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## The Masculinist #7: Accountability for Failure

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Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter about the intersection of masculinity and Christianity.

Are you a Christian man concerned about the state of young men, masculinity, and marriage today? If so, please share this far and wide with anyone you think might be interested, because this is a critical topic and I need your help. Readers can subscribe at this link: [www.urbanophile.com/masculinist](http://www.urbanophile.com/masculinist).

My last issue was about how to establish a regular prayer life by integrating prayer into a morning routine that includes physical actions.

Someone unsubscribed after receiving it because I mentioned the posture stretch exercises of someone named Mike Cernovich, who I indicated was a controversial figure. He said, “[Cernovich] is a straight up bad hombre, a bad human being. Christian men may be struggling to find their place, but we have to distance ourselves from the sort of masculinity.”

I’ve got no problem with him doing this. For one thing, I’m glad to see people unsubscribe. If the things I’m saying here aren’t causing at least some people to turn away, I’m not meeting my goals. You can already get safe, conventional wisdom thinking in all sorts of places.

I also have no problem with this guy’s sentiment, which I think is perfectly valid. I wish him well and thank him for checking this list out. It’s certainly fair to say that we should hold people accountable for bad ideas and bad actions. So he has to act in accordance with his conscience here.

But too often Christians are quick to repudiate non-Christians like Cernovich, while ignoring the bad ideas and bad actions of people inside the church. One would think it would be the opposite.

I could pick any number of examples, but since I’m a Protestant and this newsletter is about masculinity, let’s examine teachings and practices there to see what I’m talking about.

I previously said that much of what the church teaches on masculinity is outright false. Let’s start diving into that by looking at two things the church itself appears to have decided were failures: purity culture and Mark Driscoll’s Mars Hill Church.

### Purity Culture Reconsidered

I missed the purity culture movement because I was not a Christian at the time, and of the wrong age for it to boot. But I’ve heard a lot of negative reports about this and almost no good ones. As Katelyn Beaty, former managing editor of Christianity Today magazine tweeted, “I’d love to read an essay right now titled, ‘Purity Culture/I Kissed Dating Goodbye Was Weird, and I Still Turned Out Okay as an Adult.’” A number of people have said that they were left scarred by the purity culture movement and some even left the faith.

Just as one example, last year someone named Liz Lenz wrote [an op-ed for the Washington Post](#) called “‘I Kissed Dating Goodbye’ told me to stay pure until marriage. I still have a stain on my heart.”

My wife wasn’t involved in the purity culture movement per se, but was in high school and college when it was big. She attests to the awkwardness of it – guys who would only give “side hugs”, for example – and that people she

personally knows apostatized in part as a result of bad experiences with it.

Purity culture has been back in the news because Joshua Harris, whose book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was the paradigmatic tract of the movement and sold 1.2 million copies according to Slate, has begun [publicly saying that he has doubts about it and its effects](#).

I recently bought and read the book to try to get an understanding of what this movement was about and where it may have gone wrong. The essence of the purity movement as expressed in the book appears to be:

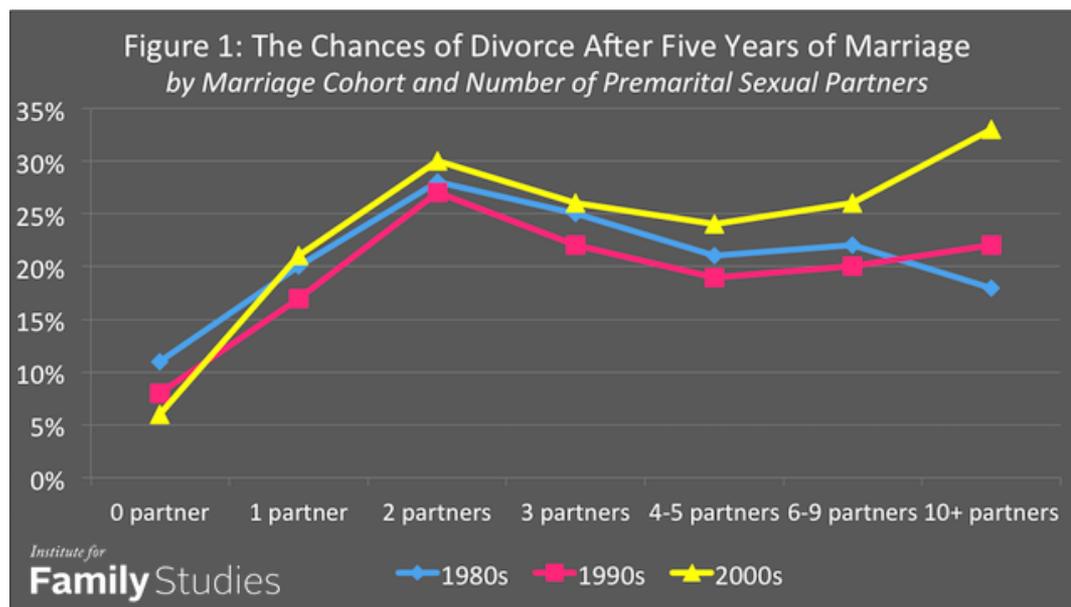
- Don't date until you're ready to get married, then engage in "courtship"
- Aggressively seek out non-dating friendships with members of the opposite sex
- Avoid or minimize physical contact (even hugging and kissing) until marriage

The book also puts forth an extremely elevated view of marriage, purity, and the importance of the quality of your future spouse. This is a highly abridged synopsis. IKDG is full of specific teachings, with chapters such as "Seven habits of highly defective dating" and "Five important steps for getting on track with God's plan." (See a more detailed overview in [a critique in the Federalist](#)).

In his defense, Harris was 21 years old when he wrote IKDG. He was coming through, and was in fact still in, an awkward stage of life that's difficult to navigate whether you are a Christian or not. He also satisfied the "skin in the game" principle in that he said he was personally living by the advice he gave in the book. He seemed to have written it to help others by telling them what he thought he'd learned about living through that time of life. He probably had no idea it would sell over a million copies. This catapulted him into the spotlight when he was almost surely not prepared for it. It was older, more mature adult church leaders, not Harris, who institutionalized his teachings. They are the ones who should have known better.

You also can't take every negative report about the purity culture at face value. Lots of people have life challenges in that age range, and some of them end up unhappy in the future. It's very tempting to want to blame that on other people, instead of taking responsibility for our own life choices. Just because you're unhappy today doesn't mean it's somebody else's fault.

It's also the case that, like it or not, sexual purity has tangible, real world consequences. For example, the chart below from the Institute for Family Studies shows [the risk of divorce by female sex partner count](#).



The stone cold reality is that women who ever have sex with anyone other than their husband have a significantly elevated risk of divorce over women who only ever had one sex partner. Premarital sex itself does not seem to have a huge effect, but having multiple partners does, and the biggest hit comes at only N=2. This is a correlation, which does not necessarily mean causation. But it's a principle people ignore at their peril.

So what were the fundamental failures of IKDG/purity culture? From my reading, I'd see a few potential areas.

1. Harris' elevated views of spouse and marriage come close to embracing the "soul mate" fallacy. That is, the idea that God has picked out from before time the person created especially for you that you are supposed to marry. This can send a person down two opposite negative tracks. The first is feeling extreme pressure to not settle for less than God's perfect person, which creates an expectation in a partner no human being could possibly satisfy. The second is to create a sense of passivity that one need not actively seek out a spouse such as by, for example, dating people; God already has it taken care of. It also puts an expectation on marriage that no relationship can possibly live up to.

2. In practice, the focus on sexual purity seemed to preclude the possibility of redemption from sin or failure. Anyone who failed to keep himself or herself pure was "damaged goods." It's true that pre-marital sex has consequences, as shown above. But it's also true that you have to leave room for God to show up. There's no guarantee we'll escape the temporal consequences of our actions, but redemption in this life is definitely possible. I can attest to that.

