



The Masculinist #15: The Structural Weakness of Christian Communities

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Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter about the intersection of Christianity and masculinity. If someone forwarded this to you and you want to subscribe, click over to: <http://www.urbanophile.com/masculinist/>

Are you an expert or especially knowledgeable about the Pastoral Epistles? If so, I need your help. I'm looking for volunteers to review and critique a document about 2 Timothy. It's a popular audience (non-technical) piece, and it's about 20,000 words long. If anyone can do this, please email me at arenn@urbanophile.com, because I want to have as many reviewers as I can get.

Since I have a large number of new subscribers, I'm going to start out with a recap of this newsletter.

This newsletter is motivated by a variety of problems facing men and the church in our society:

- The well-documented societal problems with men: failure to launch/living in Mom's basement, opioids, poor educational achievement relative to women, rising out of wedlock births, etc.
- The attraction of large numbers of young men into various atheistic, Nietzschean "alt-right" type groups (only a minority of which are actually white supremacist, but all of which have various problems).
- The disproportionate failure of the church to attract committed men. (Contrast with Orthodox Judaism and Islam).
- The universal complaints by pastors that young people, especially young women, can't seem to find quality spouses.

I started the Masculinist because there were important things that needed to be said about this that weren't being said by others. This is a topical newsletter; so don't expect me to say too much about areas outside of my focus, though I may do it from time to time when I think I have something unique to contribute.

This is not a "safe space." This is not an "irenic" newsletter. In part that's because the church has gotten a number of very important things wrong, which I intend to critique and correct (see Masc #3, 5, 7, 9, and 11). I fully expect that many of you will decide to unsubscribe. In fact, if I don't get enough unsubscribes, I'm probably repeating too much conventional wisdom. Nobody needs me for that.

This newsletter is written for Christian men. Others are welcome to subscribe and read, but I am not catering to anyone else's sensibilities.

I also want to stress that I am a cultural critic, not a theologian or Bible teacher. (And I'm a good one too – one who, for example, saw that Trump was a legitimate contender [as far back as November 2015](#)). I do not claim to be an authoritative teacher on Christian doctrine. Since this a Christian newsletter, obviously I have to deal with scripture and doctrine. But this newsletter is in the genre of cultural criticism.

I would also point out that much of what's written by actual pastors and theologians is also cultural criticism. Consider this 2011 post by Gospel Coalition council member Kevin DeYoung called "[Dude, Where's Your Bride?](#)" It only cites one scripture (1 Cor 16:13) that isn't even marriage related. This post is cultural commentary and life coaching, not Bible teaching. This is frequently the case with church teaching on sex and relationships. In the genres of cultural criticism and life coaching they may not necessarily be wrong, but they have no more credibility or authority than I or others like Rod Dreher do.

This newsletter follows several guiding principles:

- Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous dictum: *live not by lies*. We must have the courage to tell the truth, even where uncomfortable. (See Masc #1 and Coda below)
- Build up, don't just tear down. To that end, every other issue is devoted to practical tips to help you become a

better man, or to improve in other ways. My agenda is positive not just negative.

- Only critique people in the public square. I'm not going to tear into people who have not held themselves out as public intellectuals or commentators. I tend to pick on big name people who can defend themselves. And it helps to pick household names most of you already know about. And so on.
- Skin in the game. I'm not going to recommend anything I am not personally doing or did not personally do in similar situations. I may note other items, but explicitly without endorsement.

I am also attaching a zipped archive of all previous issues of the Masculinist, which you can review at your leisure. The most important ones to bring you up to speed from an analysis and critique perspective are #3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and 14.

For those of you who subscribed thanks to Rod Dreher's mention of "The Lost World of American Evangelicalism," please read the entire thing, which is in Masc #13. He gave a very generous excerpt, but the original was about 4,000 words and so not even he was able to quote the entire thing in a blog post.

