



The Masculinist #13: The Lost World of American Evangelicalism

Aaron M. Renn <arenn@urbanophile.com>

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To: "Aaron M. Renn" <arenn@urbanophile.com>

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

Is this newsletter resonating with you or stimulating your thinking? Then I need your help. To justify the investment of time in this, and the risk I'm taking on by writing some of this stuff, I need to see my subscriber base growing. So although some of this might be too hot to handle for some, please step out yourself and pass it along to those you think could benefit, especially Christian pastors and lay leaders, because I need your help to make this a success.

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The Curious Case of Ben Sasse

Nebraska's Republican Senator Ben Sasse is an Evangelical and is someone who's a darling among the Christian establishment set. I referenced him briefly back in Masc #11 for his Father's Day video. Sasse has also been one of the leading members of the #NeverTrump contingent going back to well before the election. Even up until the present day, his Twitter account is filled with frequent denunciations of Trump. This is a man who styles himself, and is seen by many, as the face of "respectable conservatism" contra Trump.

Sasse recently wrote a book called *The Vanishing American Adult* focused on some of the same problems I write about in this newsletter. He's concerned about a failure to launch among twentysomethings who would in a previous age have been living fully adult lives, with regular jobs, their own places, families, etc.

I read the book and thought it was very good in many ways. It's mostly lessons drawn from his own strategies for raising his three kids. As someone who just had a son, I personally took away a number of things from it I might apply. For example, I'm troubled by the helicopter parenting trends and want to embrace more of the "free range kids" lifestyle. But after reading Sasse I realize my own ideas of parenting were probably much more towards the over-protective side than I'd realized. Plus there are some interesting specific tips in there. Sasse's recommendations are broken down under five headings: create multi-generational relationships for your kids, develop a work ethic, embrace limited consumption, learn how to travel meaningfully, and embrace serious reading. If you're reading this and have young kids, it's definitely worth picking up.

As good as the book is, I can't help but think that the children of a US senator were already probably going to succeed. These recommendations are also rather anodyne and politically safe. Apart from a limited number of conservative talking points, I think President Obama would endorse pretty much everything in the book. The recommendations are also about high-level functioning (e.g., travel) which are mostly applicable to people in the professional classes who already have the basics taken care of. The idea of embracing limited consumption is only relevant if you can afford excess consumption, for example. The book's target audience is the top 20% - exactly the people whose kids are by and large not having problems. In effect, it's about helping the haves to figure out how to get even more rather than pulling up the have-nots. The consumption of advice like his is how the 1% reproduces itself.

Sasse does not forthrightly address any of the serious problems facing America's youth with any proposed solutions that might get him into the slightest bit of hot water. (He did give family breakdown a mention, but did nothing with it). The kids growing up in white working class communities with rampant family breakdown, unstable employment, drugs, etc. have much bigger problems in life than learning how to travel well. Drug addicted parents are injecting babies with opioids to make them stop crying (true story). There's one woman I know personally who had four kids by three different fathers, two of whom were brothers. And who went through a significant stretch to drug addiction where she was completely out of the picture while her kids were raised by grandparents. Those kids face serious problems. (Two of them have already had out of wedlock children of their own, one of them already with multiple partners).

Similarly, a black teenager in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood faces much bigger problems than his summer reading list.

Sasse, despite all of his pretention to moral superiority, despite his constant anti-Trump preening, despite all of his Evangelical faith, despite being a US senator, is unwilling to stand up in the public square and say unpopular things to confront the serious problems in America, ones not amenable to uncontroversial feel-good solutions like “consume less.”

In this curious blend of moral posturing and play it safe proclamations, Sasse is very representative of what’s probably the dominant strain of Evangelical thinking today. So it’s worth exploring what that is - and why it exists.

The Three Worlds

Ben Sasse is a conservative exemplar of what I term “neutral world” Christianity. In my framework, there are three worlds we’ve seen in my lifetime related to the status of Christianity and traditional Christian norms in society.