3. Encouraging people to seek out platonic relationships with members of the opposite sex is, in my view, a very, very bad idea. I don't believe it's possible for a man and a woman to be "just friends." A romantic subtext is always present, particularly at that age. After enough of my own bad experiences with this, I established a "no friends ever" policy with women, and things improved greatly.

But the fourth and most important point is that Harris conflated Biblical injunctions and life advice. That is, he spoke with Biblical authority, but on matters not actually directly addressed by the Bible. The Bible says a lot about marriage, but nothing at all normative about dating beyond the call to chastity. So anything Harris or anyone else might say on the topic is some type of application of generic Biblical principles to a specific situation. That is to say, it's simply human advice. Harris seems to recognize this. An [interview with Harris](#) in Slate says:

He now draws a line between Biblical principles and Biblical practices: The former are essential (e.g., raise your children to know God) and the latter are optional (e.g., home-school your children). Christian leaders like himself have erred, he said, when they blur the two.

This is a critical lesson to learn since the vast bulk of what's written on dating, relationships, and marriage in the Christian market is really life coaching or cultural commentary that is often not clearly delineated from authoritative Biblical teaching.

The huge danger in this is that if the life advice fails for any reason, Christ Himself, His word, and His church are called into question.

Given that a large amount of what is being taught by pastors on gender and relationships falls into this category, there would appear to be many potential ticking time bombs waiting to go off in the future. This is an area to address pronto.

This applies to me too. So just to be clear: I am a cultural commentator, not an authoritative Bible teacher. If I want to argue from scripture, I'll try to remember to be clear to demarcate what it is I'm actually doing at the time. Even so, for all of us, to the extent that people act based on what we tell them, that's a huge weight of responsibility. That's one reason for the skin in the game principle. It at least makes sure that we are exposed to the potential downsides of our own advice. It's not a guarantee, but it's a good heuristic (cf Nassim Taleb)

The question is again why there has been no accountability for the failures of the purity culture movement. By that I don't mean firing people or exiling them to the outer darkness. Instead, it might look something like:

- Admitting that purity culture was flawed in important ways
- Trying to correct or remediate errors and harms done where they are known
- Asking how the church got so badly off track, and how to avoid doing it again

To his credit, Harris, now 40, appears to be doing just that. But again, he was 21 when the book came out. He wasn't the person who institutionalized this into the ministry structures of large numbers of churches. And he's as much a product of as responsible for the purity movement. I'm told it actually pre-dated the book, which is one reason it probably sold so many copies; it had a built in audience already.

In short, Joshua Harris falling on his sword as a scapegoat would be a false accounting. A broader post-mortem would appear to be warranted.

## **Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church**

This is one where I have much more personal knowledge. In fact, I have watched in excess of 100 Driscoll sermons myself, and have read much of the critical information about him from the likes of Warren Throckmorton too. I watched this go down in real time.

Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill Church in Seattle at one time had 14,000 attendees across several campuses. It was one of America's largest and fastest growing churches. He also had a massive following on the internet. In a feminized church environment, Driscoll's ministry was targeted at men. In fact, he said God spoke to him, saying, "Marry Grace, preach the Bible, plant churches and train men."

To attract men and thrive in Seattle, he adopted a "bad boy" ministry style. A [2009 New York Times profile](#) says of him:

Mark Driscoll's sermons are mostly too racy to post on GodTube, the evangelical Christian "family friendly"

video-posting Web site. With titles like “Biblical Oral Sex” and “Pleasuring Your Spouse,” his clips do not stand a chance against the site’s content filters. No matter: YouTube is where Driscoll, the pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, would rather be. Unsuspecting sinners who type in popular keywords may suddenly find themselves face to face with a husky-voiced preacher in a black skateboarder’s jacket and skull T-shirt. An “Under 17 Requires Adult Permission” warning flashes before the video cuts to evening services at Mars Hill, where an anonymous audience member has just text-messaged a question to the screen onstage: “Pastor Mark, is masturbation a valid form of birth control?”