Issue Index:

- #1 Introduction - very similar to the "welcome" message for this list, but with some additional material
- #2 Skills – the importance of regularly acquiring new skills. (Accountability point: I am now in my second year of studying French)
- #3 The History of Church and Men
- #4 Helping Men and Women Meet in the Church
- #5 What Does It Take to Be a Man? – How the church fails to understand the essence of masculinity, and some consequences thereof.
- #6 How to Establish a Consistent Prayer Life – I got some nice feedback on this one.
- #7 Accountability for Failure – The church loves to slam people in the world for their words and deeds, but there's been little accountability in the church for catastrophic errors related to sex and relationships (purity culture, Mark Driscoll)
- #8 Stop Apologizing
- #9 Preaching What We Practice – The church's surprisingly weak and unenthusiastic endorsement of its own nominal teachings on marriage.
- #10 The International Man of Mystery – Maintaining a sense of mystery in relationships is more important than transparency, at least initially
- #11 Has the Church Become an Unwitting Enabler of Family Breakdown?
- #12 How to Improve Your Posture
- #13 The Lost World of American Evangelicalism – If you came because of Rod Dreher's excerpt, please do read the whole thing.
- #14 An Antifragile Church – a look at the work of Nassim Taleb, which is profound and extremely favorable to the church

The World Is Talebbian

I always say that I am an "experiential Calvinist." Let me explain.

In the last issue I talked about the importance of the church grappling with the work of Nassim Taleb, which undermines many modern conceits and is very favorable to Christianity.

As it happens, that was going to be my last ever issue of the Masculinist. I had started this as an email list a bit over a year ago. I picked email for many reasons. My professional work is in a completely different field and I didn't want to muddy the waters. There's already so much public negativity out there, with Christians savagely attacking other Christians, even in major secular publications like the New York Times and Washington Post. I wasn't ready to add to that public food fight.

But I also wanted to do it as a market test. Were people interested enough in what I had to say to spread the word? I mostly allowed the newsletter to spread by word of mouth. If people weren't passing it around, that would be sign that it wasn't compelling. I set a target in my head as to the number of subscribers I'd need to hit within a year to make it worth continuing on.

I did pretty well, but not good enough. I was only on track to get to around half of my target level. You may have noticed that both my "Lost World" article and my Taleb one were only weakly related to masculinity. That's because, seeing that I was on track to fail, I decided to simply give two of my best insights on any topic in the last couple of

issues before shutting it down.

I did that and made the decision to shut it down on my October 19 deadline. I even gave a heads up to my initial “friends and family” who had been there since the beginning.

Two days later was a Saturday, and my wife and I walked down to Ample Hills ice cream for a treat. I checked my phone when I sat down, and had 23 subscription notifications for the Masculinist. I thought that was a bit weird. After eating our ice cream I checked again. There were 15 more subscriptions.

As it turned out, someone had given my “Lost World” piece to Rod Dreher, who posted [an enthusiastic excerpt on his blog](#). My number of subscribers exploded. Later [Douglas Wilson](#) also gave it a recco. And [A Journey Through New York Religions](#) also excerpted my Taleb piece. Those added even more subscribers.

To date, my subscriber base quintupled as a result of these, and more subscribers keep rolling in. I smashed through the initial goal I’d set for myself so I guess I’m still in business after all.

This is a perfect example of Taleb’s randomness and black swan effects in action. Technically this wouldn’t be a true black swan. Unlike 9/11, the idea of an article going viral is one we can conceive of. But it’s something we can’t easily control or predict. That makes it a “gray swan.” I wrote the article in the hopes it would go viral. But I can’t tell you how many amazing articles I’ve written (in my own opinion at least) that flopped without going viral.

The key is that one mention from Dreher had more impact than the entire rest of everything that happened with the newsletter combined. This is the essence of a “fat tailed” distribution. Random, outlier events dominate the end result.