1. Positive World (Pre-1994). To be seen as a religious person and one who exemplifies traditional Christian norms is a social positive. Christianity is a status enhancer. In some cases failure to embrace those norms hurt you.
2. Neutral World (1994-2014). Christianity is seen as a socially neutral attribute. It no longer had dominant status in society, but to be seen as a religious person is not a knock either. It’s more like a personal affectation or hobby. Traditional norms of behavior retain residual force.
3. Negative World (2014-). In this world, being a Christian is a social negative, especially in high status positions. Christianity in many ways as seen as undermining the social good. Traditional norms are expressly repudiated.

To illustrate the differences, consider these three incidents:

1. Positive World: In 1987 the Miami Herald reported that Sen. Gary Hart had been having an affair, and cavorting with the woman in question on his yacht. He was forced to drop out of the presidential race as a result.
2. Neutral World: In 1998 the Drudge Report broke the story that Bill Clinton had been having an affair with intern Monica Lewinsky, including sex acts in the Oval Office. Bill Clinton was badly damaged by the scandal but survived it as the Democratic Party rallied around him and public decided his private behavior was not relevant to the job.
3. Negative World: In 2016 Donald Trump, a man whose entire persona (sexual antics, excess consumption, boastfulness, etc.) is antithetical to traditional Christianity, is elected president. The Access Hollywood tape, for example, had no effect on voter decisions about him.

Even for those who hate Christianity, the rise of Trump, something only possible in a post-Christian world, should give them pause to consider.

The Church’s Strategic Response to These Worlds

The church has clearly shifted its strategies over time in response to these three worlds. The paradigm of positive world Christianity is the religious right. The very phrase “Moral Majority” speaks of a world in which Christianity is the majority or at least normative.

The religious right was highly combative and oppositional vs. emerging secular culture. By and large the people we associate with it today were those far away from the citadels of culture. Many of them were in backwater locations. They tended to utilize their own platforms for reaching people: direct mail, paid for UHF televangelistic shows, etc. My impression is that they were at least initially funded mostly by donations from the flock, which gave them a marketing driven style. Alex Jones/InfoWars might be a good contemporary secular analogue. (Later, the GOP establishment poured money into these groups. I don’t know for certain, but have been told by someone in a position to know that weaponizing these folks politically was a cynical ploy by the establishment class to fend off the paleocon populism of Pat Buchanan. They needed an alternative outlet for the rubes).

Positive world figures: Jerry Falwell (Lynchburg, VA), Pat Robertson (Virginia Beach), Jimmy Swaggart (Baton Rouge), Oral Roberts (Tulsa), Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker (Portsmouth, VA). Later political operatives included people like Ralph Reed (Atlanta, I believe).

A second strain of the positive world movement was the rise of the “seeker sensitive” suburban megachurch such as Bill Hybel’s Willow Creek (Barrington, IL) and Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church (Orange County). These were in a sense a proto-type of the neutral world to come, but note the term “seeker sensitive.” It assumes large numbers of people are actively seeking. Many of these explicitly rejected the backwoods fundamentalism of the group above, but

still operated in a positive world paradigm. Bill Hybels walked door to door in Barrington surveying the non-churched about why they didn't attend. He designed his church to appeal to them stylistically. That was predicated on an underlying friendliness to Christianity.

The neutral world church is very different in a number of ways. It has traditionally been much more apolitical (though many of its practitioners lean left). It's also much more heavily urban and global city focused. It tries to avoid highlighting areas where Christianity is in conflict with the world. Instead of being antagonistic towards the culture, it is explicitly positive towards culture. In fact, you could sum up much of the model under the heading "cultural engagement." They want to meet the culture on its own terms, and reach people as participants in a pluralistic public square. They want to be in the mainstream media, not just Christian media or their own platforms. Many of their ministries have been backed by big money donors. These are many of the people who denounced Trump to no effect during the election. In effect, they represent a version of Christianity taking its cues from the secular elite consensus.