Driscoll doesn’t miss a beat: “I had one guy quote Ecclesiastes 9:10, which says, ‘Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.’ ” The audience bursts out laughing. Next Pastor Mark is warning them about lust and exalting the confines of marriage, one hand jammed in his jeans pocket while the other waves his Bible. Even the skeptical viewer must admit that whatever Driscoll’s opinion of certain recreational activities, he has the coolest style and foulest mouth of any preacher you’ve ever seen.

...  
God called Driscoll to preach to men — particularly young men — to save them from an American Protestantism that has emasculated Christ and driven men from church pews with praise music that sounds more like boy-band ballads crooned to Jesus than “Onward Christian Soldiers.” What bothers Driscoll — and the growing number of evangelical pastors who agree with him — is not the trope of Jesus-as-lover. After all, St. Paul tells us that the Church is the bride of Christ. What really grates is the portrayal of Jesus as a wimp, or worse. Paintings depict a gentle man embracing children and cuddling lambs. Hymns celebrate his patience and tenderness. The mainstream church, Driscoll has written, has transformed Jesus into “a Richard Simmons, hippie, queer Christ,” a “neutered and limp-wristed popular Sky Fairy of pop culture that . . . would never talk about sin or send anyone to hell.”

His style, though nominally aggressively masculine, was not particularly friendly to men. In fact, his strategy to attract them was that of the drill sergeant, or at least a parody of one. He would sometimes brutally berate and attack the men of his own congregation from the pulpit. For example, consider his infamous “How dare you!” tirade which you can [watch for yourself on You Tube](#):

How dare you! Who in the hell do you think you are?! Abusing a woman, neglecting a woman, being a coward, a fool, being like your father, Adam! Who do you think you are?! You’re not God! You’re just a man! You’re not an impressive man! You’re not a responsible man! You’re not a noble man! You’re not a respectable man! You’re not a responsible man in any regard! I don’t care how successful you are! In this area, if you are a failure, it clouds all of your dignity! It robs all of your masculinity! There is no excuse for any man who claims the name of Christ to treat a woman in a dishonorable, disrespectful way!

Some of you right now, you guys will get all— “Oh, how dare he yell at me.” That’s the Holy Spirit telling you, it’s you. I didn’t name you, he did. You change now, little boy. You change right now. You shut up. You put your pants on. You get a job. You grow up and maybe one day, you can love a woman. It’s for men, not for boys. And those of you men who are here and your wives are suffering under your folly and failure, shame on you. And shame on you if you say you’re a Christian. And shame on you if you’ve been attending Mars Hill. And shame on you if you’ve been surrounded by good men and have pursued none of them. And shame on you if you’ve not become a member and submitted to spiritual authority. And shame on you if you’ve not joined a community group so you can walk in darkness. And shame on you if you show up to put communion in your hands representing the body and blood of your murdered Savior and then go put them on your girlfriend or download porn from the Internet or raise your hand in a threat to your wife. Shame on you. You guys are a joke. And there’s a handful of good men that are tired of picking up your mess so you step up, you shut up, you man up, and you use all that anger you have toward me right now to repent. You do business with God. I’m gonna let you sit in this for a while. You don’t go get your kids. You don’t get up and leave.

I won’t go into much detail here, but it’s worth pointing out how he says there’s only “a handful of good men.” Driscoll seems to believe the vast majority of even Christian men are pathetic sinners and losers who needed to be regularly beaten up by the very few good ones. He appeared to especially believe in his own goodness, as the reports of his “my way or the highway” leadership style would suggest.

Driscoll’s style was controversial all along. What protected him from his critics was his acceptance into the most prestigious club by a who’s who of high profile Evangelical superstars. Driscoll was on the national council of the Gospel Coalition. (He also ran the Acts 29 church-planting network with a large tribe of loyalists). These people stood by him despite complaints over his style, and even when some Mars Hill elders who objected to a centralization of power there were kicked out, and a number of ousted Mars Hillers told stories of the church’s abusive leadership style.

