to women is date [translation: have sex with] all of them: the bad boys, the cool boys, the commitment-phobic boys, the crazy boys. But do not marry them. The things that make the bad boys sexy do not make them good husbands.

This is the explicit advice being given to young women today, and we'll return to it in a future installment.

Let's assume that Christian women are not interested in going this route but are instead looking for a husband. For these women the long-term investment side of the formula is very important. Men are more likely to make a long-term investment in their wife and children if they are godly loving, reliable, having a strong sense of commitment, are conscientious, generous, stable, etc. This includes some of the servant leader characteristics.

Let's put these together in a chart. In honor of our super Alpha males above, we will label the attraction factors “Alpha Characteristics.” So of course the long-term investment factors we'll label “Beta Characteristics.”

Alpha Characteristics (Attraction)	Beta Characteristics (Investment)
Athleticism	Commitment
Charisma	Conscientiousness
Confidence	Generosity (i.e., to his family)
Dangerousness (potentially to others)	Fidelity
Dominance (in general)	Godliness
“Game”	Intelligence
Looks	Love
Money	Magnanimity (esp. readiness to forgive)
Personal Effects	Reliability
Power	Safeness
Status	Stability
Style	Wisdom

These are general characteristics. Each woman would add her own personal criteria to the list, especially the Beta side. These individual criteria are things like interests (e.g., sports vs. classical music), lifestyle preferences (e.g., big city vs. small town living), etc. that drive perceived long-term compatibility at the individual level.

We can further qualify the terms Alpha and Beta across multiple domains. Alpha and Beta can be:

- Two different sets of characteristics all men need to have in order to be high quality husbands, as in the above chart.
- Two different kinds of men, the super-high status and everyone else, or alternatively those who are dominant in Alpha characteristics vs. those who are dominant in Beta characteristics.
- Two different relationship strategies, one focused on attracting women via exhibiting Alpha characteristics, the other by exhibiting Beta ones.

Again, much like my positive/neutral/negative model from Masc #13, this is a framework to help you think about the world. I’m not claiming these are ontological categories. There are other ways to model the same underlying reality. For example, we could use the 3P – Provide, Protect, Procreate – model I talked about in Masc #5. Or a friend of my wife uses what she calls the PIVA model – Personality, Interests, Values, Attraction. I think that misses some important character traits, though it’s still useful. But for our purposes we’re going to stick with Alpha and Beta since everybody is roughly familiar with the Alpha/Beta dichotomy when it comes to men.

Contrasting Reality With the Servant Leader Model

Let’s quickly take a look at the church’s servant leader model in light of our model. The list of characteristics it encourages men to cultivate and exhibit are all Beta characteristics, so this is a Beta relationship strategy. The servant leader model completely ignores and even downplays Alpha characteristics. As a result, *the servant leader model by itself generates zero attraction because godliness is actually not sexy.*

I cannot stress this enough. Godliness is not sexy. Don’t believe me? Then believe Paul. If godliness were actually sexy, why did he have to warn Christians against marrying non-Christians? Paul realized that people could be powerfully attracted to the ungodly, so much so that warnings about it actually made it into the Bible.

Godliness is a good quality. It is something everyone should have. But that does not make it a source of sexual/romantic attraction. It may well be – let’s hope so at any rate – that a Christian woman wouldn’t marry a man who wasn’t godly, but that’s because of the long-term investment filter, not the attractiveness one.

The fact that a godly husband does spiritual things such as Bible studies and prayer every day will not automatically make his wife want to have sex with him. The fact that a guy goes to church and Bible study every week isn’t going to make women in church want to go out with him.

Even Matt Chandler, the guy teaching “godliness is sexy,” implicitly understands how it really works. Here’s what he wrote in his book *The Mingling of Souls*:

[W]hen I was in college leading a rather large Bible study, I was often put in the uncomfortable position of Christian girls becoming interested in me—except they weren't really interested in the real me, but rather in whatever image they had of me because of my influence and position. They got pretty good at working the image too, doing whatever they thought it was I needed to see in a godly girl.

Note that not only were these women attracted to Chandler because of his status as the leader of a large (IIRC about 1000 people) bible study, and probably also his charisma and good looks, they pro-actively conform themselves to what they imagine his desires to be in order to try to get him. In other words, this is a complete inversion of the servant leader motif, but Chandler doesn't realize or it or see the full implications.

