

## **The AALC Pastor's Conference Session One – Secularization and Men in the Church**

In the 2015 summer edition of the Evangel, our Presiding Pastor wrote, “... we may think of the congregations of The AALC as fortresses of safety in a post-Christian frontier. Each congregational outpost is carefully positioned as a haven of safety, providing the protection of God's Word and the sustenance of His Holy Sacraments. Also, each congregational fort is an outpost from which God's people are sent forth with His commission of Kingdom expansion and Gospel proclamation into a wilderness culture of immorality and unbelief.”

*Each congregation is an outpost in the wilderness. Each congregational fortress provides the spiritual protection of God's Holy Word and the spiritual nourishment of His Holy Sacraments. From the safety of the Presence of God and the fellowship of the saints, we are sent forth on a journey. Some are sent to foreign countries; others are sent into their own communities. Each one of us, inspired by His Spirit and equipped with His Word, is sent on a mission into the wilderness for the sake of Our King and the expansion of His Kingdom.”*

The Hold the Line conferences have been a boom for The AALC. I'm here before you because of one such conference contributed in a very positive way on my discernment about should I belong to such a wonderful brotherhood that we enjoy today. Inspired by the comments made by our Presiding Pastor and the hopes and the dreams of the congregation that has called me to be their pastor, to be used by the Holy Spirit to call, gather, enlighten and sanctify boys and girls, men and women by the Gospel of Jesus Christ during this dark time of pandemic and into the future, at the pleasure of her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We will look addressing the retention of men in time of the church. However, before we begin we will operate within five basic biblical assumptions. First, the Doctrine of Justification is, in fact, the chief doctrine of the entire Christian teachings, and it is the key to addressing the retention of all people in the church and specifically boys and men. Second, Ecclesiastes 1:9 states explicitly that “there is nothing new under the sun.” So, it would be extremely foolish to expect the Holy Spirit to do a new thing outside of God's infallible and inerrant Word. Third, God has promised that His Word will not return to Him void or empty but will accomplish that which He intends (Is 55:11) and His Word is eternal (Mark 13:31). Fourth, The Church of Jesus Christ shall prevail, regardless of the environment or enemies that surround her, until the coming of her Bridegroom (Matt 16:17-19). Finally, the writer of Hebrews so adeptly states that Jesus Christ alone is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). He alone is constant; thus, we must fix our eyes upon Jesus Christ in all our endeavors. With these assumptions in mind, I present this work for the edification of Christ's beloved bride, His church.

My presentation is in three parts. First, we will address the secularization of the American society that has been going on since the precolonial times. In the context of men's ministry, we will look at possible negative influences of the participation of boys and men in the church. In reaction to secularization, the church historically exercised revival to draw men and boys back to the church and I will show how this is a gross error that in the end is not sustainable.

Our second session will focus on the vocation of fatherhood and the impact of fathers upon the spiritual lives of their family. Tomorrow's final session will be about how do we as the church properly equip boys and men to live out their faith.

Demographer and Lutheran missionary, Lyman Stone, wrote a Christianity Times article in 2020 titled, "*Making Your Church Manlier Won't Make it Bigger*", citing evidence that even in the ancient church, more women than men were stalwart adherents of the Christian faith and states this is not a crisis but the norm of the Christian church for several centuries. Stone's brief article draws largely on the work of American Sociologist of Religion, Rodney Stark. Stark believes that the early church immediately attracted more women than men from the non-Christian religions due to its overall respect of women. This respected position of females in Christianity, which also advocated for a late marrying age of Christian young females and its prohibition of abortion was attractive to the women of the day. Even as early as 370AD, Emperor Valentinian (d.375) ordered a prohibition of Christian proselytizing, aimed explicitly at ancient Roman women, due to the appeal of Christianity.

