

**The New Castrati:
Contemporary Worship and the Triumph of Effeminacy**
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For decades, statisticians and pastors alike have observed and bemoaned the feminization of American Christianity. Men don't come to church anymore. Maybe it's because we've equated Christianity with femininity and allowed men to indulge in complacent, self-interested effeminacy instead of courageous, Christ-like masculinity.

In the middle of sixteenth century, a peculiar practice emerged in Italy. Perhaps it arose in response to increasing complexity of ecclesial choral music, which was beyond the ability of soprano boys to master before their voices began to change, or to the increasing popularity of the opera, which demanded greater strength of voice than the falsettists could manage, or the peculiar proclivities of some in the secular court. For whatever reason or combination of reasons, the practice of castrating prepubescent boys to prevent their voices from maturing into men's voices came into vogue. By 1589, Pope Sixtus V issued a papal bull that reorganized the choir for the Sistine Chapel to consist of twelve chorists: four basses, four tenors, four contraltos, and four eunuchs, castrated men, known as castratis.

Apparently, the procedure allowed a singer to keep his boyish soprano pitch while his body developed to make him able to sing with more power and volume. The Pauline admonition that women should remain silent in church (1 Cor 14:34), which gave rise to the papal prohibition against women in choirs and was therefore why men were needed to hit the high notes, as well as the laws, outranked the Mosaic prohibition against a man with disfigured testicles from entering the worshiping assembly of Israel (Dt. 23:1). The last surviving Sistine castrato Alessandro Moreschi died in 1922, but you can find a recording of his singing on YouTube. It is deeply unsettling to see the picture of his face and, just when you expect to hear a man's voice, you are confronted with something neither feminine nor boyish, just weird. Eerie.

Such a primitive practice, right? To emasculate men so that they can sound better in Church? God, I thank you that we are not like previous generations. Or are we?

Across Christendom, the ratio of men-to-women in-Church is nearly 1:1 (53% female: 46% male), but in America, the numbers skew toward the ladies, 61% women: 39% men. ¹ This is great news if you're a single guy playing the field in the pews, but not so great news if you're inclining your ear to hear babies crying in church.

Bemoaning the lack of men in the pews is quite en vogue nowadays. But whence cometh this disparity? Why are there more women in your pews every Sunday morning? Why do you get complaints every Easter Monday that "you didn't sing 'In the Garden' yesterday"? You can blame egalitarianism and the loss of any sense of the order of creation.

You can blame our replacement of the patriarchal society with the new polis, the City of the Same. In the City of the Same, churches have ceased to be places where men are accepted. Though Christianity is the product of a Man who called twelve other men to follow Him, somehow in our novel City of the Same, pews are largely populated with women.

Theories abound why this is. Is Christianity inherently womanly? David Murrow wrote a book *Why Do Men Hate Going to Church* in which he argues that men don't swoon for the relationship-centric modern, American Christianity that began in the late 1800s and is part of the creed of most of Evangelicalism today, although even in 1692, Cotton Mather reports three or four hundred women and only one hundred men in church in a colony that had a 3:2 male-to-female ratio. Roman Catholic researcher Leon Podtes in his book *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*, lays the blame in the 12th century at the feet of St. Bernard of

Clairvaux, who, Podles argues, was the first to popularize the notion of the individual believer as the beloved Bride of Christ.

There's probably truth in both arguments, but I want to make a smatter one. Whatever the history of the gender gap in American Christian churches, I want to suggest that we're perpetuating the problem. By asking men to sing what passes for contemporary praise and worship music in most Sunday morning settings we are asking them to be emasculated. Castrati for Jesus.

To make my point, let's play a game.

Praise song lyric or Romance novel title?

