



The Masculinist #35: Rebalancing Away from Institutions

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Our New Lower Trust Society

How should we live in a lower trust society? This is the question that will confront us all, as everyone makes adjustments in a world where trust is on the decline.

Becoming a low trust society is generally a bad thing. To see the consequences of low trust, just read Edward Banfield's classic study *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, in which he explains how low trust crippled Southern Italy. We aren't likely to fall that far, but we've already fallen to the point where we need to start behaving differently. I don't like that, but it's the world we live in.

This issue is about the decline of trust in institutions. But before that consider a couple of items to illustrate our new, lower trust world.

First item: 25% - one out of every four - of all the people riding the bus in New York [don't pay the fare](#). This is a hard number since bus drivers press a button to record every single person who doesn't pay.

Second item: You no doubt read about the Southern California college admissions bribery scandal that snagged several celebrities. This is only the blatantly illegal tip of the iceberg. Other wealthy people [buy their kid's way into elite colleges](#) "legitimately" through donations. And at upscale, affluent high schools, between 20% and 30% of all the students are getting extra time to take the SAT tests because they say they are [claiming to be disabled](#), a percentage that is ludicrously high.

Or think about the woman in the viral video who opened a half gallon of ice cream in the grocery, licked it, then [put it back on the shelf](#).

Not every aspect of trust as gotten worse, and some things have gotten better. But the cumulative effect of millions of trust destroying acts like these has been to transform the trust landscape of our society as a whole for the worse.

What do you do about this? Obviously a Christian can't skip paying a transit fare or make a false claim of a disability. But just naively following the rules or trusting in a process today is begging to be scammed. We have to find ways to adapt.

A culture of just following the rules and trusting the process to be fair simply cannot survive in a world where 20-30% of the people in many circumstances of life are those who have no scruples about gaming the system or outright cheating for their own benefit.

People are going to adjust their behavior accordingly over time and this will have profound consequences for our

society.

Those of us who are Baby Boomers or Gen X, who were deeply enculturated in a trust the system, play by the rules mindset will find the necessary adjustments very difficult, maybe impossible. But you can be sure Gen Z won't.

Here's one example of a necessary change that's perfectly Christian but difficult to make: In many domains we have to stop assuming by default that other people are acting in good faith unless we have solid evidence to believe otherwise. The unpleasant reality is a much bigger share of the people out there aren't acting in good faith compared to 30-40 years ago. That doesn't mean we assume people are acting in bad faith. Rather it means starting them at zero and making them earn trust.

I have one heuristic that has rarely failed: anytime someone argues to a person that he should have more trust in a third party of whose intentions he is skeptical, it's a sure sign of manipulation. In our world where much of the population still behaves like they are in a high trust society, the one fourth to one third who aren't trustworthy relentlessly exploit the assumption of good faith, which is why they always appeal to it in others.

This is example of the changes that are coming with a lower trust society. We may not like that, but it's here unless some major restoration of trust of which there is no sign occurs.

So how should we respond personally and as the church?

Responding to Institutional Decline

I already devoted the bulk of [Masc #24](#) to analyzing frameworks of response to failing institutions. In it I gave a number of statistics indicating a general decline in trust in institutions.

Many key institutions in our society are fundamentally corrupt or broken. While there are a number that function well and deserve trust, many don't – and many more are heading the wrong direction. Today's low trust in institutions is well deserved.

Today I want to lay out a response approach to this that I am personally starting to follow. That strategy is to fully or partially withdraw from institutions and replace them not with new institutions, but with self-provisioning and personal relationships.

We need to rebalance away from institutions, on which we have become overly reliant, and we should have a much more skeptical attitude towards institutions in general.

What does this look like? There's already one widely adopted example of this that makes the concept very easy to understand: home schooling. Home schoolers withdraw from K12 educational institutions entirely, in favor of educating their own children. Now this isn't perfect, because home schooling is semi-institutionalized these days. But you get the point.