Virtually all of the people doing "urban church" work are neutral world cultural engagement types. And the suburban megachurches have shifted that direction. Examples are Hillsong (NYC and LA among others), journalist Sarah Pulliam Bailey (lives NYC, writes for the Washington Post), Christianity Today magazine (suburban Chicago), contemporary artist Makoto Fujimura (NYC), James Davison Hunter (UVa) and Ben Sasse (DC/US Senator).

Today there are still some positive world people around, mostly legacy religious righters. It includes many of the religious leaders who endorsed Trump. Note who they were: people such as Jerry Falwell, Jr. (still in Lynchburg) and Franklin Graham, who is based in small town North Carolina I believe. (Some urban types like Eric Metaxas publicly supported Trump, but they were a clear minority and paid a price for doing so). However, the majority of the Evangelical establishment seems to have adopted a neutral world stance with the exception of some Southern Baptists and some older white guys. (The rank and file is a different story. Like politics, Evangelicalism is riven with an elite-base split).

The End of the Neutral World

The exemplar of the neutral world strategy is Tim Keller of NYC's Redeemer Presbyterian (founded 1989). His success in NYC powerfully validated the neutral world model. His Reformed background and Neocalvinist influence already primed him to be much more positive towards the world than say Jerry Falwell. He explicitly validated the pursuit of success at the highest echelons of American art, media, finance, etc., believing that Christianity had something to offer in those fields at all levels. He believes these secular fields, while suffering from fallenness like all human institutions, are fundamentally positive contributions to humanity and that Christianity should participate and engage with them rather than fighting against them or denouncing them.

Keller's NYT bestselling book *The Reason for God* (published by Penguin Books, not a Christian imprint) is a classic example of a neutral world apologetic. It came out around the same time as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Post-Taylor, Keller realized that, while his book was a bestseller, it had missed an important pre-apologetic. Before he could try to convince people that Christianity was true, he had to convince them they should want it to be true. That they should care that it was true. They weren't, in other words, already seeking (the neutral world, or "cross-pressured" as Taylor might say). So he in effect rewrote his apologetic in the light of Taylor and published it last year as *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*.

As near as I can tell, the book flopped. Right now its Amazon ranking fluctuates in the 20,000s – not good. I searched around for reviews and such, and didn't see that it made much of a media splash. *The Reason for God* is actually still at 1,074 (bestsellers often have a long tail of success).

I'm not surprised to see this. I read the book myself. I rate it excellent in many ways. It's basically applied Charles Taylor plus some other thinkers. Most people will never read Taylor, and this is a great way to engage with the concepts. I highly recommended it to every Christian with say a college degree or equivalent to help them armor up intellectually.

However, this a neutral world book in a negative world. The pool of potential converts who are skeptical but open to the idea of faith is dwindling. Why even entertain the idea of something that, if you sign up for it, is going to incur a social stigma?

What's more, like Sasse's book, this one doesn't address any of the serious troubles and issues in the world today. In fairness, it was probably written in 2014 before things went really crazy, but it doesn't speak to the reality of someone living life today. Again in fairness, that's also probably in part generational. Keller is retirement age and draws on the

cultural examples of the past like CS Lewis, Christopher Lasch (1970s), and Robert Bellah (1980s). He does not cite some of the most powerful contemporary secular voices that speak directly to today's world in a manner very favorable to Christianity, like say Nassim Taleb or Michel Houellebecq. He may not have even read them. However, I suspect that, like Sasse, he really, really does not want to say anything that will offend unless he has to. That's just virtually impossible to do today and still have anything to say relevant to life as we experience it in America 2017.

In a sense, Keller's pastorate at Redeemer (1989-2017) bookends the neutral world. It was a very smart, successful strategy for that era. I would give him an A+ for it. But we have now transitioned to a negative world, and neutral world strategies will be increasingly ineffective or even counter-productive. As Keller might say, things need to be "contextualized" to today's reality.