- Lost within your beauty – praise song
- Lost in his sauce – romance novel
- Wonder of your touch – praise song
- Texan's Touch – romance novel
- Cowboy's Touch – romance novel
- Sloppy wet kiss – praise song
- Wet kisses – romance novel
- Sloppy kisses – story about dogs
- Surrender my love – romance novel
- Surrender to your love – praise song
- Beautiful Broken Mess – romance novel
- Beautiful Mess – praise song
- On my knees – both
- You are my desire – praise song
- My heart's desire – romance novel
- Warm embrace – romance novel
- Feel the warmth of your embrace – praise song
- I have fallen in love with you – praise song Fallen in love – romance novel
- Lavish my love on you – praise song
- Lavish love – romance novel
- When you touch me – both
- So in love with you – praise song
- So in love – romance novel
- All ever need is you – romance novel
- I need you, Oh, I need you – praise song

There should be no overlap. You should not confuse the words of 50-Shades wannabe books with songs intended to praise the One in whose presence the angels have to cover themselves while singing "Holy, holy, holy." Admittedly, in the last decade, much of what sells as praise and worship music is more Christocentric, focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Many popular new songs are repackaged hymns, now sung by the hipster with the tight jeans and shaggy beard and his coquettish praise babe background singers. But since Lutherans are perpetually 10 years late to every trend, our brothers and sisters who pretend to subscribe to a Confession which holds that "the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with the highest reverence," (Ac X)(IV 1) still find themselves rocking out to these love songs to Jesus.

These songs may be ok in the minds of your preteen daughters scrolling on their phones through Justin Bieber's Instagram during the sermon or for the LWML ladies busy during the Service of the Word getting the fellowship hall ready for the potluck to follow the service. But in order for a man to fit in in a culture of homoerotic worship that reduces the Incarnate God, the Savior of the World, whose presence commands your rev-

erence, into your gentle, mild mannered, nice-guy boyfriend, he's either got to become like a woman or a gay man. It should not surprise us to look out over the sheepfold of the Lord's church in the contemporary worship crowd and notice that the pasture is full of wethers, geldings, steers, and barrows.

The New Castrati are the choristers in the egalitarian churches in our emasculated City of the Same, where gender roles are gone, where a schoolteacher is more of an expert in your children's education than you, where masculine energy can be medicated with Ritalin, where tolerance is the law, and where feelings are more real than created reality.

There is something distinctly masculine about being a Christian. St. Paul describes all the baptized as sons of God: "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."¹

Why sons? Sons were heirs. In the same way still today that traditionally sons retain the family name and daughters are given the family name of the man they marry (and therewith his property and inheritance), so in Jewish law, it was the son who could receive an inheritance. What Paul says is quite radical, then. It's the answer to the question Jesus gets asked repeatedly about how to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17; Luke 10:25; 18:18). It's a foolish question, if ever there were one. You can't do something to inherit something. It's akin to asking what I can do to inherit the crown of England. Answer: nothing. Sorry, pal, but unless you're born into the right family, you're outta luck.

So, Paul says, Baptism is that rebirth into the right family. It makes you a son of God. Even girls are made metaphorical sons in Baptism because they're made heirs with Christ of the treasures of heaven. Thus, there's an inherent masculinity simply to being made a

Christian through the waters of Holy Baptism. Every Christian is a son of God.

There's a femininity to being a Christian, too. If the essence of masculinity is to give; a significant part of what it means to be feminine is to receive. Inasmuch as receptivity is the posture of every Christian toward God, each Christian also has a feminine side, though this does not change "sons of God" into "daughters of God." It simply means sons learn from their Mother how to receive from their Father. Moreover, the Church herself is pictured as a woman, the Bride of Christ.

These are separate metaphors, though. The individual Christian is not the Bride of Christ. Christ is monogamous. He has one Bride, and you ain't she. Everyone made a part of His Church is a part of His holy, redeemed Bride. This was the normal narrative the Church told and Christians understood for the first thousand years of the Christian Church, until Bernard of Clairvaux's interpretation of the Song of Songs as a romance between Christ and the individual believer marked a watershed moment in the abdication of men from the call to be pastors, fathers, and spiritual protectors and heads of their families.

According to Podjes.

The transfer of the role of the bride from the community to the soul has helped bring about the pious individualism that has dissolved ecclesiastical community in the West. The Church is the bride and the object of the heavenly bridegroom's love, and individuals are the objects of that love only insofar as they are members or potential members of the society of the redeemed. The Church should yearn for the presence of her bridegroom, who consoles her and makes her fruitful in good works and children. This imagery was natural to the Fathers but has been lost. Instead the individual is felt to be the center of God's affections....and the only real concern of Christianity is 'Jesus and me.'²

¹ Galatians 3:25-29

² 3 Leon J Podjes. *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*. Dallas: Spence Pub, 1999. 118-119.