This is why I am an experiential Calvinist. Taleb’s randomness and black swans I call God’s sovereignty and unlimited room for God to show up, even in ways we can’t even imagine. (A Catholic reader suggested the term “Providence” instead. I’m fine with people conceptualizing this in a variety of ways). I’ve had so many things like this happen to me that I’ve lost track of them – things that show that it’s really not me who is responsible for a whole slew of the most important shaping events of my life. I either have to chalk it up to God, or admit that random meteor strikes out of the sky control my life. I prefer the former, but to each his own.

People who haven’t had those experiences might think differently. But as the great philosopher Mike Tyson once said, “Everybody’s got a plan till they get punched in the face.” Some people haven’t (yet) been punched in the face, so they still retain a high sense of their sovereignty over life. If that punch ever does come for them, they might feel differently.

This is also why I’m not afraid of critiquing the biggest names out there. I realize that their success, much like my own, was random. They are certainly talented people, but they aren’t unique geniuses.

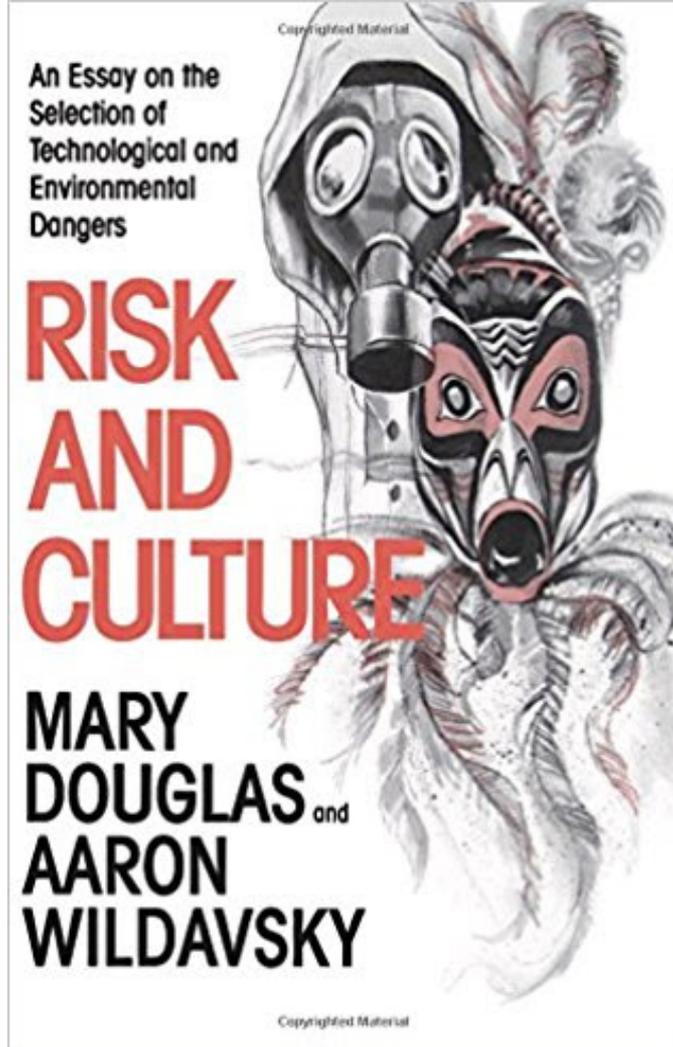
The difference between me shutting this down and quintupling my number of subscribers is one post from Rod Dreher, a post I had nothing to do with. I choose to call that God’s sovereign control over events.

Does that mean God endorses what I’m saying here? No. Nor does it mean that my efforts are destined to be ultimately successful. This could even blow up in my face. I don’t believe the idea of God’s sovereignty has any predictive power in terms of any specific outcomes in this world. But it does shape how I choose to respond to this world, and why I’m willing to step out into risk in ways that I was never willing to do so before.

In any case, the world is Talebbian. So be sure to go back and read Masc #14 about his work.

Contemporary Christianity’s Low Group Cohesion

Since I have so many new subscribers and want you to have the opportunity to get up to speed before I dive into a sure to be controversial series on attraction, I’m going to write one more general framework essay to give you a month to catch up on the archives for those who desire.