This is why I say the root of confusion is that church leaders have confused what they want to be true with what is true. They know we are commanded to be godly. They know godliness and other positive character traits are required to be a good husband. So they think godliness and those character traits should be attractive. So they teach that we should act as if godliness is attractive when in fact that's not actually the case. You can see Chandler struggling with this here. He sees the truth, but he doesn't think that's the way it should be.

Just because pastors think women *should* to be attracted to godliness doesn't mean that they actually *are* attracted to it. Women only want godly men to the extent that they are *attractive* godly men. There's a reason why women are usually more interested in dating the music leader than the church janitor.

So the servant leader model is a recipe for relational frustration, not just for men, but also for women. The church's advice to men directly compromises their ability to attract a high quality wife because it ignores the actual basis of attraction.

This is not to say that the things the servant leader model plays up are bad. Men absolutely need to have Beta characteristics to be good husbands and fathers. They are critical and every man must cultivate them. But taken on their own they are incomplete. They only address the long-term investment side of the formula and ignore the mating/attraction side.

To illustrate how the church actively steers men wrong, consider that TGC post from Kevin DeYoung I referenced back in Masc #15 called "[Dude, Where's Your Bride?](#)" Here's what he has to say:

I don't think young women are expecting Mr. Right to be a corporate executive with two houses, three cars, and a personality like Dale Carnegie. They just want a guy with some substance. A guy with plans. A guy with some intellectual depth. A guy who can winsomely take initiative and lead a conversation. A guy with consistency. A guy who no longer works at his play and plays with his faith. A guy with a little desire to succeed in life. A guy they can imagine providing for a family, praying with the kids at bedtime, mowing the lawn on Saturday, and being eager to take everyone to church on Sunday. Where are the dudes that will grow into men?

DeYoung explicitly downplays Alpha characteristics of power (corporate executive), money (houses, cars), and charisma (Dale Carnegie) and plays up Beta characteristics and the servant leader mindset (providing, praying, mowing the lawn, seriousness about faith). This is absolutely disastrous advice for any man who follows it by mowing women's lawns or something. Sadly, the men in his pews probably will take it because he is the pastor and authority figure they look up to. Then he wonders why all these Christian women he hears from aren't getting married!

Again, I'll note that DeYoung is a pastor giving advice on an Evangelical Christian web site. But he cites only one scripture in the entire piece (1 Cor 16:13) whose context does not apply to the matter at hand. So in this matter, he is acting as a life coach, not a Bible teacher. His teachings here are not authoritative. Not only that, they're actually dead wrong. But in my experience DeYoung's views are very much the rule, not the exception.

Applying the Attraction Model

As I said, this is news you can use. Every man needs to be working on both the Alpha and Beta side of the formula. He has to be working to become marriage eligible by developing the character that can give a woman the confidence to bet her pile of chips on him for the long term.

But where the average Christian guy often falls short is in the Alpha category. So it's also important to work on the traits that make you a more attractive man so that you can marry the highest quality woman possible. Product matters. Women are not going to be attracted to a fat, underemployed guy with no confidence or charisma.

One has to be careful here because there are ungodly and unwise ways to pursue this. It wouldn't be good to become single minded about the pursuit of money, for example. Or to debase yourself on reality TV to earn celebrity status.

But there are many ways to improve your attractiveness. Becoming more confident – a deficiency many Christian men seem to have – by itself generate large returns. That's why I gave tools to help you establish and maintain strong eye contact (Masc #4) and to improve your posture (Masc #12). Things like these will pay dividends in every area of your life, not just dating and marriage.

The World Is Talebbian Redux

I recently saw another great example of how the world is Talebbian. The site Art of Manilness is the web's top site on masculinity. It gets huge traffic and has a gigantic podcast too. How did this happen? The content is great. That's important. But what really [launched AoM into the stratosphere](#) was a black (or technically a gray) swan event:

For the first couple months, the site was likely read by just my family, a few friends, and maybe a few random strangers who stumbled upon it. But I didn't care. I was having fun and it provided a creative outlet and break from my studies.

A few months later, though, I experienced a happy stroke of luck.