It's difficult for run-of-the-mill heterosexual men to identify with being Jesus' lover. And yet, much of what passes for music in the Church today are love songs to Jesus with lyrics that could just as easily be spoken by a husband to his wife.

Consider these examples.

Kelly Carpenter's 1999 "*Draw Me Close*" sets the paradigm for this kind of love song to Jesus. It continues to this day to be covered by other worship bands and gets regular rotation in worship medleys: "You are my desire, no one else will do/ 'Cause nothing else could take your place. To feel the warmth of your embrace... You're all want/ You're all I've ever needed/ You're all I want/ Help me know You are near."

My wife would swoon if I spoke to her that way. I'm not sure Jesus has the same head-over-heels reaction.

Though already a decade old, "*How He Loves*" by John Mark McMillan has been covered by numerous Contemporary Christian Music artists and endures as a popular worship song. Sing along if you know it. "So, heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss/ And my heart turns violently in side of my chest, I don't have time to maintain these regrets/ When I think about the way/ That He loves us/ Whoa, How He loves us/ Whoa, How He loves us/ Whoa, How He loves..." Not even Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of the affection Jesus has for Christians culminating in a "sloppy, wet kiss." Gross, dude.

Michael W. Smith's "Breathe" gets Christians to sing over and over again, "I'm desperate for you...I'm lost without you." Matt Redman's "Let my Words be Few" contains these few words, "The simplest of all love songs/ I want to bring to You/ So I'll let my words be few/ Jesus I am so in love with You." The song "Madly" by Passion Band repeats the line, "I'm madly in love with you."

Then there's the always creepy "*In the Secret*" by the band Mercy Me, which taken out of the context of worship, sound more like the petition of a horny, desperate teenager and less like words to be sung to a God in the presence of whose holiness, people regularly fall down in fear and cry out for mercy (Isaiah 6:5; Matthew 2:11; Mark 3:11; Luke 5:8; Revelation 5:8). And yet, this is how the song goes, "In the secret,/ In the quiet place/ In the stillness you are there...I want to touch you/ I want to see you face/ I want to know you more." Ewww.

Admittedly, these songs are not the newest nor presently most popular praise and worship songs. But they persist in the PowerPoint projections of well-meaning Lutheran Baby Boomers who want to entice their children to come back to church by singing songs like what they think are on their children's Spotify account. But are they right? Or are we ready to admit our twenty-plus-year experiment with worshiping like Baptists hasn't made our children more Lutheran or more Christian. And what self-respecting guy wants to fall in love with Jesus and sing about it in the same repeating four-chord choruses?

Even the language of popular Christianity has been softened and feminized. What is the very essence of Christianity in many, if not most, Evangelical churches? A relationship with Jesus. This language is both absent in the New Testament and a foreign tongue to the modern man. In his important study on the role modern churches have on the church-going

habits of men, David Murrow notes, "When Christ called disciples, he did not say, (Come, have a personal relationship with me.' No, he simply said, Follow me.' Hear the difference? Follow me suggests a mission. A goal. But a personal relationship with Jesus suggests we're headed to Starbucks for some couple time."³

What's a "relationship" with Jesus entail anyway? Will guys have to talk about their feelings? Though the word itself is quite unspecific (you could have an adversarial relationship with Jesus, for instance) as it's used

³ David Murrow. *Why Men Hate Going to Church*. (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2011), 165. Taken from my *Men Hate Going to Church* by David Murrow Copyright 2011 by David Murrow. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson. www.thomasnelson.com.

in Evangelical parlance, "relationship" seems to imply the kind of erotic love of a couple facing one another, looking into their-eyes, not the friendship of two men laboring side-by-side, disciples following Jesus, heading in the same direction.

Emasculating men by asking them to lend their basses and baritones to the "I'm so in love with you Jesus" medleys is perhaps not the worst damage done to men – and women – by the surrender of many Lutherans to the lure of Evangelical emotionalism. The graver threat is not in what tracks the worship DJ in the youth hangout room is spinning but in the mindset of tinkering with the liturgy itself.