A great and short book is 1982's *Risk and Culture* by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky. Douglas was a renowned British anthropologist. Among other things she wrote a provocative analysis of Leviticus called *Leviticus as Literature*, as well as a book on Numbers I haven't read. Wildavsky was an American political scientist. I have been super-impressed with the limited amount of what I've read from both of them.

Risk and Culture book tries to explain why modern American culture is so obsessed with environmental risks versus all the other kinds of risks we could be worried about. That's an interesting question in its own right, but especially interesting in the system they use to analyze it, known as the *cultural theory of risk*. Among other things, they classify societies along two axes: grid and group:

"The relationship between social organization and values can be demonstrated by an impressionist exercise in grid/group analysis. This is a way of checking characteristics of social organizations with features of the beliefs and values of the people who are keeping the form of the organization alive. Group means the outside boundary that people have erected between themselves and the outside world. Grid means all the other social distinctions and delegations of authority [hierarchy] that they use to limit how people behave to one another."

They develop a few typologies of communities, including hierarchical, individualist, and sectarian (using sectarian in a neutral sense).

This is a great book that's very much worth reading. I'm going to borrow their dimension of "group" and repurpose and redefine it for my own purposes. In my formulation, group is a measure of group separation and cohesion based on the value received from community membership and the cost of defection from the community. What do you get if you join a community and what do you lose if you leave it? A community that doesn't give you much if you join and doesn't cost you much if you leave is a structurally weak community.

Douglas and Wildavsky contrast the property ownership systems of the Amish with the Hutterites. Both are Anabaptist sects, but the Amish hold title to property individually and work it individually whereas the Hutterites hold and work it collectively. Any type of "common purse" community like the Hutterites is thus higher group, because if you leave, the group retains the collective property. There is a higher cost of defection.

If you look at contemporary American Christianity, it's very obvious that it is a low group environment. The barriers to membership are low, the value derived from membership in the community is ordinarily also low (absent some life trauma, for example), and the cost of defection nearly non-existent.

I think about my own church, for example, which is pretty well known locally for having strong community. What would I lose if I stopped attending there? Would people stop talking to me? Probably not. If I had a serious life problem, such as a major medical problem with my son, would they refuse to help me even if I had abandoned the faith? Not very likely.

There also appear to be remarkably few things that will get you excommunicated (kicked out) of most churches today, or even just generate problems for you, unless you deliberately rock the boat.

Contrast this with other religions. Islam is extremely high group. Technically apostasy is punishable by death. That's a pretty high cost of defection. Even though that's a risk in only a limited number of countries, even in the West officially abandoning the faith will cause a major loss of community, including potentially being cut off by your family, for example. It's been known for centuries that it is extremely difficult to make Christian converts from Islam.

Judaism, especially Orthodox, is another high group faith, though this is complicated by the fact that Judaism as a religion overlaps with ethnicity. A Jew who converts to another religion such as Christianity incurs tangible penalties, such as forfeiting his automatic right of citizenship in Israel. Even domestically, conversions from Judaism appear to be frowned upon inside the Jewish community.

Orthodox communities in New York deliver high value to their members. They help arrange and sustain marriages and

family life in the city. They also run their own welfare systems. As an example, listen to this [WNYC segment](#) about Hasidic groceries in Brooklyn. In the grocery profile, nearly everyone pays on account (*aufschreiben*). Wealthier community members end up settling poorer members' bills behind the scenes, via a third party organization. No one is required to publicly reveal that they are being subsidized while shopping, because everyone pays on account. So not only are they financially helping others, they are also creating community solidarity and protecting members against the shame of poverty. Even the wealthy people paying the bills don't know whose bills they are paying.

Then there are the Mormons. The Mormons are also noted for rich community and the high value of membership delivered to its members. This article in Bloomberg on "[how Utah keeps the American Dream alive](#)" is instructive. The Mormon Church runs a vast welfare system and serves as a network to help members find work. People who receive help are expected to help back in return and be working towards becoming self-sufficient. All Mormons are encouraged to do extensive volunteer work for the church, the missions aspect of which is most famous. But again, I read of complaints of loss of community (shunning) for those who leave the church. You can't continue to enjoy the benefits of the community without being part of the community.