One key area to implement this is in training our children in the faith. My assumption is that my church will contribute zero towards this and that my wife and I are 100% responsible for spiritual formation in our son. I'd like to hope that we'll get better than zero from the church, but I'm not taking any chances. With the primary religion of young people today being "[Moralist Therapeutic Deism](#)" and so many Millennials raised in religious schools that come out knowing next to nothing about Christianity and the Bible, nobody can afford to depend on the church to catechize his kids.

Gresham Machen supposedly said a hundred years ago something that's still true today: "The most important Christian education institution is not the pulpit or the school, important as those institutions are; but it is the Christian family. And that institution has to a very large extent ceased to do its work."

But my main focus in this issue is the relationship building aspect, which I will have much more to say on in a bit.

Why do I think we should be rebalancing away from institutions? There are many reasons. One set is practical, the other religious.

America Is Over-Institutioned

First, starting with the practical, America is vastly over-institutioned. Institutions are frequently created, but less

frequently decommissioned them, with the exception of failed for-profit businesses. For example, the number of government entities has expanded over time. My home state of Indiana has over 1,000 townships alone, a legacy of the Northwest Ordinance. They don't do much today, and what they do could be better done by counties. They are often poorly run and/or cesspools of nepotism. But eliminating them has proven impossible.

It's the same with arts organizations, community development groups, etc. Anybody who has ever tried to do a something in a neighborhood knows that community groups come out of the woodwork to claim the right to veto your project. The big problem Amazon ran into in New York, for example, was its failure to buy off all of these institutions that expected to get their beaks wet in that deal.

One of the big reasons that newer suburbs on the fringes of cities do so well initially is that they have, for a while at least, comparatively few legacy institutions, deals, governance arrangements, etc. gumming up the works. In many other places, these legacy items make it impossible to do important things like build critically needed housing. The average city in America would be better off if half its non-business institutions of all types were simply eliminated.

Investing in Institutions Creates Surplus Value That Will Be Used in Ways Contrary to Your Beliefs

Second, supporting and investing in institutions generates surplus value that accrues to the institution and which will almost certainly be redirected and utilized in ways you don't like, potentially by people whose values are very different from yours.

The best example of this is social media. People used Facebook to connect with their relatives and high school friends, to share pictures of their kids, etc. The ability to use this network had real value to users. But it generated even more value for Mark Zuckerberg, who with his majority voting rights in Facebook gets to decide what to use it for (though see below). This includes the power to shape culture, electoral results, sell your data, etc. Guess what? We are the ones who created that power and then gave it to him by building up the institution of Facebook.

Similarly, I could enroll my son in the Boy Scouts both because I want him to benefit from it and because I want to support an organization helping instill positive values and skills in boys. I could even volunteer so that I could personally monitor and ensure that nothing was being taught to him that I didn't approve of. But even if 100% successful from a personal perspective, this would also generate surplus value that would accrue to the Boy Scouts as an institution. And what are they doing with that value all those fathers and sons spent decades creating? Launching [all-girls scouting troops](#). So if you invested in the Boy Scouts hoping to specifically invest in helping boys, everything you created might ultimately be invested in girls instead. This isn't a prediction, but it wouldn't surprise me if down the road the organization currently known as the Boy Scouts becomes majority female.

If you are a believer in scouting, that's great. As I said, it's very possible for your sons to have a great experience in the Boy Scouts. But the Boy Scouts are Exhibit A when it comes to institutions heading the wrong direction and which I don't want to contribute to.

Given that the values of our society are far out of line from Christianity, and that American Christianity itself is in a declining, catabolic phase, you just have to assume any institutional value you create, even in a religious institution, will be redirected to ends of which you don't approve – and maybe of which you actively disapprove. This is true even of institutions you start and control, because one day you'll be gone and someone else will be in charge.

All Institutions Are De Facto Instrumentalities of the State

Third, today all institutions are de facto subsidiaries of the state. A lot of people steeped in Tocqueville have an idea of institutions as an intermediary buffer between the individual and the state. Robust voluntary associations, institutions, are thought to constitute the bedrock of civil society in which real national civic well being resided.