Nearly thirteen hundred years later, American pre-colonial clergy lamented the lack of men's worship participation. In many congregations of this era, the ratio of women to men was recorded as high as 2:1. Interesting to note, in pre-colonial Lutheran churches, the ratio was about equal males to females. Nevertheless, smaller Calvinist influenced Protestant congregations experienced a high-water mark as great as a 3:1 ratio of women to men.

There are no shortages of theories and speculation as to why there is a disparity of male participation in Christian congregations' worship life. Once such theory is the feminization of the church as proposed by Leon Podles, who has authored two well researched books, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (1999) and *Losing the Good Portion: Why Men Are Alienated from Christianity* (2020).

The Apostle Paul refers to all baptized believers (male or female) as "sons of God," (Rom 8:14,19; Gal 3:26), and yet the Church of Jesus Christ is always referred to in the feminine (Matt 16:18) and specifically as Christ's bride (Eph 5:25-27, 32; Rev 19:7-9). By all accounts, men and women participated equally in the early Christian church. However, men primarily led church activity and especially worship until the thirteenth century. Since the thirteenth century, Christians have seen their primary identity as feminine, and worship seems to have focused upon women as the primary audience. Podles suggests that this happened as a result of three movements within the medieval church. The popularity of Bernard of Clairvaux in both his sermons and teachings, the rise of women's mysticism and the Frauenbewegung (women's religious movements) and the influence of Marian theology.

The impact of these movements has had far reaching influence in the feminizing of Western Christianity to this day. The underlying message is: if only men could become like women, then they too can be saved.

The Old Testament records God addressing Israel as her husband, loving her as His beloved and yet unfaithful bride (Is 54:4-5;62:5; Jer 3:1,8,14; 31:31-33). God even uses the personal life of His prophet, Hosea, as a living paradigm to instruct the unfaithful people of Israel about His unwavering love. The church fathers including Augustine and biblical scholars recognize the Song of Songs (Solomon) as an anticipation of the intimate relationship between the church as Jesus Christ's beloved bride, whom He presents to Himself without spot or blemish (Eph 1:11-14; 5:22-6:4). The Bride of Christ is in fact a predominant image describing the relationship of Jesus Christ to His Church throughout the New Testament (John 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2-3; Eph 5:25-27; Rev 21:9-11). In both Old and New Testaments, God proclaims an exclusive relationship with His bride the church in which He is jealous for her (Ex 20:5).

In his commentary on the Old Testament book, Song of Songs, Origen (d. 254?) refers to all human souls in the feminine. In Book One, Origen states: "The appellations of Bride and Bridegroom denote either the Church in her relation to Christ, or the soul in her union with the Word of God." Perhaps inspired by Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) employed the same feminine language incorporated into his own sermons as he rose in popularity, a practice which became known as bridal mysticism. Bernard used personally intimate language to describe the converted soul's relationship with the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and addressed the human soul in the feminine. As he developed this Christology, he often referred to himself as a woman and even encouraged his monks to do the same.

Bridal mysticism ushered in the notion of each individual's experience as a bride of Christ, as opposed to the doctrine of the communion of saints as His bride. Followers of Bernard, especially the mystics, pushed this interpretation of his language, despite Origen's earlier warnings to not overly sensualized the soul as the bride of Christ. Popular mystics of the twelfth century like Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), whom her contemporary, Bernard, considered a prophet, Margareta Ebner (d. 1351), and others took the bridal union of the soul with Christ to yet a higher plain. These mystics even elevated the bridal union with Christ above an ordinary earthly marriage. Nevertheless, they included within the bridal union with Christ the "physical eroticism" reserved for a sexual union between husband and wife, exercised within the sacred covenant of marriage.