In his *Benedict Option*, Dreher highlights various organizations as positive role models. Many of these are obviously high group communities. Benedictine monasteries, for example, are extremely high group. Very high value to members, very high cost of defection.

Now, high group organizations certainly have the potential for abuse within them (e.g., Jonestown). But that's the nature of any high value relationship. I can't think of any relationship that is high value that doesn't include exposure to potential harm. Think of marriage, for example. It can be a high value relationship, but clearly involves exposing us to possible great hurt by our spouse. But to protect ourselves from abuse, or simply from the ability of organizations to put any constraint on our behavior, is to sunder ourselves from the majority of the value they deliver. Thus the erosion of our politics, many of our communities, etc. along with the decline of institutions that once sustained them. Preventing others from having the ability harm us creates an isolated life, which is itself damaging.

It's also the case that a high group organization must have the ability to set standards of behavior for members and enforce them (some level of grid). It should come as no surprise that many of the people who complain about abusive treatment by religious groups are those who have publicly rejected some commitments of their organization, and aren't happy that they have paid a price for doing so. (I particularly notice this among Mormons, possibly because in Christianity and Judaism it's easier to simply move to a more congenial congregation).

High group organizations and cultures are also able to develop and sustain unique features that make them attractive even to outsiders who aren't members and don't share the belief system.

For example, I was keynoting an economic development event in Elkhart, Indiana, the "RV Capital of the World" and a region with a large Amish community. I was told employers there love hiring Amish people. They are hard workers who show up on time (and aren't hung over, dealing with substance abuse problems, etc). The Amish may be lower group than the Hutterites but they are high group compared to society at large.

The Quakers in England provide a historic example. Many famous and successful British businesses were Quaker run. In an era before widespread government regulation, they were known for treating their workers well (which attracted a labor force) and dealing fairly with their customers (which attracted more). An [article about the Quaker business Cadbury](#) in the *London Review of Books* notes:

The moves to Bournville, Haxby Road and Somerdale weren't mere efficiency and tech upgrades. In its poster announcing the naming contest Fry's says of the site: 'there is ample room, not only for factories, wharves and sidings, but also for playing fields, bathing pools and sports grounds.' The Cadbury, Fry and Rowntree families were successful capitalist industrialists, but they were also Quakers, bound to care for the welfare of their employees. In the high Victorian age it was still possible to see a potential harmony between Quaker ideals of simplicity, temperance, pacifism and charity and the handsome profits made by Quaker companies like Barclay's and Lloyd's banks, Bryant and May matches, Swan Hunter shipbuilders and Cadbury itself. In Victorian Britain, Quaker businessmen had competitive advantages. Ron Davies, in his biography of George Stephenson (Quakers were early financiers of the railways), talks about a Quaker 'moral mafia'. In a commercial landscape filled with fraudsters and dodgy dealers, non-Quakers liked doing business with the Friends, knowing the extraordinary lengths the community would go to to vet its members' entrepreneurial ventures and, if things went sour, to prevent, or make good, the consequences of bad loans and bankruptcy. As for the workforce, Robert Fitzgerald, in his account of the Rowntrees, points out that since 'business and wealth were viewed by the Quakers as a God-given trust, labour could not be treated as a mere commodity'.

Tim Keller has talked about this in terms of churches providing so much help for the poor that the community at large would have to respect them even if it didn't like them. I haven't seen this work too much in practice where there hasn't been some merger with politics, but I would say it's possible though difficult in a world where the government is seen as the responsible party for poor relief. (The LRB notes this downside of the expansion of the government's role in regulation and social service provision).