Negative World Evolution

When the world switched from positive to neutral, the cultural engagement strategy was readily developed. With the switch from neutral to negative, the church needs a new strategy. However, one does not appear to be forthcoming. The lack of negative world ideas is remarkable not just for the fact that it has not occurred, but that it has received so little attention.

There is only serious engagement with the negative world out there I know of, Rod Dreher's "Benedict Option." Dreher is an admixture of positive (political movement conservatism), neutral (*Crunchy Cons*), and negative (Benedict Option) worlds. He even physically moved from backwoods to Louisiana to New York City then back again. He's also Eastern Orthodox, not Protestant. He's all over the map in many ways, and as a result the Benedict Option is critically flawed in my view. However, at least it's addressing reality.

Interestingly, neutral world Evangelicals seem to have largely rejected the Benedict Option, and therein lies an important tale.

I first created this positive/neutral/negative framework in 2014 when I saw [For the Life of the World](#), a series of seven short films talking about Christianity and life. A friend of mine was heavily involved in making this. It played to enthusiastic crowds at Christian colleges and elsewhere, with at least half a million people having watched it.

When I saw it the first time, I said to myself walking out, "That was really well done, but it was the film for five years ago." I went back and started taking notes, and rapidly sketched out my framework.

My initial thought is that as soon as being known as a Christian would incur a material social penalty, which I anticipated happening soon, there would be a mass abandonment of the faith by the megachurch crowd, etc.

I was wrong about that. What happened instead is that the neutral world Evangelicals largely decided to follow the response of the traditional mainline denominations before them in embracing the world and focusing on the social gospel. In other words, they decided to sign on with the winning team.

The average neutral world Christian leader – and that's a lot of the high profile ones other than the remaining religious righters, ones who have a more dominant role than ever thanks to the internet – talks obsessively about two topics today: refugees (immigrants) and racism. They combine that with angry, militant anti-Trump politics. These are not just expounded as internal to the church (e.g., helping the actual refugee family on your block), but explicitly in a social reform register (changing legacy culture and government policy).

I'm not going to argue that they are wrong are those points. But it's notable how selective these folks were in picking topics to talk about. They seem to have landed on causes where they are 100% in agreement with the elite secular consensus.

It's amazing how loud and publicly chest thumping they are on these topics while never saying anything that would get them uninvited from a Manhattan cocktail hour. They are very party line. (Since I mentioned Keller earlier I'll point out he's been somewhat different. He [pointedly refused](#) to take a position on the election, for example, saying that as a pastor he had to stick to the Bible and not give political opinions. And angry screeds aren't his style).

I won't speculate on their motives, but it's very clear that neutral world leaders have a lot to lose. Unlike Jerry Falwell, who never had secular cachet and lived in the sticks, these guys enjoy artisanal cheese, microbrews, and pour over coffees in Brooklyn. They've had bylines in the New York Times and Washington Post. They get prime speaking gigs at the Q conference and elsewhere. A number of them have big donors to worry about. And if all of a sudden they lost

the ability to engage with the culture they explicitly affirmed as valuable, it would be a painful blow. For example, to accept Dreher's Benedict Option argument they'd have to admit that the entire foundation of their current way of doing business no longer works. Not many people are interested in hearing that.

The neutral world Christians – and again that seems to be much of Evangelical leadership today – are in a tough spot when it comes to adjusting to the negative world. The move from positive to neutral world brought an increase in mainstream social status (think Tim Keller vs. Pat Robertson), but the move to a negative world will involve a loss of status. Let's be honest, that's not palatable to most. Hence we see a shift hard to the left and into very public synchronization with secular pieties. That's not everybody in Evangelical leadership, but it's a lot of them. Many of those who haven't are older and long time political conservatives without a next generation of followers who think like them. (Political conservatism is also dying, incidentally).