That shaving article that I wrote to kick off the website ended up on the front page of Digg.com, which back in the day was one of the most trafficked sites on the web. Thousands of people started coming to my dinky blog. So many, in fact, that it crashed the site.

I, of course, was stoked. After getting the site back online, the traffic kept coming. People who saw the article on Digg posted it to reddit and [del.icio.us](#) (RIP), and that sent even more traffic. Lifehacker posted an excerpt on their site and sent even more folks over.

I figured I'd experience this nice burst of traffic, but eventually AoM would go back to being another small outpost on the web. But more articles made it to the front page of Digg, and people kept on coming back.

No matter how good McKay was, had he not had lightning strike in the form of a front page link on Digg (similar to how Rod Dreher wrote about this newsletter), his site would not have taken off like that. Clearly content and quality and what we do matters. But the outside forces (i.e., God's sovereignty, providence, etc.) are determinant.

Noteworthy

Daily Mail: [Women really DO fancy rich men more as scientists find a bigger salary adds two to his 'out-of-ten' rating – you don't say](#)

Phys.org: [Upper body strength key factor in men's bodily attractiveness](#) – you don't say

The Federalist: [How My Parents' Divorce Ruined Our Holidays And Family Life Forever](#) – It's pretty obvious, really. As I've noted before, when parents with children divorce, the children have to live with that bifurcation of that family (and any future step families) forever. That's a cost imposed on him those from intact homes never have to pay.

The Atlantic: [The rebirth of America's pro-natalist movement](#)

The Economist: [In defense of the childless](#). This article argues that we should be all cool with people who don't have kids. But childlessness comes with profound long-term consequences. People make the life choices that often lead to childlessness long before the bill comes due. When the realization of the implications of those choices dawns, it's often too late to do anything about it. (See Masc #8 on meta-awareness of life change).

What's more, the childless aren't going to want to be left alone to live their life. They are going to seek to reshape society and our institutions to conform to their choices. We already see it. For example, I previously mentioned [Gina Dalfonzo's book](#) that argues the church should make changes to cater to the increasing number of singles (the way of childlessness) in the pews. Harvard sociologist [Robert Putnam is sounding alarm bells](#) about what it means to grow old alone, without all the care and support provided by family. We do a disservice to people when we treat choices for childless as just another lifestyle choice like ordering Italian for dinner instead of Chinese. It's a serious matter that should be chosen (for those for whom it is a choice) seriously and with an understanding of the lifelong ramifications.

Jacobite: [The Ikea Humans: The Social Base of Contemporary Liberalism](#). Mere Orthodoxy named this piece, published on a neo-reactionary site, as one of the top 2017 pieces of social commentary. What I find interesting about is that it takes certain well-known aspects of our contemporary society, then uses powerful and effective rhetoric to delegitimize that culture, especially in its elite form. In this, it is similar to Taleb's "intellectual yet idiot" construction. This is what the neutral world church can't do, because its strategy is based on finding points of synchronization with the culture. You might not be as down on American elite culture as I am, but everything from Trump to the Weinstein vortex to the disastrous wars and extremely poor economic results so far this century should make us at least be questioning things.

Coda

A man who thinks humans are rational creatures might try to attract a woman by being extra nice. That seems reasonable because people like nice people more than they like mean people. But seduction-wise, niceness is boring, and nice people are a dime a dozen. Niceness can get you only so far. A far better seduction strategy would involve participating in any kind of coed group activities at which you happen to excel. When you display any kind of talent, it triggers other humans to want to mate with you. We're biologically hardwired to be attracted to anything that helps the gene pool, and talent is a signal for valuable genes. So instead of being nice, focus on being talented, or attractive, or smart, or muscular, or something that suggests you have good genes. A common misconception is that because nice guys seem to finish last and jerky guys seem to get the women, being a jerk must have some sort of seduction advantage. It doesn't. That's an illusion caused by the fact that people who have other advantages—such as wealth or beauty—have the freedom to act like jerks because they can attract mates no matter what. If you don't understand what motivates people at a deep level, you might be fooled by your observation that jerks often do well in romance. If being mean were useful to getting sex, you would see ugly people doing it more often with great success. But keep your eyes open and you'll notice that attractive people can get away with being mean, and ugly people can't. Attractiveness is the key correlation – Scott Adams, [Win Bigly](#)

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