Historically the church would appear to be higher group than it is today. For example, it certainly policed the behavior of its members. Paul directly ordered that someone who was having sex with his mother-in-law should be excommunicated (1 Cor 5) and said that you should "keep aloof from any brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6) among other such commands. The church helped everyone, to the point where secular poets mocked Christians for being such easy marks (see Lucian of Samosata's *Death of Peregrinus*). But it also prioritized those who were members of the community (Acts 4:32, Gal 6:10, others).

In my view, if the church wants to create structurally stronger communities, it needs to find a way to become higher group. I'm not going to prescribe anything, but would encourage you to think for yourselves about the following questions:

- What value does being a member of your community provide above and beyond a) that provided by other groups and society at large and b) that is not available on similar terms to non-members?
- What distinctive value does your community bring to the world at large that would render it at least someone attractive to non-members in certain contexts?
- How easy it is to become a member of your community? (Studies suggest a high cost of admission enhances group loyalty. This is one function of military boot camps).
- What standards of behavior, if any, does your community have for members to remain in good standing? Are these objective or subjective?
- What does anyone lose if they leave your community? What is the price of defection from the group?

If the answers to these are not much, not much, easy, very few, and not much, you probably have a structurally weak community.

You may notice that the other high group religions I noted are minority religions, at least in the West. Minority religions need to be higher group in order to preserve their identity at all.

Well guess what? Christianity is now a minority in the West. This might necessitate having a higher group strategy to survive, though I'm not going to make a prediction on this front. But it most certainly gives Christians new freedom to implement a high group strategy similar to the Jews, Mormons, etc. This would certainly be sectarian in a sense, but not necessarily in a politically aggressive mode.

Charles Taylor talks about the dilemma of renunciation. How high can you set the bar? If you set the bar too high, you put it beyond reach of the average person, leading to the two-speed Christianity of the Middle Ages. But if you set it low enough for everybody to meet, then you have set a low bar indeed.

As an essentially normative faith in a country without an established church, Christianity in America had to be somewhat ecumenical and based on a low bar shared public standard most people could sign up to, at least rhetorically.

Now that America is a clearly post-Christian nation, there's no civic barrier to creating higher bar, higher group communities in more previously "mainstream" Christian traditions. Yes, this would mean smaller communities. That's a real dilemma that's been noted by many people: stay pure but small or grow large but become watered down (ultimately to nothing it would appear).

Part of how you decide between the two is based on an answer to a question very few of us have ever considered: how many people are saved? As Taylor points out, historically the answer in the West was, "Not many" (e.g., "[The Little Number of Those Who Are Saved](#)"). Today, our answer is implicitly, "Potentially most people" and increasingly outright universalism (e.g., Marilynne Robinson).

Again, I'm not a theologian and I'm not your church's strategy director. How you answer these questions is up to you. I'm simply saying they are questions to consider. I'm certainly thinking about them and how to create a different kind of community. And I'm also saying that the dawn of the post-Christian era opens up new cultural space for Christians to rethink the nature of their communities, space that used to only be available to small sects and religious minorities.

In the Culture: The Meaning of Harvey Weinstein



The last month has seen an explosion of sex abuse scandals rocking Hollywood and the elite media. At of this writing, the spread shows no signs of abating.

There's a powerful lesson here. It's not that America's culture elite is uniquely evil. There's enough depravity to go around in this world. Nor is it that they are hypocrites, another universal aspect of the human condition. It's not even that their public moral proclamations are made in bad faith (though they are).

It's that the world should never be held up as a source of moral insight and authority for the church. I mentioned in my last issue that one of the most important things Taleb does, even if not always in way I'd approve of, is relentlessly attack the brand of the economic, intellectual, cultural, and political elite, whom he labels "[Intellectual Yet Idiot](#)" among many insults.

This is entirely warranted. Our elite – again, of which myself and many on this list could be considered at least junior varsity members of – has many fine people in it. But collectively they just aren't that smart, have produced disaster upon disaster, and are morally bankrupt. To the extent that they've succeeded, it's mostly via applied physics, and even then

not without side-effects. (Had Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey not invented Facebook and Twitter, for example, we wouldn't be worried about Russian social media trolls influencing our elections).