That's a nice vision, and it might have even been true once. But no longer.

The state – broadly understood as the ultimate public-private partnership that includes our entire governing regime consisting of the state proper, elite universities, elite media, some superrich, a limited number of key businesses such as too big to fail banks, and a small number of elite NGOs such as major national foundations – will not tolerate any truly independent centers of power. So it forces any institutions that want to continue existing to comply with its directives and priorities. This makes all institutions de facto instrumentalities of the state when it counts.

I'll give two examples of this. The first is, again, Mark Zuckerberg. In theory, he is similar to Gilded Age businessmen like Carnegie and Rockefeller, someone who has absolute personal control over his business empire. He personally controls a majority of the voting rights in the company. However, as we see, he is very much not free to run Facebook how he wants. He's presently under a full assault from the elite media, in part likely driven by jealousy at Facebook eating their lunch, and also from the government and various political groups. He can run Facebook, but he can only run it within the parameters they set, including in some cases letting them determine who gets to stay on Facebook and who gets kicked off. (One particular national newspaper I know seems to have a team of reporters specifically dedicated to getting people kicked off social media platforms). Zuckerberg also has to employ armies of compliance workers in areas such as HR. These employees bring the values of their profession with them, meaning the values of the state. Facebook's own internal bureaucracy probably wields more practical control over Facebook than Zuckerberg himself does.

Since this is a men's newsletter, I'll pick one example of particular relevancy to us. It's widely bemoaned that men don't have close relationships with other men these days. This lack of social bonds is a key driver of male suicides and other dysfunction, as this [twitter thread](#) from Anthony Bradley at the King's College in New York helps illustrate.

Men used to have many relationships with other men, frequently provided through men's institutions, virtually all of which have been eliminated as male spaces by the power of the state (again, broadly understood). Almost every men's club, every men's service and fraternal organization, every military unit, etc. has been forced to admit women. The recalcitrant were subjected to jihad by the media, such as the New York Times' multiyear, 100+ article crusade against Augusta National golf club for not admitting women.

Male spaces and men's only institutions have been de facto outlawed in the United States. Only a small number of legacy institutions remain all male. The last bastions of men's groups at scale are college fraternities and church men's groups. Fraternities are under assault as we speak and could easily either go away or become co-ed. (Look at the lengths Harvard is to going to [stamp out single-sex institutions](#)). So if you want to have space in your life just to get together with other of your male friends and associates, you have to do it outside of a non-church institution.

The bottom line is that if your values conflict with the state, you are going to find it very tough going to maintain an institution that embodies your values. As a result, today's institutions provide very little in the way of true mediation between the individual and the state.

Now, I'm using a bit of hyperbole here to illustrate a point. Obviously we can't survive without institutions. And many institutions are well functioning and perhaps should be invested in. I also believe we need to build new institutions, although of a very different variety than we have today. These would need to be – and I use this term metaphorically – “blockchain institutions” that are designed from the ground up to avoid the problems above.

But my point is that we've become very overly dependent on institutions, and this is a big problem in the current environment.

The Good Samaritan Was Not an Institution

In addition to these practical problems with institutions today, there are also religious reasons to move away from them. Almost everyone I've talked to who has read Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* was struck by his discussion of Ivan Illich's provocative interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Illich was a Catholic priest who was well known in the 1960s and 70s for his message advocating a radical deinstitutionalization of society. This fit in well with the cultural currents of the era, which featured things like communes and the back to the land movement. Illich's profile waned significantly in the 1980s as that culture changed. I could give a million criticisms of this guy, but that would miss the point. He was one of the best at profoundly identifying and critiquing the problems of modernity and industrial society. And even if you don't agree with him, Illich will certainly make you think about the world in very different ways.

