
The Masculinist #45: Flattery Will Get You Everywhere

Aaron M. Renn <aaron@aaronrenn.com>

Fri, Oct 9, 2020 at 10:20 AM

To: aaron@aaronrenn.com

Welcome back to the Masculinist, the newsletter about how we live as Christian men and as the church in the modern world.

Readership continues to grow and grow. Thanks so much to all of you for helping to spread the word. Please be sure to share this with anyone you know who might be interested.

Subscribe, read back issues, and download free resources at: www.aaronrenn.com/masculinist

Thanks to the hundreds of you who checked out the podcast and left ratings. I'm honored to already have 23 five-star reviews on iTunes. Please do subscribe if you are into podcasts. You can [find it on iTunes](#), and it should also be on Google and Amazon as well under the name "The Masculinist Podcast." And of course, please spread the word about the podcast too.

Again, the podcast will be 10-30 minute episodes, with a mix of educational material and hard-hitting commentary. My first series is called "Urban World, Urban Church." There are three episodes up in it so far. The [first](#) looks at the mass urbanization happening globally. The [second](#) is about the rise of elite cities like New York and San Francisco in the US, and why it's important for the church to be strong in those cities. The third is about the urban church's "[theology of pride](#)." (You won't want to miss that one).

And for those of you who are Protestant and haven't gotten it yet, please check out my modern English translation of John Owen's Puritan classic *The Mortification of Sin* ([paperback](#), [Kindle](#), [e-pub](#)). This book has been widely touted by a who's who of people from John Piper to Tim Keller, but is extremely difficult to read in its original 1656 English. I updated the book into modern English that is very readable, and also re-outlined the text to make it much, much better organized. (You can read the [full outline online](#), which functions well as a précis of the book too). It currently has a five-star rating on Amazon and is great for personal reading, as a gift, or for a study group.

Flattery Will Get You Everywhere

This is the first of what will be an occasional series explain one of my dictums about disputes in today's world:

If you're debating substance, you've already lost.

That is to say, if you are trying to convince a skeptic or win a debate, including debates over what policies and views will prevail in a church or other institution, by using factual, logical, rational arguments, you are very likely to lose and in fact have probably lost already and just don't know it yet.

This is very important to understand because so many people, especially conservatives, default to a logical mode of argumentation to the exclusion of all other forms of persuasion or influence. This is one reason why they have so consistently lost over the years.

The conservative expression of this point of view is embodied by Richard Weaver's famous claim that "ideas have consequences" which suggests having the right idea is of paramount importance. It's true in some ways that ideas do have consequences. But lots of other things have consequences too. Material forces like [industrialization and deindustrialization](#) also have consequences. These many other forms of rhetorical, economic, cultural, and institutional power are almost totally ignored by people who put a high premium on getting the substance right, e.g., having the right theological position.

That doesn't mean that getting the substance right isn't very important. It is. I think you'll agree my newsletters are very substantive. But having the right intellectual answer is not enough. You also need the right theory of change, and

the right strategy and tactics for seeing that substantively correct idea prevail in the world. Prevailing isn't always possible, of course. But it's often much more possible than people realize.

There's a lot to say on this topic. In this issue, I'm just going to show how many "weak" arguments don't have to be logically persuasive but rather to just flatter the vanity or self-interest of the hearer. In these situations, logically refuting the argument is completely ineffective.

I've studied the book of 2 Timothy, and actually wrote my own thematic commentary on it that some of you provided feedback on a while back. Thanks so much for that. I decided not to publish it due to my intent to remain in the genre of cultural commentary rather than Bible teaching.

But I do want to highlight one rather depressing passage from that book, where Paul writes (2 Tim 4:3-4), "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

I would argue that's an apt description of the American church today.

There's a saying, "Tell lies to people who want lies and you'll get rich; tell the truth to people who want the truth and you'll make a living; tell the truth to people who want lies and you'll go broke."