What I termed "neutral world" Christianity (Masc #13) has a very high view of the culture and the secular elite consensus. It takes its cues from them about what is important, and what the right answer is on many issues. Until the hold on this elite has on their consciousness is broken, they will seldom question its dictates.

I've learned many things from secular people. They can even have a lot of moral understanding. But I don't believe the secular world is a generator of new moral insights somehow undiscovered by the church over the course of its first 1900 years.

The lesson of Harvey Weinstein, et. al. is that the church should knock the elite secular consensus off the pedestal they've put it on. That doesn't mean going into old school attack dog mode à la Jerry Falwell. And one need not argue that our elite are uniquely depraved, misguided, etc. That's the human condition, after all. But there's no reason to allow them to set your agenda, or to crave their approval or legitimation, etc. Until those things change, the church is going to continue to be tossed hither and yon by the wind.

Noteworthy

In my last issue I touted the works of French novelist Michel Houellebecq. Here's [an interesting look at him](#) from Quillette.

WSJ: [The politicization of motherhood](#). One again, I'll note a Jewish woman who is willing to say things many Christian pastors won't.

The premise of Ms. Komisar's book—backed by research in psychology, neuroscience and epigenetics—is that "mothers are biologically necessary for babies," and not only for the obvious reasons of pregnancy and birth. "Babies are much more neurologically fragile than we've ever understood," Ms. Komisar says. She cites the view of one neuroscientist, Nim Tottenham of Columbia University, "that babies are born without a central nervous system" and "mothers are the central nervous system to babies," especially for the first nine months after birth. What does that mean? "Every time a mother comforts a baby in distress, she's actually regulating that baby's emotions from the outside in. After three years, the baby internalizes that ability to regulate their emotions, but not until then." For that reason, mothers "need to be there as much as possible, both physically and emotionally, for children in the first 1,000 days."

An [interesting graphic](#) of the percentage of never-married women by age, comparing 1980 with 2015.

Here is [an interesting post](#) from the Z-Man. Z-Man is someone from the Richard Spencer (white nationalist) grouping within the alt-right. It's about the dearth of Christians in their movement.

Can you be a Christian and Alt-Right? That's a question the TRS guys were debating the other day. It comes up a lot, mostly because the leading lights in dissident politics are not religious. Some appear to be outright atheists, even if they don't make a big deal out of it. Of the old guys, I can't think of any who are Evangelical. Most were Protestants, but have long ago drifted from their churches. I don't think any of the next generation are religious. Some grew up going to church, but abandoned it as soon as they left home.

...

There's a lot more to this so there will be many more posts on the topic, but a good point of entry is the simple question at the start of the post. The alt-right makes race the primary identity. Christians, and I'm thinking primarily of non-denominational Christians, place their relationship with Jesus Christ as their primary identity. That's an obvious conflict, as nothing in Scripture backs the primary arguments of the alt-right. Even the most expansive reading of Scripture cannot arrive at a pro-white position.

The boy wonders of our secular elite culture have been extremely hostile to Christianity. Enjoy trying to contain the fallout. They forgot the many things Christianity was a bulwark against. For those in the church, if you want to get the start of a sense of why people are turning to these groups instead of to Christianity, go back and read Masc #5. Among other things, unlike too many of our religious leaders, Z-Man and other alt-right intellectuals are willing to [forthrightly declare the bankruptcy of our cultural elite](#). So when one of the many current events that proves them right comes along – the Paradise Papers, the Hollywood-media sex abuse scandals, you name it – they seem like prophets rather than folks stating an obvious truth. And then the rest of their agenda gets accepted. It was the same effect with Trump's appeal. There's real value that accrues to the person who is actually willing to stand up and take the risk of saying that the emperor has no clothes.

Coda

"A thing I learned advising startups that generalizes: people get the most upset when you tell them true things they wish were false." - [Tweet](#) from Sam Altman, President of Y Combinator

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