Ultimately a cascade of scandals too big to ignore finally sank Driscoll, including plagiarism, paying to get one of his books onto the New York Times bestseller list, and accusations that he used funds raised for foreign missions on his central church in the US. Driscoll resigned from Mars Hill church, which promptly imploded, though with several congregations spinning off into independent churches. Driscoll moved to Phoenix and started a new church called [The Trinity Church](#).

Again, what's interesting is the lack of accountability. Driscoll himself appears to be largely unrepentant. But as with Joshua Harris, broader questions need to be asked. Driscoll was only able to get away what he did as long as he did because he had so many high-profile backers. But when it comes to them, Driscoll appears to have largely been airbrushed out of the Politburo photo. He's rarely talked about, and I've seen little in the way of post-mortem analysis that wasn't focused on Driscoll himself.

The only major backer of Driscoll who has much spoken about his own role is John Piper. You can listen to/read [one such response from here](#) [him here](#). But again, it's mostly about Driscoll, and not Piper reflecting on what he might or should have done differently. Piper basically says he has no regrets about his own role.

Again, the point isn't that people should be shot over this, but if there's no honest look at how this happened, how do you keep it from happening again?

## The Consequences of Failure

Here are two pretty clear-cut instances where the church basically admits it went badly wrong in its teachings on masculinity, gender, relationship and marriage. That's not to say that purity culture and Driscoll had no positive aspects, but I don't exactly hear people making full-throated defenses of them these days.

Which brings us back to Mike Cernovich. Mike is a not a Christian and has an explicitly Nietzschean view of life that he regularly extols in his books, blog, and social media. But in contrast with what I've seen in the Christian church, I'm sad to report that Mike dispenses vast quantities of accurate and helpful advice.

I have followed Mike's work for about three years, since before most people ever heard of him. I found him when he was doing podcasts with his friend Jay about physical fitness. This was at a time when I was switching from being a runner to focusing on strength, and I got a ton of great advice and insight on exercise that still pays dividends today. Mike has also distributed a torrent of highly practical and useful information on a wide range of other topics. I have personally benefitted from his writings on morning routines, posture, how to edit podcasts, what blog technology stack to use, how to better leverage Twitter (which I was already a top 1% user of by most external benchmarks, mind you), improving your interpersonal communications/charisma, and more. He's also given a vast amount of advice I haven't personally taken, but which I have little doubt is likewise accurate, ranging from an entire [web site dedicated to juicing](#) (the vegetable kind, not drugs) to the more dubious areas like how to get girls to have sex with you.

Cernovich openly boasts about his internet marketing prowess, and proved it by building himself into a bona fide e-celebrity, including getting [profiled in the New Yorker](#) (which I've never managed to accomplish). He arguably influenced the election too, and was the most important player in injecting Hillary Clinton's health problems into the debate. Like Driscoll, popularity and success don't make him morally right, but until such time as he suffers his own catastrophic fall, it gives him major street cred. And talk about skin in the game: a huge number of people are just waiting for Mike to make a mistake so they can't take him down.

I hate to say it, but I've gotten far more good advice from Mike than I have from the church. In fact, I've received nothing but bad advice from the church when it comes to relationships, and personally suffered harm from following it. I have gotten some good advice in other areas, but not as much as from Mike. Bluntly, I've got more trust in Mike Cernovich than I do in any number of people I see in the church.

I take responsibility for the decisions I've made. I'm not blaming the church or anybody else for my problems. But something is badly wrong when I can get better life advice and more accurate cultural diagnoses from non-Christians (if I apply some judicious filtering) than from what's being billed as "Christian masculinity."