It is too easy to dismiss bridal mysticism as a Roman Catholic concern; however, its influence did not disappear with the Reformation. In the seventeenth century, European protestants, especially pietists, frequently wrote and spoke about the individual Christian as the "Bride of Christ." Evidence suggests that sixteenth-century Calvinists celebrated an erogenous union between the Christian, the bride, and Jesus Christ, the bridegroom. Making its jump across the Atlantic, prominent Puritan colonial leaders such as Thomas Hooker (d. 1647) and John Cotton (d. 1652) brought bridal mysticism to the American colonies addressing the mystical union of the human soul to Christ.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Bishop of the Moravian Church Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (d. 1760) strived to form a pan-German Protestant church in colonial Pennsylvania. Zinzendorf practiced an amalgamation of Lutheran theology, with its emphasis on justification by faith alone, bridal mysticism, and traditional passion symbolism. By the end of the 1740s,

Zinzendorf's theological confession included the belief that Christ's union could be experienced during sexual intercourse for either men or women.

While acknowledging Christ as fully male, Zinzendorf's Christology and Moravian piety focused on the side-wound inflicted by the Roman spear in John 19:34. Zinzendorf associated Christ's spear wound with the maternal and feminine attributes of the womb. That is, the blood and water which issuing forth during physical child birth is likened to Jesus Christ's blood and water issue forth to provide both individual believers and the church with a spiritual birth. Just as Eve is taken out of Adam's side, so the church is taken from the side of Christ. Thus, Zinzendorf advocated that the church should be called "christess," and like Eve, the church should desire her Husband. Therefore, all Christians should desire an intimate union with Christ. According to Zinzendorf, masculinity was temporal and earthly: *There are no male souls in the world, not in heaven or on earth. Everything about our bodies that is temporarily male will have ended from the moment that the corpse descends into the earth.*

This notion soon became more than just a pious metaphor. Some early Moravians seem to have considered it an attainable reality. This became clear during a controversial ceremony on December 6, 1748, led by Zinzendorf's son, in which he declared single men to be women.

The influence of bridal mysticism reached well into the modern era. The beloved scholar and converted Anglican, C.S. Lewis (d. 1963) stated in 1948 that, while it is crucial for men alone to be clergy in order to "represent the Lord to the Church", nevertheless all individual Christians are to be viewed both "corporately and individually, [as] feminine to God."

Swiss theologian and Roman Catholic priest Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988) identified Mary's life as the prototype of the *ars dei* (art of God). According to Balthasar, Mary is the ideal and perfect model for all Christians. For this reason, Balthasar was outspoken in his full support for women priests, as a direct reflection of the work of Mary, especially in the celebration of the church's Eucharistic sacrifice. According to Balthasar, a holy pious woman beneath the cross plays an "*organic, theologically correct mediating role.*" Just like Mary.

The influence of feminization and bridal mysticism has not waned since the twelfth century. According to Podles, both Roman Catholics and Protestants have agreed in seeing the female as more receptive to the action of grace. This is illustrated in a response to a Lutheran pastor who expressed his grievances about the incompetence of the Lutheran General Synod of 1916, as it failed to adequately address the "boy problem" and retain boys in the Lutheran Confession. In response the columnist, Reverend Walter S. Schuette of the American Lutheran Survey countered with "*...this writer does not countenance the theory that boys have a deeper dye of original sin than do girls.*"

Even in the teachings of popular Evangelical lecturer, Beth Moore, bridal mysticism played a key role in her account of her conversion. In a 2005 interview with Today's Christian Women, Moore accounts, "*My Sunday-school teacher would hold up pictures of Jesus, and he looked so nice. I needed a hero, and Jesus seemed like one. I'd lie on the grass, stare up at the sky, and wonder what Jesus was like. Even as a child, I fell in love with him. After my freshman year in college, I was a camp counselor for sixth-grade girls. Early one morning, as the girls were*

*sleeping, I sensed God's presence enfold me. There were no audible words, no bright lights. But suddenly I knew, without a doubt, my future was entirely his. You are now mine, he told me."*

Moore's romantic encounter with Jesus Christ is not unlike those experienced by Bernard's followers and medieval female mystics. As expressed throughout the last seven hundred years, from Bernard to Moore, bridal mysticism provokes great concern as it emphasizes subjective individual experience as being superior to the objective truth of Holy Scriptures, begging the question, "Can a masculine man receive eternal life?"