Believe me, I get it. Always remember the Law of Projection. What you see in others is what's present in yourself. I live in NYC. I love going to the opera. I'm into all that stuff. My urban work is a version of neutral world strategy I called "policy not politics." I focus almost exclusively on local policies, which are far away from the world of national politics. I studiously avoid giving my opinion on things like Obamacare, not just because I'm not an expert on it, but also because it will just alienate people (regardless of my position) gratuitously. I try to be completely evenhanded in criticisms of Republicans and Democrats. I'm in the mainstream media. My personality is also not really oriented towards high-conflict environments. I prefer being generally liked. I've got a lot to lose. Changing that approach would be really hard.

But the reality is even in my secular urban work the ground is eroding under my feet. Everything is becoming hyper-political, whether I want it to be or not or whether it should be or not. I'm going to end up in a higher conflict mode whether I want to or not. Just like what happened to Tim Keller at Princeton. Buckle up.

People are going to be forced to make choices, across a wide spectrum of domains. I'm afraid current trends indicate that Christian leaders are going to make the wrong ones. We already know from the past that social gospel style Christianity is a gateway to apostasy. That's where the trend is heading here.

I was speaking with one pastor who is a national council member of the Gospel Coalition. He's a classic neutral worlder who strongly disapproves of Trump. But he notes that the Millennials in his congregation are in effect Biblically illiterate and have a definition of God's justice that is taken from secular leftist politics. They did not, for example, see anything at all problematic about Hillary Clinton and her views. A generation or so from now when these people are the leaders, they won't be people keeping unpopular positions to themselves. They won't have any unpopular positions to hide. They will be completely assimilated to the world. Only their ethics will no longer be Hillary's, but the new fashion du jour.

Rather than a mass blowout then, Evangelicalism would thus die from a slow bleed, much as the mainlines and the Church of England did before them. Indeed, today's Evangelicals are retracing the steps of the mainlines. The parallels with the late 19th/early 20th centuries are there and should be studied. Back then, for example, virtually all of the sophisticated intellectual and cultural types – the cultural engagers of their day – sided with the world and became today's liberal mainlines. Many of the ones who remained orthodox, like Gresham Machen, paid a huge price for doing so – largely inflicted by their erstwhile brethren who assimilated. As it turns out, intellectuals are very easy to co-opt with a few trinkets. It looks like it's happening again. Almost every Evangelical institution I know is explicitly reformulating itself around secular social gospel principles, even if they wouldn't use those words to describe it. There will be residual beliefs in place, but over time they could dissipate to nothing. (Remember, the liberal mainlines didn't go from A to B overnight. It was a long process. For example, earlier this year I read a book by famed early 20th century liberal preacher Henry Emerson Fosdick that contained things so reactionary that even many "conservative" pastors today would be unwilling to write them).

Practically speaking, folks like Ben Sasse might obtain great sinecures for themselves, but they will never effect any real, positive change in the world. And their attractiveness to others will dwindle over time and their Christianity will fade into the background and ultimately disappear. On the conservative side, we already see this happening in the form of JD Vance, a younger guy in the Sasse mold, but one who holds to a curiously vague Christianity. All we really know about his beliefs is that he doesn't like rural Pentecostalism. The more liberal types are already cultural epigones. They have nothing to offer the world that I can't already get in a better form direct from the secular source.

How does this relate to masculinity, you might ask? Again, because embracing a loss of status, saying unpopular things that will get you in trouble – these things take balls.

The world is shifting, to crib from Leon Podles, from an irenic age to an "agonistic" (Greek *agon* = struggle, contest,

fight) one. This will require the masculine virtues, ones in desperately short supply in the church. The template is Paul, who was one tough hombre. Paul was a Jewish blueblood on the fast track to high council membership who threw it all way to endure beatings, imprisonment, etc. (One of the underappreciated virtues of Paul is just how physically and mentally tough that guy was). He said he counted it all as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. He also someone who could say, “I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God.”