In America today, and frankly in much of the church, the desire for lies is common. That's probably an extreme way to put it. Perhaps nobody actually sits down and says he wants to be lied to. But definitely there are many, many things we all dearly want to be true. If someone provides an even semi-plausible case for them, we're often very likely to seize upon it. Most of us like to be flattered as well, so teachings that flatter our vanity or suggest that our desires are good are also likely to be embraced.

In some cases, money and institutional interests are at stake more than the desires of the average person. These powerfully shape how people preach or argue on many topics. As Upton Sinclair famously put it, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

A lot of the purveyors of flattery and the like today use variations of the hero's journey or rags to riches story for the sell. Most self-help gurus fall into this category. Think of someone like Tony Robbins, who promises that you can "awaken the giant within." For men, this often involves promising that they can join the brotherhood of elite men. This isn't necessarily a bad thing if the promise can be delivered. The US Marine Corps recruiting slogan of "the few, the proud, the Marines" promises a form of personal transformation that the Corps does provide. But most such purveyors of these promises – roided up supplement sellers promising sick gainz, for example – don't deliver on their outsized claims.

The female version of this seems to be some variation of the "eat, pray, love" script. The woman futilely searches for fulfillment, then rejects and walks away from her commitments and her old life, experiences some transformational insight revealing her inner beauty and strength that was always there if only she just believed in herself, followed by a resolution in which she finds both herself and happiness.

But more relevant to our topic today, the average American (which includes the average churchgoer) wants very much to establish and maintain as much status in society as possible. He certainly isn't interested in being low status, or having to make big sacrifices for his faith.

Again, there's nothing necessarily wrong with these things. Wanting to increase your social status is a perfectly legitimate goal. However, what it means is that people who desire this – which, let's be honest, includes most of us including myself – are going to be prone to believe Christian teaching that tell us we can in fact have them. (The same logic applies in domains like politics, business, etc.).

Given a choice between a sermon telling us we can live authentically as a Christian and be in line with secular society at the same time, and a sermon saying that to live as a Christian will require being out of sync with secular society in important ways, people are going to choose the first one every time if they can possibly justify it to themselves.

An immense quantity of Christian content that I look at today basically attempts to provide a plausible exposition of the Bible and Christian doctrine that posits limited if any conflict between Christianity and aspirational secular norms. In fact, sometimes those norms are essentially sacralized as expressions of authentic Christian teaching. Because, as sociologist Rodney Stark has noted, American Christianity is a marketplace, the competitors who sell that popular

message tend to acquire large followings. You win in the market by providing the product that people want to buy.

People who attempt to sell the less popular idea that there might be some conflict between Christianity and culture do less well.

We can see this by looking at perhaps the most successful person selling this latter message today, Rod Dreher.

Dreher has a new book out soon called [Live Not By Lies](#) that I plan to review, either here or elsewhere. But for now, I'll just note that Dreher has a very big audience. I can get a good sense of how big someone's readership is by how much traffic I get on my site when he links to me. Dreher's links generate incredible traffic. The only person who has ever sent me more traffic by linking to me is Andrew Sullivan back in his blogging heyday.

Dreher also has the ability to move markets with his recommendations. His interview with J.D. Vance about *Hillbilly Elegy* crashed the servers at The American Conservative and seems to have been the triggering event which sent that book rocketing to #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. Last fall he touted an off-Broadway play called *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*. There were plenty of tickets available when he did it. (I know because I bought some). But shortly after his recco the play sold out, then ended up having its run extended, and later was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. And as I have mentioned before, his recommendation is what turned this newsletter from a failure into a success.

Yet, as near as I can tell, Dreher financially appears to be, as the quip above has it, making a living. He certainly does not appear to be rich.

Someone with Dreher's readership and ability to influence product sales should be making huge money, certainly several hundred thousand per year and maybe into the seven figures. It's revealing that he does not seem to be. Some of this is probably his own choice or fault. Maybe he's just not as oriented towards monetization as content production. I can relate to that.