Other ideas that can be dumped into the feminine mix is that masculinity is toxic. Although the term "toxic masculinity" has become widely used in academia, recent popular discussions, and in the "#MeToo" movement of 2017, it is also typically the term used to describe traditional, patriarchal, and stereotypical masculine behavior that authorizes violence against women and children. In psychoanalytic contexts, "toxic masculinity" is used to describe, extreme competition and greed, insensitivity to or lack of consideration of the experiences and feelings of others, a strong need to dominate and control others, an incapacity to nurture, a dread of dependency, a readiness to resort to violence, and the stigmatization and subjugation of women, gays, and men who exhibit feminine characteristics.

Others have defined "toxic masculinity" as the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly "feminine" traits—which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual—are the means by which your status as "man" can be taken away.

In contemporary discussions, the term, "toxic masculinity" seems to be readily interchangeable with "patriarchy," that is, male behavior driven by power and control. This conflation affords no room for "benevolent patriarchy," commonly known as "complementarianism," since it still employs power distinctions between genders. In 2018, writer Michael Flood expressed concern that discussion and attitudes concerning "toxic masculinity" may foster or incite an environment of shaming and blaming men. Flood's apprehension is based on the concern that if men believe they are under attack, or that they perceive they are victims of a man-hating culture, they may react in an excessively defensive and hostile manner. Possible unintended consequences of the anti-toxic masculinity, anti-patriarchy, and #MeToo movement are that male pastors and laymen may become hypersensitive and avoid interaction with females in the church due to fear and lack of trust.

ELCA's theologian-at-large and feminist Karen Bloomquist posit that the... *Reformation understanding – that we receive our dignity, or worth (are saved) not by what we do but by God's grace- goes against the grain of both patriarchy and capitalism.* Accordingly, a gospel that emphasizes the necessity of becoming powerless, embraces the denial of self, loving God above all things, and displays the necessity of sacrificial love is much easier to be heard and accepted by women who have less power than men in a patriarchal culture. Bloomquist believes this "gospel" is not helpful to women and it repels men who want to embrace patriarchy and capitalism. She observes, *No wonder more women than men are found in most churches! It has been far more comfortable for male preachers to proclaim a gospel of self-sacrifice and giving*

*up control to women and other subordinated groups. This 'gospel' therefore serves to legitimize rather than transform the situation and conditions of these groups.*

She emphatically states that the theology of the cross, namely, that “*God is revealed through suffering and weakness and not in glory*” needs to be driven into the hearts of men “*in this patriarchal society*” but women who are “*victimized by patriarchy*” need to hear a completely different message of empowerment.

Expressed in his work, “*Beyond Good and Evil*”, philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) rejected Christianity’s call to deny self and life as a principle of “dissolution and decay”. Christianity then is just “sentimental weakness” in as much as life is essentially about the conquest and exploitation of that which is inferior. In that view, the Christian faith, from its origins, is a faith that would sacrifice all that defines a man. Thus “modern man” has no need for the “paradox of the formula, ‘God on the cross.’” Podles’ interpretation of Nietzsche’s “will to power” is that a man must choose between Christianity or masculinity; to Nietzsche, “a man can’t be both.”

When asked in 2009, “Where have all the men gone on Sunday?”, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary - Fort Wayne, Gary Zieroth, replied, “*I think men today are afraid.*” That is, men are simply afraid to enter into the battle that God has initiated against man’s sinful flesh, the devil, and the evil world. According to Zieroth, men feel ill-equipped and so are fearful of being called into battle. “*Men want to do the opposite. They [want to] hide.*” Men will seek refuge behind careers, sports, leisure activities, and technology before taking up the “crucial call” to battle. Evangelical David Murrow in his book, “*Why Men Hate Church*”, claims men are not ashamed of Jesus Christ but are in fact deathly afraid of feminization. Murrow lists twelve reasons that men are afraid of worship. These reasons have one thing in common: they violate multiple “man laws,” including the loss of control, of becoming powerless and being sucked back into the feminine.