But Paul wasn't agonistic in the religious right sense. I took an inventory of every single command he issued in the New Testament and divided them into various categories. They are overwhelmingly concerned with unity in the church and personal holiness. There are remarkably few commands that concern the outside world at all, and most of them involve accommodating oneself to it with the least possible disruption (be in subjection to the governing authorities, pay your taxes, try to remain at peace with all men, etc). Although his mission brought him in conflict with the world, fighting with the world was not on his agenda. And he did not try to change any secular political policies. He held people to a very high bar within the church, but the world outside the church, apart from seeking converts, was not much of a concern.

That's just a bit of stimulating your thinking. It's not a strategy or theological argument. But the church and others in society need to get a lot tougher – tougher physically, mentally, spiritually. And the church needs the manly virtues of enduring suffering, hardship, and having values that are higher than worldly social status and success – people who stand on solid rock, not who have a finger in the air to see which direction the wind is blowing so they can conform.

If this generation of Evangelical leaders doesn't develop that masculine strength within them, then they may ultimately be the generation that led their flock off down the well-trodden roadway that leads to apostasy.

For those readers who aren't Christian, that might be a good riddance. But remember Trump. The shift to agonistic is already ongoing in the culture, and not channeled by a Christian worldview. Good luck trying to deal with the fallout.

Noteworthy

Amy Wax and Larry Alexander published an op-ed in the Philadelphia Inquirer called [“Paying the price for breakdown of the country's bourgeois culture.”](#) In it they wrote:

The causes of these phenomena are multiple and complex, but implicated in these and other maladies is the breakdown of the country's bourgeois culture. That culture laid out the script we all were supposed to follow: Get married before you have children and strive to stay married for their sake. Get the education you need for gainful employment, work hard, and avoid idleness. Go the extra mile for your employer or client. Be a patriot, ready to serve the country. Be neighborly, civic-minded, and charitable. Avoid coarse language in public. Be respectful of authority. Eschew substance abuse and crime. These basic cultural precepts reigned from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. They could be followed by people of all backgrounds and abilities, especially when backed up by almost universal endorsement. Adherence was a major contributor to the productivity, educational gains, and social coherence of that period.

As you can imagine, this incurred savage denunciation. Half the Ivy League Penn Law faculty (Amy Wax teaches there) signed an open letter saying, “We categorically reject Wax's claims.”

Wax's claims are true. Her response to her critics is the best illustration, as she pointed out that the very people denouncing bourgeois values are people who follow them in their own lives, and aspire for their children to follow them. This goes back to what I said in Masc #9 that the American elite won't preach what they practice. Kudos to Wax (Jewish) for stepping up and being an exception.

NYT: [How ‘Snowflake’ Became America's Inescapable Tough-Guy Taunt.](#) The “snowflake” taunt is completely ineffective rhetoric. No one feels insulted or generally disturbed from being called a “snowflake.” Would you be insulted if someone called you that? I doubt it. Snowflake is the kind of insult a particular kind of conservative finds clever and hard hitting. That they think this is part of the reason why they are so ineffective.

NYT: [New fathers are older than ever.](#)

Rachel Sherman has [an NYT adaption](#) of her new book *Uneasy Street*, based on her interview with rich people in New York. There's a lot of unintended messages in there. Brad Wilcox [pointed out](#) one of them when he said, “Everyone is married in this story. Striking subtext to this NYT story on the rich. Which we also don't talk about.”

Coda

Whenever I interview someone for a job, I like to ask this question: “What important truth do very few people agree with you on?” This question sounds easy because it’s straightforward. Actually, it’s very hard to answer. It’s intellectually difficult because the knowledge that everyone is taught in school is by definition agreed upon. And it’s psychologically difficult because anyone trying to answer must say something she knows to be unpopular. Brilliant thinking is rare, but courage is in even shorter supply than genius – Peter Thiel, *From Zero to One*

PO Box 231028
New York NY 10023
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