But that doesn't seem to be the whole story. Contrast him with, say, Jonah Goldberg. Jonah Goldberg is at the center of the Conservatism, Inc. institutional world. Until recently, he was at the National Review [making](#) about \$200,000/year. In addition to what they were paying him, he also holds a fellowship at AEI called the Asness Chair in Applied Liberty, which hedge fund manager Cliff Asness [endowed](#) to the tune of \$2.4 million dollars just for him. After leaving the National Review, Goldberg and two collaborators [raised](#) \$6 million to start their own publication called the Dispatch. He also appears to [charge \\$10-20,000](#) as a speaking fee. Despite the coronavirus, he has at least two events [scheduled](#) in October. Goldberg has a sizable audience, though I doubt bigger than Dreher. But his message is sympatico with the conservative establishment class.

Dreher also used to work at the National Review, when he was writing things like *Crunchy Cons*. Since then, he's been pushed towards the periphery of conservatism as his writing changed, and is now working for the scrappy outsider magazine The American Conservative, founded by dissidents who opposed the Iraq War. He does not appear to hold any fellowships or affiliations at any other Conservatism, Inc. institutions. Social conservatism is very unpopular in Conservatism, Inc (far more unpopular than is generally known). Nevertheless, plenty of social conservatives have acquired additional think tank money gigs, including Ross Douthat and Michael Brendan Dougherty (at AEI), and George Weigel and Peter Wehner (at EPPC). But I don't know of anything like that for Dreher. I also haven't seen anything indicating that wealthy conservative donors are backing any projects of his. And Dreher's [speaking fees](#) appear to be only half of Goldberg's at \$5-10,000, which is ridiculously low. Nobody charges less than \$5000 per appearance. I suspect Dreher has far fewer paid speaking engagements than Goldberg too.

Relative to his large audience and influence at the individual level, Dreher is practically an outcast.

Why is that? Chief among the reasons has to be that Dreher is putting out a message that religious and politically conservative leaders don't want to hear. Pope Francis himself [appears to not like the Benedict Option](#). Most of the Evangelical commentariat seemed to puke on it too. Both the political and religious conservative donor class don't want to hear it either, other than those few backing TAC.

Sociologist Peter Berger said, "Ideas don't succeed in history because of their inherent truthfulness, but rather because of their connection to very powerful institutions and interests."

Rod Dreher's pessimistic message about the state of the world and the church, his investigations and commentary on the Catholic abuse scandals, etc. do not serve any powerful institutional or financial interests. In fact, they are either implicit or explicit indictments of those institutions and their leaders, which failed in important ways to accomplishing their purported mission.

Fortunately for Rod, there are enough individuals who sense that all is not well to constitute a readership and a career for him. But he seems to be cut off from the kinds of institutional support that would give his ideas traction in the real world and cause Christians to start mobilizing to respond to the situation in which we find ourselves. Much more than money, I suspect this is what frustrates Rod – that ideas like the Benedict Option end up institutionally marginalized and largely unimplemented. (Events appears to be moving ahead at an even faster rate than Dreher's pessimism, so perhaps he'll become more accepted with his new book, which appears to be getting better reviews than the last one).

So, if you read a book or blog post, or listen to a sermon or podcast, and think that the argument it's making is full of more holes than Swiss cheese, before writing a multi-part detailed refutation of it, ask yourself a couple of questions:

1. Whose position is flattering the intended audience or telling them what they want to hear, his or mine?
2. Whose position best aligns with significant institutional and financial interests, his or mine?

If the other person's work is strongly telling the audience what it wants to hear and/or serving powerful institutional and financial interests, then any factual or logical refutation is likely to be ineffective against it. Perhaps somebody needs to document the errors. But to actually make sure the erroneous work is rejected by the church at large, you'll need to look at other forms of power and persuasion to make it happen. (Think about this point while listening to my podcast about the urban church's [theology of pride](#), which deals with this very situation).

Support the Masculinist

Are you someone who wants the truth? Then please become a monthly supporter of the Masculinist on [Patreon](#) or [Gumroad](#). You can also send a one-time donation via [PayPal](#).

Men and the Church

It was a big month for articles about men and the church.