Here is what Taylor had to say about Illich and the Good Samaritan:

Illich starts right off in Chapter 1 to explain this, using what is perhaps the most famous story from the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan. This arises out of a discussion of the meaning of the precept from the Ten Commandments: Love your neighbor as yourself. A scribe asks Jesus: "but who is my neighbor?", and Jesus' answer is the story. A traveler is robbed and beaten and left by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite — that is, important figures in the Jewish community — pass by "on the other side". Finally a Samaritan

— that is, a despised outsider — comes, and he takes up the man, binds his wounds, and takes him to recuperate at a nearby inn.

So what kind of answer is this to the original question? We moderns tend to think that it's obvious. Our neighbors, the people we ought to help when they're in this kind of plight, are not just the fellow members of our group, tribe, nation; but any human being, regardless of the limits of tribal belonging. We can generalize this, and say that all human beings, without discrimination, are the proper beneficiaries of our help, which ought to be given generously, following the example of the Samaritan. This story can be seen as one of original building blocks out of which our modern universalist moral consciousness has been built.

So we take in the lesson, but we put it in a certain register, that of moral rules, how we ought to behave. The higher moral rules are the universal ones, those which apply across the whole human species. We concentrate on the move out of the parochial. But in Illich's view, in this we are missing what is essential here. *What the story is opening for us is not a set of universal rules, applying anywhere and everywhere, but another way of being. This involves on one hand a new motivation, and on the other, a new kind of community.*

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So far, Illich agrees with the standard view. The Samaritan is moved by the wounded man; he moves to act, and in doing so inaugurates (potentially) a new relation of friendship/love/charity with this person. But this cuts across the boundaries of the permitted "we's" in his world. It is a free act of his "I". Illich's talk of freedom here might mislead a modern. It is not something he generates just out of himself; it is that he responds to this person. He feels called to respond, however, not by some principle of "ought", but by this wounded person himself. And in so responding, he frees himself from the bounds of the "we". He also acts outside of the carefully constructed sense of the sacred, of the demons of darkness, and various modes of prophylaxis against them which have been erected in "our" culture, society, religion (often evident in views of the outsider as "unclean").

This shakes up the cosmos and the proportionalities which are established in it in "our" society, but it does not deny proportionality. It creates a new kind of fittingness, belonging together, between Samaritan and wounded Jew. They are fitted together in a disymmetric proportionality which comes from God, which is that of agape, and which became possible because God became flesh. The enfleshment of God extends outward, through such new links as the Samaritan makes with the Jew, into a network, which we call the Church. *But this is a network, not a categorical grouping; that is, it is a skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfleshed people to each other, rather than a grouping of people together on the grounds of their sharing some important property (as in modern nations, we are all Canadians, Americans, French people; or universally, we are all rights-bearers, etc.). It resembles earlier kin networks in this regard...* But it is unlike tribal kinship groups in that it is not confined to the established "we", that it creates links across boundaries, on the basis of a mutual fittingness which is not based on kinship but on the kind of love which God has for us, which we call agape.

The corruption of this new network comes when it falls back into something more "normal" in worldly terms. Sometimes a church community becomes a tribe (or takes over an existing tribal society), and treats outsiders as Jews treated Samaritans (Belfast). *But the really terrible corruption is a kind of falling forward, in which the church develops into something unprecedented. The network of agape involves a kind of fidelity to the new relations; and because we can all too easily fall away from this (which falling away we call "sin"), we are led to shore up these relations; we institutionalize them, introduce rules, divide responsibilities. In this way, we keep the hungry fed, the homeless housed, the naked clothed; but we are now living caricatures of the network life. We have lost some of the communion, the "conspiratio", which is at the heart of the Eucharist. The spirit is strangled.* [emphasis added]

As Illich himself puts it, "Whenever I look for the roots of modernity, I find them in the attempts of the churches to institutionalize, legitimize, and manage Christian vocation." And, "It has become almost impossible for people who today deal with ethics or morality to think in terms of relationships rather than rules."

Illich also notes how John Chrysostom argued strenuously against the creation of institutions to care for the needs of people, believing that it undermined Christian charity and Christian relationships:

But this new relationship, as I have said, was also subject to institutionalization, and that was what began to happen after the Church achieved official status within the Roman Empire. In the early years of Christianity, it was customary in a Christian household to have an extra mattress, a bit of a candle, and some dry bread in case the Lord Jesus should knock at the door in the form of a stranger without a roof – a form of behavior that was utterly foreign to any of the cultures of the Roman Empire. You took in your own but not someone lost on the street. Then the Emperor Constantine recognized the Church, and Christian bishops acquired the same

position in the imperial administration as magistrates, so that when Augustine wrote to a Roman judge about a legal issue, he wrote as a social equal. They also gained the power to form social corporations. And the first corporations they started were Samaritan corporations which designated certain categories of people as preferred neighbors. For example, the bishops created special houses, financed by the community, that were charged with taking care of people without a home. Such care was no longer the free choice of the householder; it was the task of an institution. It was against this idea that the great Church Father John Chrysostom railed. He was called golden-tongued because of his beautiful rhetoric, and, in one of his sermons, he warned against creating those *xenodocheia*, literally “houses for foreigners.” By assigning the duty to behave this way to an institution, he said, Christians would lose the habit of reserving a bed and having a piece of bread ready in every home, and their households would cease to be Christian homes.

I can't begin to do Illich justice here, but if you want to understand how to live in our world today, he's a must read. His books are short, topical, powerful, and provocative. His take on the Good Samaritan can be found in [The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich](#) by David Cayley (Charles Taylor wrote the Introduction). But you might also want to start with his most famous book, [Deschooling Society](#). Or, since this is a men's newsletter, his controversial book [Gender](#).

Your Band of Brothers

So if we want to move away from institutions towards self-provisioning (discussed above) and relationships, what do we do?

For me, there are two institutions that I do very much want to continue investing in: my family and my church. The family and the church are “intimate” institutions established by God. So those institutions we support. (The state is a “remote” institution created by God to whom we owe allegiance but not necessarily active investment). Investing in my family, then building up my church are top priorities.

The next thing I want to do is build closer, deeper relationships with other men, both inside and outside the church. The average American man has far fewer significant male relationships than he used to. Correcting that so that we have solid male friendships and a “band of brothers” is critical, as per the Anthony Bradley link above.

If you do not cultivate your own direct relationships with other men, your psychological well-being and even your life could be in jeopardy. Imagine you are a man whose other male friends are exclusively those that come through connections with your wife, meaning that you have a relationship with this person because your wife is friends with his wife, a very common occurrence. What happens if your wife divorces you? Remember, women initiate 70% of divorces. Now you are likely left without any support network, because the women are going to terminate that relationship you have with that other man. You can't put yourself in that situation. You have to have friendships with other men that are not dependent on someone else. Ideally that means multiple types of relationships with different men in different contexts.

It's something that many men recognize as they are starting to slowly reconstruct in non-institutional ways the male spaces that were destroyed. For example, I've seen a marked increase in men's dinner groups, where a group of guys get together anywhere from monthly to a couple times a year. I also know of annual guys weekends that are de facto retreats. That is, a group of friends or like-minded acquaintances get together for fun but also with some sort of programmatic component such as a speaker.

Once I first noticed this as a trend, I started seeing it everywhere. I wouldn't be surprised if many of you are already part of a group like these. (If you are, [email me](#) and tell me more).

A number of these groups have even given themselves names. Now, this creates an institutional personality even if there's no formal structure, with some of the vulnerabilities that implies. But these are still basically under the radar, informal, personal groups.

One of the positive things about having these informal, especially unnamed men's groups is that they do not produce much surplus value that can be redirected and they are self-liquidating. The value of the group is in the people who are there. Even if it is “taken over” or turns over into a totally different group of people over time, it will only have value to the extent that those people continue creating it. It won't have accumulated money, property, prestige, culture power, etc. to appropriate and redirect.

This kind of group is exactly why I've been trying to connect Masculinist readers with each other. I could have tried to

create a formal organization around the Masculinist, as others have done. That would give me the ability to vet people and create a valuable structure I controlled, with surplus value accruing to me. But I did not do that because I did not want to create an institution.

Instead, I want to connect men with each other in cities across America so that you can build your own informal men's group, using the Masculinist as [Schelling Point](#) for selecting potentially likeminded people. My hope is that these would expand into real "band of brother" type groups of the kind I'm talking about here.

So if you want to find other like-minded folks like yourself to build relationships with, [email me](#) and tell me where you are located.

Obviously these relationships and groups take time to form. You have to meet people, get to know them, find out what if anything you have in common, build trust, then move on to deeper common projects.

One thing that's critical for this is insisting that everyone in the group demonstrate integrity and that they are worthy of trust. It only takes one shady person to wreck the whole thing. High trust has to be actively policed these days.

Building up networks of trusted personal relationships like these is critical in an era when general society trust levels are falling. You can be more autonomous when you can trust institutions, strangers in transactional settings, etc. But as that erodes, we will need the support of familial and other high-investment, high-trust relationships and networks.

Love Your Neighbor

It's one thing to build beneficial relationships for ourselves, but Christianity is about loving others who aren't necessarily in a position to help us back.

The American church does this, and pretty much everything else, using parachurch institutions and specialized ministries. There is an immense constellation of these in America.

A whole lot of them seem destined to close down. Many of them like Christian camps already are. Especially once the older donor base of many of these groups pass on, look out below. Personally, I think much of the parachurch infrastructure in the US should be decommissioned.

The overreliance on parachurch institutions and specialist ministries is a serious problem. For example, my impression is that almost every Evangelical church in lower Manhattan serves the poor almost exclusively by writing checks to these organizations.

Given the income segregation that exists in our cities, this isn't totally a bad thing, but I think something has gone very wrong when this sort of thing substitutes for a relationship with an actual person. I want to invest in those relationships, not ministries. This is heart of what Ivan Illich was arguing. And if I do invest in a ministry, I want it to be one that's part of my church, not parachurch in nature.

Although all of these ministries claim to be relational, way too many of them are transactional rather than holistic. They are meeting a point need perhaps, but not investing in a "full spectrum" relationship with a person.

A good example of this is refugee resettlement. There are many nominally "faith based" refugee agencies that are basically just government contractors whose goal seems to be getting as many warm bodies into the US as possible. What happens afterward by and large isn't their problem.

By contrast, a church I know in East Providence, Rhode Island wanted to better serve their community, and got to know a Congolese refugee family that they were able to support, not just transactionally but in terms of a deep, long-term relationship with them as people. That family ended up joining their church, and now their church has a sizeable refugee contingent in their congregation because of other Congolese who followed them.

I listen to so many churches today wring their hands about why they aren't more diverse. This church, despite being in one of the most old school denominations out there, actually became diverse. And it's not because they created a diversity and inclusion committee. It was because they invested in relationships.

Let's be honest, changing the life of even one person in serious need for the better is extremely difficult. It often takes multiple people investing in that person's life for an extended period of time to make a difference. It requires reverse

leverage. Instead of a 1:n situation it's more like n:1. A simple transaction sure isn't going to cut it.

Transactions are important. When someone is hungry, they need a meal. But Christian organizations providing transactions are just doing something that the government or others could or should be doing, and in many cases would be doing if the Christian groups went away. There would not be even one fewer refugee admitted to the US if every faith-based resettlement group disappeared. Their role would be immediately backfilled by the government or secular non-profits.

A lot of people still seem to have this vision of the church creating programs that will address public needs as a whole. That's a 1950s vision. It would be great if that were possible today, but it's not, except maybe in Mormon Utah. Right now the church is too small and too weak and the needs are too large. I think the church needs to offload more pure transactions onto the state, which is the only entity with the financial and institutional resources to address the kind of systemic needs of that sort we have today.

What the church and the individual Christian can do that the state can't is engage in real personal relationships with those in need. We have to be real and face the fact that we don't have the numbers to do that with everyone who could use it. But we could certainly do it with more people than we are now.

Some parachurch ministries do engage in those kinds of relationships. Some homeless ministries do, for example. They use transactions as the top of a funnel that hopefully leads to them being able to share the gospel and then build relationships with a small number of people. I have no problem with this. Others have to operate in a parachurch mode because of various constraints (e.g., prison ministries). But too many groups are deluding themselves about the depths of the relationships they are building. And ultimately the institution that should be doing much of this is the church itself, not specialized ministries.

What I want to do is invest in real relationships with those in need immediately around me: people in my church, on my block, in my neighborhood, etc. The needs everywhere I look are overwhelming. There are probably more people with serious problems just on my block than could ever possibly be served by my entire church.

We should be much more focused on the local, even hyper-local community where we live and do our business and less on trying to create broad scale institutions that simply can't make the kind of impact on our communities that we might hope or that might have been possible 75 years ago when America and the church were very different.

And again, remember, other than perhaps the church itself, any institution will be subject to the dictates of the state. If you're not interested in pursuing its secular aims, best to choose relationships instead.

A Poor Church for the Poor

A final thing I'll note about institutions in this age is that we should be very cautious about creating institutions with significant amounts of assets and prestige. Anything that's valuable attracts parasites. And the church has not proven very adept at detecting and repelling them.

Pope Francis said that he wants "a poor church for the poor." I happen to think that's a great concept for the institutions we do need, like churches. Keeping institutions lean, and limiting the amount of accumulated assets (money, property, etc.) and brand value, is one way to help protect your institutions in the world we live in.

If you want your church or institution to remain faithful, best to keep it poor.

Conclusion

All this probably sounds a bit suspect to those of us enculturated in the idea of institutions. It's hard to even conceptualize the church functioning without them.

But we don't have to go to a radical like Illich to understand that we are in dire need of more intimate, deep personal relationships today. Everybody is saying it. I saw David Brooks give a talk at an event I spoke at in Miami earlier this year, and he talked specifically about the importance of relationships over institutions. Presumably this is in his new book as well. And Andy Crouch talked about the importance of relationships over impersonal, institutionally mediated transactions in his Q Ideas talk this year.

I don't want to claim those guys would agree with what I'm saying here, but the flip side of wanting more personal

relationships is to diminish investment in or actively disinvest from institutions and institutional relationships so that we can redirect our time and resources into self-provisioning and personal relationships. If we're not willing to do that, we're not actually serious about relationships.

Again, I'm not totally opposed to institutions. We obviously have to have them. It's not lost on me that the Masculinist itself is a sort of institutional, specialist ministry of the type I just decried. But I want to start rethinking dependence on institutions and rebalance away from them. I want my family to do more ourselves and rely on institutions less. And I want to be investing in the relationships that are going to be the critical things to have in tomorrow's lower trust world that's also far less friendly to Christianity. This isn't a total solution to the world that faces us, but it's a start. And by the way, creating more and stronger families, stronger churches, and more deep human relationships would do more to help reconstruct civil society than any act of other institution building could possibly do.

Coda

Up to now economic development has always meant that people, instead of doing something, are instead enabled to buy it. Use values beyond the market are replaced by commodities. Economic development has also meant that after a time people must buy the commodity, because the conditions under which they could get along without it had disappeared from their physical, social or cultural environment. And the environment could no longer be utilized by those who were unable to buy the good or service.

...

Defense against the damages inflicted by development, rather than giving access to some new 'satisfaction', has become the most sought after privilege. You have arrived if you can commute outside the rush hour; have probably attended an elite school if you can give birth at home; are privy to rare and special knowledge if you can bypass the physician when you are ill; are rich and lucky if you can breathe fresh air; not really poor if you can build your own shack. The underclasses are now made up of those who must consume the counterproductive packages and ministrations of their self-appointed tutors; the privileged are those who are free to refuse them.

...

Development based on high per capita energy quanta and intense professional care is the most pernicious of the West's missionary efforts – a project guided by an ecologically unfeasible conception of human control over nature, and by an anthropologically vicious attempt to replace the nests and snakepits of culture by sterile wards for professional service.

- Ivan Illich, [Shadow Work](#)

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