If the feminization of the church isn’t repelling enough for men, the attraction of secularization is taking a huge toll on males and their participation in the Christian faith.

Research on why men don’t attend church reveals that it is not because men are hostile to Christian corporate worship. Nevertheless, more and more studies clearly show that worship and church activities are perceived as not being relevant to men’s lives. Their children, mainly sons, follow their fathers’ lead and do not participate as well. Again, Chaves and Stephen’s work, “*Church Attendance in the United States*” (2004) posits that since the 1960s men are increasingly less engaged in activities of the church but this is not at the expense of their belief in the “supernatural or concern about spirituality.”

The terms “secularism,” “secularization,” and “secular age” seem to be used interchangeably. These are generally terms of reproach and contempt among Christians. By definition, “secularization” refers to transforming a society that involves a change from the close identification of society with religious institutions to a separated relationship between society and religion. “Secularism” is a belief or ideology that states that religion and religious considerations should not play a part in temporal affairs. As defined by Canadian philosopher

Charles Taylor, the “secular age” is a worldview that employs exclusively humanism to account for all of the meaning and significance of human life in a way that dispenses with “naive religious faith” and its adherence to “the transcendent.” Interesting to note, Taylor blames Luther as the catalyst for secularism as the Reformation, in Taylor’s opinion, was the root cause for expressive individualism and the rejection of that which is holy.

Traditionally, American Christianity existed in a society that neatly broke down into two worlds: religious (mainly Christian) and non-religious with a clean separation of church and state. In the past, “secular” was used to label someone or something with no religious affiliation, confession, or belief. However, “secular” now means that the Christian faith is just one of a host of optional beliefs or convictions and as such it is expected to be challenged, making the Christian faith vulnerable to being eclipsed by an exclusively humanist worldview. According to historian Wilfred McClay in his 2007 study, secularism exists in the West in two forms: 1) “*Political secularism*,” which desires politics as an independent sphere, “one that’s not subject to ecclesiastical governance, to the governance of a church or religion or the church’s expression of that religion.” 2) “*Philosophical secularism*,” which is secularism as “a kind of godless system of the world, a system of beliefs about ultimate things.”

In 2012, Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce co-authored “Why are Women more Religious than Men? Their secularization thesis is that religion, specifically Christianity, will fade into irrelevance in its final stage such that “*even most women [will] no longer go to church...*”

The Brisbane Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia in 1907 stood-up a commission to counter secularization. The Commission found that with a nominal church membership of 131,000, only about 15,000 attended, composed of mostly women. The report included comments from the diocese’s laymen expressing reasons for non-attendance: “The church is out of touch with the people,” “Services are too dull and monotonous, and in many cases conducted in a lifeless manner,” “Attendance affected by the personal like or dislike of the clergyman,” “Too much exhortation from the ignorant to the ignorant,” and “Want of interest by the clergy in individuals except of a particular class.”

According to Murrow’s “Top 10 Reasons Why Men Don’t Attend Worship,” time and nationality seem to have no relevance, as the list is uncannily parallel to the previous study: 10. I don’t have time, 9. Church just doesn’t work for me, 8. It’s boring, 7. It’s irrelevant to my life, 6. I don’t like the pastor, 5. I don’t want to talk about it, 4. It’s too long, 3. They ask for money too much, 2. It’s for wimps. 1. There are too many hypocrites there.

There appear to be little significant or lasting shifts in men’s religious behavior during the last several decades, except for the large number of unchurched. The group of unchurched men has grown by nine percentage points since 1991. As of 2011, an estimated 39 percent of all men in the U.S. can be considered unchurched. Barna’s definition of “unchurched” is: “having not attended a church event, other than a special service such as a wedding or funeral, in the past six months.”