No one had a greater influence on my starting this newsletter than Mike Cernovich. I saw what he was doing, and saw that we as Christians need to get into the game or we're in deep trouble. You may recall that I quoted Rod Dreher a couple issues back as making a similar observation with regards to the "pagan masculinist" Jack Donovan. We have to start giving much better life advice and cultural analysis, being careful to be clear that it is just that, and not strictly speaking Biblical doctrine. Otherwise people are going to be drawn to Cernovich, Donovan, et. al., and in addition to

the high quality practical advice they receive, end up potentially embracing incorrigible spiritual, metaphysical, and ethical beliefs. Even if they don't find those folks, the church's bad advice and cultural commentary by itself will badly harm many, and even cause some to fall into perdition. This is a serious matter.

I will address the current church teachings in future newsletters, but if people now admit that the signature teaching on this topic in the last 25 years, purity culture, was deeply flawed, and that the poster child for men's outreach, Mark Driscoll, was also a failure, why would anyone believe the stuff that's being taught today is true? Particularly when there's been no accountability for those previous failures. Given the recent track record, people are right to be highly skeptical of anything the church is teaching on the topic of masculinity, gender, relationships, and marriage.

## In the Culture

Milo Yiannopoulos is another controversial character who has attracted quite a following, one much bigger than Mike Cernovich. Rod Dreher, no fan of Milo, ran [an interesting post](#) with a comment from someone who obviously despises Milo and believes the worst of him:

As someone who's seeing the rise of Milo's ideals specifically in teenagers raised in a conservative context in my Christian high school, I feel like I have a perspective that you don't. Milo isn't getting conservative ideas out there in a subversive label that's appealing to Millennials. He's a prophet of the deeply un-conservative alt-right. He's not creating a climate that's accepting of conservative ideals. He's creating one that specifically rejects those values as hallmarks of a system that they view as a failure through not being radical enough. **That's why all the good little Christians at my high school are falling in behind him — not because they actually give a crap about conservatism but because he's giving angry, aimless young men whose church hasn't given them anything solid to fall back on an alternate source of values** that happens to be steeped in fascist and white supremacist ideals.

As with Rod himself, here's a guy who, no matter how much he hates Milo Yiannopoulos, at least has the honesty to admit the church isn't offering young men anything today. But what are they actually going to do about this? When will they actually get into the game themselves? If they don't like Milo, are they going to provide a compelling alternative? I'm not seeing it. You can't beat something with nothing. And you can't beat it with things like purity culture or Mark Driscoll either.

## Noteworthy

Nautilus: [The American Weakling](#). Tom Vanderbilt takes a great look at declining grip strength and more.

Business Insider: [The gender pay gap is narrowing for millennials — but for the wrong reasons](#). It's because men are earning less, not women earning more. "They are taking up jobs that used to be predominantly taken by women — part-time, low-paid work — according to the think tank Resolution Foundation's 'Intergenerational Commission' unit."

Nicholas Kristof argues that [husbands are more dangerous than terrorists](#). As matter of fact married women, and girls living with their married father, are [far safer than other women](#).

National Review: [Trump, JFK, and the Masculine Mystique](#)

WSJ: The [grim truth](#) behind the "Winner Effect"

Art of Manliness: [Why you should train when you are sick](#)

## Coda

"Probably it is in the realm of sexual desire that sublimation is talked about most and understood least. Not all demands of the human organism can be sublimated. In satisfying physical hunger there is no substitute for food; in satisfying the impulse to breathe there is no substitute for oxygen. One cannot refine such desires until they appear in alternative and sublimated forms through which the organism finds satisfaction and content. When sex is thought of in its narrowest sense, as the specific tension in a distended gland, it belongs in this class. Such physical sex-hunger, so organically caused, cannot by itself be stepped up into a transcendent form that will be satisfied with something other than the release of its specific tension. So long as nature, therefore, prepares boys and girls physically for marriage in their middle teens, and society postpones marriage until the middle twenties, there is bound to be a sexual problem, and were this disparity between nature and society removed, the problem would still remain in multitudes of lives, not

to be altogether solved by any talk of sublimation” – Henry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*

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