Our fathers in the faith,' against the accusation that the Lutherans were not just correcting errors within the Roman Catholic Church but were scrapping all the trappings of

Western Rite Christianity, all the way down to the Mass itself, answered, as I mentioned earlier, "We do not abolish the Mass...all the usual ceremonies of the Mass are retained." Questions about the *satis est* aside, this is a different mindset than the kind of confessional minimalism that wants to assert that you can maintain Lutheran substance with Evangelical style.

"Adiaphora" is a loophole big enough to drive the truck hauling the portable stage, sound equipment, kids' inflatables, and coffee bar, of the Lutheran megachurch travelling satellite site through. Who cares what the least required to remain Lutheran is. I could maybe stay married and only come home to eat my wife's dinner once a week. But it doesn't make me faithful to my marriage vows. Or smart.

This minimalist mindset is as far away from the mindset of the Lutheran Confessions as you can get. It should be no surprise, I guess. It's as if these pseudo-Lutherans never left the kind of legalist thinking from high school youth group where the question was always

"how far can we go in dating and not get in trouble?" Touch? Kiss? 3rd base? Just don't get (or stay) pregnant? "What parts of the service do we need in order to be Lutheran?" Readings and Communion? Sermon and song? Is an altar call ok if it's at a Lutheran youth gathering?

This approach to the Divine Service, that those who poured ink and blood onto the page to compose the Book of Concord fought to preserve with as few departures from what they had been given as possible, fosters not just a consumeristic mentality toward the Sunday morning service, both in those who plan the service and in their planned-for customers.

It also breeds narcissism and selfishness. We will give you what you want. The seeker drives the service. Try it; you'll like it. This is the grave danger of emotionalism and catering to the felt needs of the people whose membership and attendance we're trying to solicit.

The Church, however, does not exist to infantilize her members, to pander to their basest desires, to give them what they want. She exists to mature them, to purify their desires, to teach them to desire what her Lord gives. God makes you His sons in Holy Baptism. In His Church, He shapes you into men. "And [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers. to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Ephesians 4:11-14).

If you want to recapture the robust masculinity of orthodox Christianity and organize the resistance against the emasculating tendencies of the culture and the effeminate, selfish curving in of your own sinful flesh, you'll find in the Church's ageless liturgy and robust hymnody a good place to start. You'll need to quit asking men (and women) to serenade Jesus with syrupy-thick, Hallmark-esque love songs. Save that pillow talk for the bedroom.

Instead, learn to pray like a man, which means you'll need to learn to sing like a man. Though singing isn't today regarded as very manly, and people today don't sing very much, singing together was once an ordinary manly endeavor.

Men working together often sang together. From the sea shanties of sailors to the call-and-response songs of field hands, men have regularly used song to unite themselves to one another, to teach stories (and tall tales), to entertain, to synchronize their work, or to pass time.

In other cultures, men sing to synchronize their drinking in the pub, to celebrate their soccer teams, to indoctrinate their children in cultural rituals, and more.

So also in the Church, men have regularly sung together. The Reformation restored singing to the role of the congregation so that singing became again the means by which

Christians confessed the faith to one another. And hymns have always had a masculine vigor to them. As early as 1903, however, Episcopal priest Rev. Ernest F. Smith lamented the rise of unmanly hymns.

It is an insult to ask a man to sing some hymns which are found in a good many of the best collections, and which were written by women or invalids for persons of a certain effeminate temperament. There is nothing effeminate or invertebrate about the old hymns of the pre-Reformation Church; they were written by men and sung by men, and will last as long as the Church lasts. The permanence of a hymn depends more on its vigor and virility than on almost any other quality.⁴

So, check your love songs to Jesus at the door, confirm that you've not been enrolled in the ranks of the castrati, and join in the more robust, more vigorous marching cadences of

Christian men. These hymns are certainly vigorous. If you don't grow chest hair just by singing them, they will do the catechetical work of shaping you into mature spiritual manhood, growing you as a song of God.

For example, any hymn that describes the battle between Michael the Archangel and the devil is bound to inspire a fighting spirit in men.

1 Christ, the Lord of hosts, unshaken
By the devil's seething rage,
Thwarts the plan of Satan's minions;
Wins the strife from age to age;
Conquers sin and death forever;
Slams them in their steely cage.

4 Jesus came, this word fulfilling,
Trampled Satan, death defied;
Bore the brunt of our temptation,
On the wretched tree He died.
Yet to life was raised victorious;
By His life our life supplied. (LSB 521)

Fighting, crushing, conquering, setting free and more compose a vigorously masculine story of courage, sacrifice, giving, and fighting that puts to shame the "Do you love me Jesus, check [] yes or [] no" schtick of pop Christianity. Or consider the way the work of the martyrs praised in a hymn that's rarely sung but as fightin' a hymn as there is.

1 The Son of God goes forth to war,
A kingly crown to gain; His blood-red banner streams afar:
Who follows in His train?
Who best can drink his cup of woe, Triumphant over pain,
Who patient bears his cross below, He follows in His train,

⁴ Smith, Ernest F. "Hymns and their Tunes: A Review and Criticism." *The Church Eclectic*, v. xxxiii, n. 2, November 1903. 110.

3 A glorious band, the chosen few On whom the Spirit came,
 Twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew,
 And mocked the cross and flame.
 They met the tyrant's brandished steel, The lion's gory mane,
 They bowed their necks, the death to feel: Who follows in their train? (LSB 661)

If singing this hymn doesn't cause you to leap from your pew with a loud "Hooyal" and charge off into battle against the powers of darkness that threaten your family and your friends, you should check your pulse.

Any hymn or song that treats the core events of the Christ narrative, His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, is bound to have the robustly masculine themes of sacrificial love, perfect sacrifice, triumph and conquest, resilient hope, and determined giving.

Age certainly isn't a guarantee of the virility of any song, though having weathered the scrutiny and implacability of time is a good bellwether of a hymn's robustness. A hymn doesn't have to be old to be manly. It has to be gritty, more narrative than emotive. It has to be singable by people, even unaccompanied by instruments. And it has to confess the crazy truths of Christianity courageously.

Nor are accompaniment by an organ or inclusion in a hardback hymnal indicators of whether a man could be caught dead singing a hymn. Take "Beautiful Savior" for instance. Yes, truth is beautiful. Creation is beautiful. So also the Creator is beautiful. But Jesus' most praiseworthy characteristic is not His dashing good looks. The words do not praise Christ for the beauty of His perfect sacrifice, merely for His beauty, and His fairness, especially compared to flowers. Not only does the prophet Isaiah disagree (Isaiah 53:2) with the veracity of this hymn, but it's also pretty hard to understand why any guy would sing along to this homage to a Jesus on the cover of a romance novel.

Sing like a man in order to pray like a man. Let the richness of the Church's song shape your confession. Let her songs give words to your prayers. Let the call and response of the Liturgy keep you planted in the field from which the Lord is harvesting. Let the work songs of tales of her saints and martyrs encourage you in your vocation. Let the story of salvation be your marching cadence as the Lord in His Church trains you for godliness. Sing to train yourself and to encourage your brothers under the cross. Train your voice on this side of the

Resurrection so the melody of the great Te Deum of the saints in heaven will be a little more familiar to you when Christ calls you forth from the grave to breathe and sing anew. Stake out the territory of your resistance against the homogenizing, dehumanizing oligarchs who rule over the City of the Same, with the song of Christ crucified and risen as your anthem and the banner of a perpetually countercultural liturgy.

Today the Church gives you the feast day of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, whose courageous confession of Christ proved he was no castrato. Similarly, when St. Polycarp was being led to the arena where he would be burned and stabbed to death, someone in the crowd shouted, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." None of the martyrs as a gelding or a wether; their heroic confessions ought infuse you with a fresh dose of courage. The days of 1950s comfortable Christianity will draw to their close. The Church in to errant America may be in for days of increasing persecution. We need no more castrati. We need courageous men, pastors, husbands, fathers, and sons. We need righteous women, wives, mothers, and daughters. The time for the Church participating in the emasculation of her sons is over. Join in her holy liturgy and learn the treasury of her hymns. It's time to grow a pair. And sing.