Despite this discouraging statistic, it is worth noting that American men are not becoming atheists. Pew research found in their 2016 study that 32 percent of U.S. males attend weekly

worship, 47 percent claim to pray daily, and the same percentage states that faith is “very important” to them. Compared to other western nations, the religious commitment of U.S. males is exceptionally high. This same study confirms that 44 percent of Christian males worship weekly, 61 percent pray daily and 63 percent claim that their faith is “very important”.

Interestingly, 15 percent of “unaffiliated” men in the U.S. claim to pray daily, 12 percent of the same group of men say religion is “very important,” and 3 percent attend weekly worship.

Another study explicitly focusing on millennial males paints a fascinating picture. Nearly half (46 percent) believe in God, and 36 percent of men polled state that their faith is “very important.” Nevertheless, only 27 percent worship weekly, and 37 percent will seldom worship; 41 percent seldom pray compared to 35 percent that pray daily; 64 percent seldom participate in prayer, Bible study, or religious education. When asked to identify their source for moral guidance, this same millennial group of men, broke down into 63 percent identifying philosophy, reason, or common sense, 21 percent looking to religion, and surprisingly only 13 percent to science. Alarming, nearly half (48 percent) of this generation’s men reject the idea that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God.

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Cornell University sociologist Landon Schnabel in his 2017 work, *“The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research,”* endorsed the premise that instead of religion fading into irrelevance, Americans continue to be intensely religious, including their devoted attachment to and practice of persistent biblical literalism, and evangelicalism. According to Schnabel and Brock, only moderate Christianity which demands minimal doctrinal adherence, such as Mainline Protestantism, is on the decline in the United States. They conclude that religiosity in the United States is atypically persistent, is exceptional, and does not heed to the secularization thesis.

Nevertheless, a study of male weekly worship attendance patterns leaves little doubt that perceived “cost versus benefit” analysis strongly influences men to move religious activities to the sideline. An interesting study evaluated the influence of at home National Football League (NFL) games upon worship. This study revealed that not only do churches have to compete for adherents, but worship is now just one of many options in the secular “leisure and entertainment” market place.

College and young adult pastor David Zahl’s thesis in his 2019 book, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do about It*, is that “institutional religion” is losing ground to a secular religiosity, that Zahl has coined “seculosity.” Zahl states that “seculosity” incorporates secular replacements such as political ideology, parenting styles, special diets, work success, and romantic fulfillment as the

means for self-justification or self-righteousness. According to Zahl, American's replacement religions are not where one seeks meaning or hope, but rather "enoughness" is the goal. Zahl defines "enoughness" as that which completes a man or makes him feel he is okay. The "seculosity" of the church is when she turns into just another location of many to "establish our enoughness, rather than the only reliable place to receive it." What concerns Zahl is that the secular idea of "enoughness" has been heightened and given deep spiritual significance within the church. The consequence is that the very institution commanded by Jesus Christ to proclaim "justification by grace through faith boldly" does not practice its own mandate.

American Protestantism has repeatedly and unsuccessfully relied on a revival system in a reactive response to male attrition through feminization and secularization. As a result of various historical, ecclesiastical, and cultural factors, the Christian church has experienced long periods of absences or even decline in boys' and men's participation in the Divine Service relative to their female counterparts, including the present. This loss of males in worship attendance presents the church with an existential problem that must be effectively recognized, analyzed, and addressed if these boys and men are to be adequately nurtured, prepared, and strengthened in their spiritual battle as sons of God. Nothing less than their eternal salvation is at stake.

From the pre-colonial Great Awakening Revival to the contemporary Promise Keepers along with the men's focuses ministries of Bill Hybel and Willow Creek and Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill, it seems every 5 -10 years someone is creating a revival to address men and the church. While they make much commotion and excitement, in the end they eventual fail.