Last month I kicked off a conversation at the Theopolis Institute with an article on [the manosphere and the church](#). Four respondents have now written their own take. They are well worth reading.

- Alastair Roberts: [The Virtues of Dominion](#)
- Peter Leithart: [Side Effects](#)
- Bill Smith: [Attraction: A Biblical Theology of Pick-Up Artistry](#)
- Paul Maxwell: [The Measure of a Man](#)

One additional person will be contributing, then I will write a final essay. I will link these next month.

Anthony Bradley at the King's College in NYC wrote a piece in Mere Orthodoxy called "[American Evangelicalism isn't patriarchal or feminized. It's matrilineal.](#)" It was published about the same time as my original Theopolis piece. I linked it last month, but wanted to share a few excerpts this time around.

Evangelical churches are actually not patriarchal, even with mostly male leaders. Nor are they feminized. They do not emasculate men in order to appeal to women's sensibilities or desires. "Feminized" is the wrong word to describe the sermon content, music styles, programs, décor, and the like of many evangelical churches. The study of human anthropology provides another possibility: Evangelical churches are, in fact, matrilineal. Matrilineal societies are centuries old systems that organize community life so that the day-to-day activities of women are placed at the center of social thriving for successive generations... *Matrilineal* societies are different than *matriarchal* societies. In a matriarchy, women hold the highest levels of authority and social power. Matriarchal women are outward-facing representatives of the community. In matrilineal societies, by contrast, the outward-facing office does not determine which gender is socially dominant.

...

Not only are women the life-givers in matrilineal societies, they are also the life sustainers. As such, in matrilineal societies, mothers are revered. Mothers, above all other women, are held in highest esteem because they are the life-giving and life-sustaining centers of community life. In many ancient cultures, the importance of mothers was depicted in sculpture and art in ways that men in general, and fathers in particular, were not. Without mothers, these societies could not function.

...

It is important to remember that matrilineal societies can exist while men are placed in outward-facing leadership roles (say, pastor or elder), but the community's internal life would implode without women's

authority as mothers. Matrilineal societies are about who does what to sustain life rather than merely looking at who holds which outward facing job title or role.

It's an interesting piece I can't do justice to here. I recommend reading the whole thing.

Another article that made the rounds is Lyman Stone's Christianity Today piece, "[Making Your Church Manlier Won't Make It Bigger.](#)" It includes a number of points. Let's put aside his claims about the historic gender composition of the church for now. That's for others to debate.

Stone argues that contrary to popular belief, attracting more men does not lead to greater church growth overall. While he looks at this empirically, I don't like this kind of rhetoric for a different reason, namely that it implicitly treats men as means not ends. "Reach the man, reach the family" and dictums of that nature treat men as instruments that the church uses to get to the people it really wants to reach. How often do you hear reaching men stated as a purpose of its own, without being instrumental to some other goal? Less often than you might think.

I would also agree with Stone that the decline in American Christianity is unrelated to a gender imbalance in the church. I haven't noticed people making this argument though. And I would agree that the American church has long had a female skew, which I don't believe anyone disputes.

What I find troubling is Stone's apparent indifference to any form of church reform on the gender issue. It's clear that much of the American Protestant church at least is very anti-male in its rhetoric. Callum Brown established that historically, and it's easy to confirm empirically in the present as well. (See my [Theopolis essay](#) on this topic). He does not even examine much less address any of the specifics of what churches are actually doing and teaching on this matter. Even if a gender skew in churches persists, perhaps it is possible to reach more men – for their own sake.

Stone, whom I know personally, is really great on demographic statistics and such. His writings at places like the Institute for Family Studies are must reads. But his prescriptions tend to veer away from the obvious implications of his own data. For example, he cites in this piece studies showing that women who work full time outside the home have similarly low religiosity to men. If so, wouldn't the obvious first move, from a Christian evangelization point of view, be for the church to encourage more non-working wives given that this is already a valid and viable social role in our society? Stone does not argue for that though, instead leaping directly to a much more radical gender-neutral anti-work and consumption agenda, including "encouraging vows of poverty." (Stone is Lutheran. Do they even have vows of poverty?) My recommendation with his pieces is to enjoy the statistics, but to feel free to draw your own conclusions about what they mean and what we should do about it.

Owned Space

Politico has an [interesting profile](#) on Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett's (purported) religious community in South Bend, Indiana called People of Praise. Although the article is intended to be critical, it reveals a lot of positive elements about how they created a robust, high value community, and how they acquired "owned space" (see [Masc #43](#)) in South Bend:

People of Praise includes several prominent local families, including real estate agents and local financial advisers, who act as a sort of professional network for families in the group and provide considerable social capital to its members. In South Bend mayoral elections, campaigns have been known to strategize about winning over People of Praise as a constituency, given the fact that they live close together in several neighborhoods. The group runs Trinity School at Greenlawn, a private intermediate and high school that is considered by some to be the best—and most conservative—school in South Bend. Families from Notre Dame and elsewhere, even unaffiliated with the group, pay \$14,000 to attend grades 9-12 and \$13,000 for grades 6-8. Barrett served on its board from 2015 to 2017, and her husband, Jesse, a former assistant U.S. attorney who is now a partner in a law firm here, advised the school's nationally recognized mock trial team.

As industry receded in South Bend with the closure of the automaker Studebaker in 1963, People of Praise has grown to occupy some of the city's most storied institutions. The group's original home was the nine-floor, 233-room Hotel LaSalle, a Georgian Revival structure from the 1920s, one of the most prominent buildings in downtown South Bend. When the group moved into the building in 1975, after it was bought by Charismatic Renewal Services, Inc., a closely affiliated nonprofit, it cleared out one floor to serve as a communal day care, and used a former ballroom for its meetings, where members spoke in tongues and practiced healing. Some members lived there.

Trinity School occupies a sprawling mansion situated on a sylvan property on the east side of town that was formerly owned by the Studebaker family, whose factory once employed 30,000 workers. The group's main meeting hall, which isn't listed on Google Maps, is a former bowling alley and indoor soccer complex 10 minutes from downtown, near the Trinity sports fields.

You know that the community is high value and had strong boundaries because people complain that they lost access to the benefits of community membership after leaving:

Though families are free to leave, in South Bend there is fear about losing the social capital and status membership affords. "When my parents left, they lost all their friends," the former member said.

I do believe it's possible for organizations to have an abusive hold on their members. For example, if an intentional community (secular or religious), induces people to sign their assets over to the group or dissuades them from having friends and connections outside the group, that creates an abusive barrier to exit.

But in general, social groups ought to be valuable enough that membership means something. If you don't give anything substantive up by leaving, the group is probably of no value in the anyway. The idea that you can continue to enjoy the benefits of membership in a social community that you have repudiated is ridiculous.

Our problem today is rarely that we lose social capital when quitting a group, but rather that we have so few groups in which membership creates valuable social capital in the first place.

Noteworthy

Michael Lind: [Home Economics: Putting the Family Back into the Economy](#)

IFS: [And a Child Shall Lead Them—to the Polls: Family Formation and Voting](#) – In short, all measures of political participation are higher among people who are married with children than among singles without children. The one exception is participating in a protest or boycott.

SSRN: [Car seats as contraception](#)

Coda

What of the responsibility of intellectuals? Those who qualify for the title have a degree of privilege conferred by this status, yielding opportunity beyond the norm. Opportunity confers responsibility—which, in turn, poses choices, sometimes hard ones. One choice is to follow the path of integrity, wherever it may lead. Another is to put such concerns aside, passively adopting the conventions instituted by structures of authority. The task in the latter case, then, is to carry out faithfully the instructions of those who hold the reins of power, to be loyal and faithful servants, not after reflective judgment but by reflexive conformism. That is a fine way to evade the moral and intellectual difficulties of challenge and to escape what can be painful consequences of seeking to bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice.

- Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals"

PO Box 33171

Indianapolis IN 46203
USA

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Change Subscriber Options](#)