Zieroth believes that Evangelical revivalist models of the past and present focus on inner experiences and emotions, which are ultimately various forms of pietism. However, men's very nature is to ignore and suppress their feelings as they serve the church and community. This inward focus upon feelings, senses, and emotions will ultimately be perceived as feminine and not masculine. Thus, it awakens men's natural fear, namely, to be pulled back into the feminine world and become emasculated. According to Zieroth, historically speaking, revivals have momentarily increased male participation in church, but those same revivals prove to be unsustainable, and the church returns to favoring women as males leave the church. He is convinced that men do not participate in Christianity because of feelings or social pragmatism. Rather, Zieroth believes that men will embrace and flourish in confessional and orthodox Christianity, which addresses the things that matter most to men: true masculinity as defined by the Scriptures and authentic brotherhood in Jesus Christ.

The example of past and contemporary male-focused evangelism movements that, with the best intentions, prod men by admonishment, by rebuking and inviting, by advising and promising and by goal setting, frequently result in the initial positive response of attracting men to church. However, these same movements have also proven to be unsustainable because of their continual emphasis on moralism and self-improvement.

As Dr. Rod Rosenblatt, former Professor of Theology at Concordia University Irvine, explains in his lecture, The Gospel for Those Broken by the Church: *"If the Ten Commandments were not impossible enough, the preaching of Christian behavior, of Christian ethics, of Christian living, can drive a Christian into despairing unbelief. Not happy unbelief. Tragic, despairing,*

*sad unbelief. It is not unlike the Christian equivalent of ‘Jack Mormons’ – those who finally admit to themselves and others that they can’t live up to the demands of this non-Christian cult’s laws, and excuse themselves from the whole shebang. A diet of this stuff from pulpit, from curriculum, from a Christian reading list, can do a work on a Christian, that is, at least over the long haul ‘faith destroying.’*

According to Lutheran Pastor and Professor George H. Gerberding (d. 1927), who witnessed the revival efforts of Evangelist Billy Sunday (d. 1935) and his contemporaries, rejected modern revivals as the “whole system is an invention of man” and “unscriptural from beginning to end.” In his work titled, *The Way of Salvation in The Lutheran Church (1887)*, Gerberding lists ten objections to modern revivals, the first and foremost is that revivals treat the Holy Spirit as a fleeting visitor, whose activities are ethereal and short-lived, requiring enticement through extraordinary methods in order to return and revive boys’ and men’s wayward faith. Revivals failed to recognize and in fact ignored the work of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacraments and therefore completely lose sight of the means by which Jesus Christ delivers His redemption and salvation. In short, men’s revival movements in the past were not in keeping with Holy Scripture and Christian doctrine and relied exclusively on “human means and methods.”

Gerberding provides excellent commentary on the words of Jesus Christ as recording in the Gospel of St. John as how the church should understand the work of the Spirit. In the fourteenth chapter, Jesus offers His disciples needed encouragement and comfort as the time of His crucifixion drew near. Indeed, He promises to send “ἄλλον παράκλητον” (another helper/comforter) to His disciples (John 14:16). The conjunction, “another” indicates that the mission of the coming Helper would be similar, if not the same, as Jesus Christ’s own: to guide, to teach, to comfort, to strengthen, and to defend those whom the Father had entrusted to His care. In other words, this “another” is to be the only substitute, one who will take the place of the no longer visible Jesus Christ. This “another helper” is not some temporary or fleeting spirit that must be drawn out from hiding, but rather He is God, the Holy Spirit, the One who will “be with you forever” (John 14:16b). In short, this “another helper” uses the means of grace (Eph 5:26) instituted by Jesus Christ Himself to come and operate within the hearts and minds of boys and men (2 Tim 3:15-16).

Regardless of the packaging, past and current efforts to evangelize men are all the same at their core. The first step is to return to the epiphany that men need the church; in other words, to boldly declare that men need Jesus Christ. The second step is to identify and focus on a specific need that must be addressed to draw men. The third step is to generate a sense of crisis around this core need and highlight that men are the only solution to addressing the problem. This third step requires surveying the immediate social landscape, the repurposing of something that already exists or identifying something that is needed in either secular or non-secular society, and then building methods around this core need. The fourth step is to manipulate men through an appeal to their feelings or emotions, supported with a heavy dose of moral legalism. This step will employ various forms of worship that focus on the individual rather than the traditional orthodox focus on Jesus Christ and Him crucified and the call for repentance for the forgiveness of sin. This step must include an ample amount of Scripture, but it cannot be burdened by too much sound biblical doctrine and is typically non-sacramental. Finally, this last step emphasizes

that men need to take control of their destinies (temporal and eternal) and must choose to have “a close and personal relationship with Jesus.”

Men’s movements follow the same predictable pattern. Movements will progress, mature, and dissipate over time. Male-focused movements always cause a brush fire of interest and demonstrate a measurable participation in the church. However, history has shown that the impact of these movements is short-lived. There may be a remnant well after the movement’s apex; however, these movements’ sole purpose of bringing men to Jesus Christ and participation in the church’s activities will eventually wane. All this is due to the fact that the hearts of fallen sinful men are too weak to follow the requirements of the Law of God (Rom 7:15).

It is said that insanity is to do the same thing repeatedly and yet expect different results each time you try. Perhaps this is true, but in evangelizing men, to retain boys and men of all ages, it should not be about programmatic movements demanding that men seek improvement for God and country. Ultimately these movements have a short positive run and then dissipate with little fanfare. Rather, what needs to happen is to reform around that which church is called to do, namely, per Jesus Christ’s mandate, “...that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all [men].” (Luke 24:47).

The church’s story to boys and men is far more than chattering about moral living, rules, and penalties. It must focus on the divine source of all goodness and their salvation. She must return to her original story, the evangel; she must have her eyes and her story focused upon her Lord and King, Jesus Christ. She must lead and teach men to fix their eyes upon Jesus Christ (Heb 12:2). Just as it was relevant seventy-five years ago for C. S. Lewis, so it is for men today: *“Christianity leads you on, out of morality, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we shall call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes.”*

In short, the twenty-first century church’s clarion voice above the din of secularization and the clanging gong of revival, to boys and men must be Christocentric, not morality-centered, not even good enough-centered, but Christ-centered. The church must initiate and train up boys and men to live as sons of God and, through the inerrant Word of God and sacraments, equip them for spiritual warfare, if she expects them to be engaged or even to draw men to her Christ. It is only the power of the Gospel that can heal, resurrect, and restore men’s hearts allowing them to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, their Captain, and King (1 Peter 2:21).

The confessional and orthodox Christian church acknowledges that the will of man is powerless to cooperate with God. No man, by his own will or strength, can produce a saving faith or act in any manner that is pleasing to God according to the Law (AC XVIII 1-5). Without the work of the Holy Spirit, man cannot love God with his own heart nor serve his neighbor (Matt 22:37). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit’s work can only be accomplished through and with God’s eternal and external Word (SA III VIII 3). To overcome the devil, this evil world and one’s own sinful flesh, the Holy Spirit must employ the specific and distinctive means of the Divine Service, which consists of the Word attached to the sacraments, the forgiveness of sins (the Office of the

Keys), and sound biblical preaching emphasizing the proper distinction between Law and Gospel (LC II 58). In order for the church to build up boys into men, while retaining and equipping them for spiritual warfare, she must elevate the central teaching of the Gospel, namely, the doctrine of justification through Christ Jesus alone, making it the center of worship.

Previous men's revival movements were grounded in a misunderstanding of the manner in which the Holy Spirit acts upon the sons of God. The retention of boys and men in this heavily secularized environment of society and church, the confessional and orthodox Christian church must return and reform around the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. After lunch, we address the vocation of Fatherhood, to serve both boys and men in the light of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed.