

“Act Like Men, Be Strong”: A Call for Vigor and Exhortation

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Kramer Chapel: Of Beards and Baritones

Concordia Theological Seminary has long been a magnet for those pursuing the truth. The classroom is special, but Eero Saarinen’s architecture reminds us that Kramer Chapel is the highlight. Our liturgical life is rich, but what strikes most visitors is the sheer strength of men singing, their deep voices reverberating against concrete walls. In times when women make up over 60 percent of the churchgoing population, and when singing is no longer part of most people’s daily lives, the experience is powerful.

And then there is the *Duck Dynasty* effect.¹ In the 1960s, long hair signaled a young man’s rebellion. Feminists sported short hair as a means to repel the male gaze and assert independence.² Tearing up a picture of John Paul II on *Saturday Night Live*, Sinéad O’Connor’s shaved head punctuated her performance.³ Magda Ryczko, founder of Hairrari, an inclusive barbershop, remarked, “Gender-neutral hair is just a start pointing for breaking the gender binary.”⁴ Still, natural law, like gravity, has a way of asserting itself. When Bruce Jenner transitioned into Caitlyn, he donned a dress, makeup, and a long-haired wig.⁵ And thus the transgender movement paid homage to the gender binary that it seeks to destroy.

Combing through the Scriptures, elaborate hairstyles come with a word of caution (1 Pet 3:3; 1 Tim 2:9). Yet amorous Solomon calls to his bride, “Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead” (Song 4:1).⁶ Some Corinthian women, chafing at the gender binary, removed their head coverings.⁷ Perhaps they

¹ *Duck Dynasty* was an American reality television show from 2012 to 2017, starring men with long beards.

² Jenna Wimshurst, “Why Do Lesbians Have Short Hair?,” *Jenna Wimshurst* (blog), July 28, 2020, <https://jennawimshurst.com/why-do-lesbians-have-short-hair/>.

³ *Saturday Night Live*, aired October 3, 1992, on NBC.

⁴ Quoted in Kalle Oskari Mattila, “Why Haircuts Should Be Gender Neutral,” *Vogue*, August 13, 2022, <https://www.vogue.com/article/why-haircuts-should-be-gender-neutral/>.

⁵ “Bruce Jenner: When Did He Know,” *ABC News*, April 24, 2015, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/bruce-jenner/story?id=30570567>.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

⁷ On the meaning of head coverings in Corinth, see Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 362–368.

had misunderstood the apostle's claim that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). To clear up the confusion, Paul wrote, "[W]oman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Cor 11:7–9). This is the order of creation questioned at Corinth, challenged by Gnosticism, leveled by worldly feminism, and then obliterated by present-day gender ideology. It is in this context that Saint Paul wrote, "[I]t is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head" (1 Cor 11:6). Hair, of course, is never the real issue, but it can send a message.

What of men? Samson was a one-off, his long hair signaling a wild strength, a means by which the warrior was set apart in a Levitical manner. Conversely, a clean-shaven face, like a well-made bed, has long marked out the cultured from the barbarian, man from the beasts. Accordingly, Ezekiel enjoins Levitical priests to keep a well-trimmed head and not "let their locks grow long" (Ezek 44:20).

A dozen years ago the full-bearded Baptists of *Duck Dynasty* made a statement of their own and signaled a new trend throughout the world of "mere Christianity." Cultural critic Allan C. Carlson has taken colorful notice: "My own Lutheran parish, staunchly Missouri Synod, counts many young men drawn by an energetic pastor who preaches a masculine gospel. The majority of them have full beards. Perhaps this is God's answer to the heresy of women's ordination."⁸

Given our culture's inability to distinguish between male and female, given the assertion that gender is fluid and comes in many varieties, this trend should be welcomed, not as an end in itself but as a sign of life. A clean-shaven face is not to be despised, nor does facial hair carry any magical qualities, but the beard's resurgence sprouts from a generation that recognizes that manhood has taken it on the chin.

Act Like Men

Manhood is not optional. To his brothers in Corinth, Saint Paul says, "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong" (1 Cor 16:13). A man must be strong, a guardian who is courageous for the sake of others. The verb ἀνδρρίζομαι is common in the Septuagint. On the border of a promised but dangerous land, Moses says to Joshua, "Be manly and strong" (Deut 31:6, my translation). Three times the Lord encourages Joshua, "Be strong and be manly" (Josh 1:6–8, my translation). Such exhortation is the word of a commander to a soldier: "Be men, let us be strong for our people" (2 Sam 10:12, my translation). The word of a father to a son, "Be strong, and show yourself a man," says David to Solomon (1 Kgs 2:2). Samson remains the strong man anticipating the Strong Man above all others. But manliness

⁸ Allan C. Carlson, "Unshaved Masses: Masculine Christianity R.I.P.?", *Touchstone*, May/June 2023, <https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=36-03-003-e>.

requires more than physical strength, as Solomon observes: “A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might” (Prov 24:5). In short, the good man must have the wisdom to see the truth of things and the courage to act accordingly.

Men, Women, and Children

Talk of manhood is typically greeted with cries of misogyny and reflexive apologies. But Fatherhood and Sonship belong to God, and men are rightly called to reflect and embody what it means to be fathers and husbands, brothers and sons. Biblical patriarchy is expressed in service to others.⁹ The man who seeks headship must first recognize the headship of Christ, whose manhood is marked by sacrifice (1 Cor 11:4; Eph 5:25). True men understand what it means to be in and under authority (Matt 8:9). Whether a general or a foot soldier, a man is called to act courageously in service to God and for the benefit of others.

True manhood is never to be pitted against womanhood. That would be like hating your own body (Eph 5:29), which, it should be noted, is the essence of gender dysphoria.¹⁰ As Saint Paul writes, “[I]n the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman” (1 Cor 11:11). In our very bodily existence, man is for woman, and woman is for man. We belong to each other (1 Cor 7:4). When man and woman are at odds, there is only enmity and isolation, sterility and loneliness. Divorce and abortion run downstream from this divide. Parallel selfishness has created the land of DINKs (Double Income, No Kids), where the carefree marriage is the child-free marriage. This is a chosen barrenness that leads to barren pews and barren souls, fostering arrested development and a prolonged adolescence.¹¹

But hope springs forth, a stubble among the rubble. On Donation Day at the seminary, a regional president from the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League addressed the community after chapel and expressed her delight in hearing the voices of men singing. But, tellingly, she added that she was also struck by the cries of the many little children in attendance. Seminary student gatherings, chapel included,

⁹ Joseph Atkinson puts it this way: “Patriarchy within the Biblical paradigm is not father-centered but other-centered. In this way, the father, like Yahweh, serves his family by giving selflessly of himself and thus becomes the servant-leader” Joseph C. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2014), 107.

¹⁰ See Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2020); also Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Movement* (New York: Encounter, 2018).

¹¹ For a description of this cultural phenomenon, see Wendy Wang, “‘DINKs’ Should Rethink Their Anti-Child Views,” *National Review*, December 21, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2023/12/dinks-should-rethink-their-anti-child-views/>.

have blossomed into family affairs. Indeed, where men thrive according to godly purpose, families rise and prosper.

Faith, Family, and Fatherhood

When youth soccer takes precedence over church, family becomes an idol. Christ's teaching can turn family members into enemies (Matt 10:34–36). Nevertheless, family and church commonly rise and fall together. And apart from fathers, things fall apart. Stephen Baskerville notes, "Virtually every major social pathology has been linked to fatherless children: violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, unwed pregnancy, suicide, and psychological disorders—all correlating more strongly with fatherlessness than with any other single factor, surpassing even race and poverty."¹² But social and theological problems are intertwined. The same forces that despise patriarchy in the family also push women's ordination and the rainbow pride.¹³ Where God is called Mother, radical feminism and Gnosticism, abortion and women's ordination become the order of the day. Where the Trinity becomes depersonalized into the functions of Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, human beings are likewise neutered, and the Office of the Ministry is defined in merely functional terms. This is not simply a matter of ethics; aborted children are never baptized, and the children of divorce rarely go to church. Written creeds and confessions become museum pieces when the rainbow flag flies in triumph over the crucifix.

Accordingly, fatherhood and natural marriage are in Satan's crosshairs. As Anthony Esolen notes, "Without strong families, the poor tend to remain poor, bad neighborhoods grow worse, schools become places of violence and chaos and futility—and the spires of churches come down. You will not get those strong families if you do not raise strong men."¹⁴ When it comes to church attendance, families matter. J. P. Degance, CEO of *Communio*, recently compiled a comprehensive survey on the topic: "It turns out that 80 percent of everybody in the pews on Sunday morning grew up in a home with continuously married biological parents, and that trend

¹² Stephen Baskerville, "Is There a Fatherhood Crisis?," *The Independent Review* 8, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 485.

¹³ For a helpful summary demonstrating the theological links between these issues, see John Pless, "The Ordination of Women and Ecclesial Endorsement of Homosexuality: Are They Related?," in *Women Pastors: The Ordination of Women in Biblical Perspective*, 3rd ed., ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 231–246.

¹⁴ Anthony Esolen, "Boys Will Be Boys—and Should Be—to Become True Men," *National Catholic Register*, June 16, 2019, <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/boys-will-be-boys-and-should-be-to-become-true-men/>.

held across all age groups, from the oldest Gen Zs to the youngest boomers.”¹⁵ Eighty percent! But it is the father who plays the decisive role. According to a study from Focus on the Family, if a child is the first person in a household to become a Christian, there is a 3.5 percent probability that the rest of the family will follow. If mom comes to church first, that probability jumps to 17 percent. But if it is the father, there is a 93 percent chance that the rest of the family will join.¹⁶ The father’s faithful church membership matters especially as adolescents seek to make their way into adulthood.

This makes sense when we consider that man is called to be the head of the family and that the church is the household of God (Eph 2:19), “the household of faith” (Gal 6:10). The home is the place where a child’s faith is cultivated. Likewise, the church is a family. Adam was the first preacher. Abraham became the father of God’s people. The sacred Passover was a family meal, led by the father (Exod 12:3). Catechism lessons are taught by the household head.

Tellingly, when Jesus multiplied the loaves, “those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children” (Matt 14:21). Households matter. We should not forget Lydia, whose Baptism led to the Baptism of her entire household (Acts 16:15). More often, though, it is the paterfamilias. Paul says to the jailer at Philippi, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:33). Paul likewise speaks of baptizing the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16).¹⁷ When fathers lead, women and children follow. And in this way, men continue to bear the Spirit of Joshua, who said, “But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15).

But where will we find men like Joshua today? Young men are failing academically, psychologically, and physically. High school honor rolls and college classrooms are dominated by the girls, while boys are dropping out in record numbers. Some are led to lives of violence, others to indoor isolation.¹⁸ Christina Hoff Sommers alerted us to the problem in *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men*.¹⁹ Sommers warned of the risk-free schoolyard, the

¹⁵ Quoted in Lee Habeeb, “How Fatherlessness Drove Church Decline and How Churches Can Reverse It,” *Newsweek*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/how-fatherlessness-drove-church-decline-how-churches-can-reverse-it-1807354/>.

¹⁶ Polly House, “Want Your Church to Grow? Then Bring in the Men,” *Baptist Press*, April 3, 2003, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/want-your-church-to-grow-then-bring-in-the-men/>.

¹⁷ For further study, see Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family*.

¹⁸ Julie Jorgen, “Boys Are Struggling: It Can Take Coaches, Tutors, and Thousands a Month to Fix That,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/tech/personal-tech/middle-schoolers-academic-success-innovation-40e8456d/>.

¹⁹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

decline of recess, as well as a curriculum that does not offer the kind of action-packed books to which boys are typically drawn. The topic has recently been taken up by Nancy R. Pearcey's *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*.²⁰ Writing at the intersection of Christ and culture, Anthony Esolen has offered up *No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men*.²¹ Closer to home, the church may consider Jeffrey Hemmer's *Man Up: The Quest for Masculinity*.²² The world needs men, as does the church. Boys need role models, and a father's example is key.

Boys to Men: Wisdom As the Path to Manhood

But words also matter; they form and inform us. For raising boys into men two categories of speech are especially essential—namely, wisdom and exhortation. With wisdom, one sees things clearly, and with exhortation, one acts courageously. With wisdom, we recognize male and female, and with courage, we do not play along with false pronouns. With wisdom, we know true marriage, and with courage, we do not pretend otherwise.

Written wisdom serves as a kind of map, helping us to avoid common pitfalls. Oral wisdom is handed down through the generations to save us from unforced errors. Indeed, the world was created through Wisdom, through the eternal Word, accompanied by the Spirit who hovered over the waters (Prov 8:22–36). Since wisdom is written into creation, Sinai's stone tablets are not necessary to understand such things as the value of hard work, thrift, and a good name. Each culture has something to share. Moses himself was educated “in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22).

Biblical wisdom, though, is surer, for it is divinely certified. When the world praises the naked emperor's new clothes, biblical wisdom brings us home to reality. Biblical wisdom is written by Christians for the sake of Christians. Biblical wisdom plumbs the depths of the law, imparting understanding into what it means to be created in God's image. Biblical wisdom takes eternity into account, urging us not only to save for the future but also to think of heavenly treasure. Most significantly, biblical wisdom is centered on the cross of Christ, which is foolishness to the unbeliever (1 Cor 1:23).

²⁰ Nancy Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023).

²¹ Anthony Esolen, *No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2022).

²² Jeffrey Hemmer, *Man Up: The Quest for Masculinity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

Wisdom, as a genre, is eminently practical, a young man's guide to a life shaped in accordance with the truth. That's what the book of Proverbs is all about. In advice that resonates to this day, Solomon warns his son against joining gangs, running along the paths of those whose feet run to evil: "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent" (Prov 1:10). True strength should be cultivated and accompanied by courage for the sake of the innocent and the weak: "If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small. Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter" (Prov 24:10–11).

Wisdom's natural starting place is the home, where father and mother speak in unity. "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck" (Prov 1:8–9). A father speaks to his son about the wisdom of hard work: "Go to the ant, O sluggard" (Prov 6:6). "In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty" (Prov 14:23). This advice has spiritual ramifications as well. The lazy man who will not rise up for Monday-morning work will likely not get out of bed for Sunday-morning service. Gluttony is a sin, but wisdom reminds us, "Better a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife" (Prov 17:1). This practical wisdom serves as a stepping stone to the truth that man cannot live by bread alone, that earthly feasts have their limits, and that the Lamb's Supper finally is the only meal that matters. On a practical level, the Father rightly warns his son to stay out of trouble: Beware of the snares that come with beds of "myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon" but result in an "ox [led] to the slaughter" (Prov 7:17, 7:22). Finding a godly wife, on the other hand, benefits both body and soul, even as a godly father and mother are a child's greatest inheritance.

To impart wisdom is to teach the law, not as an imposition, an enemy, or an existential force that must be overcome. For the law of God is good, right, and eternal, a curb for all people but a welcome word for the Christian. "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light" (Prov 6:23a). Pagans may embrace wisdom as a practical guide, but Christians hear it as a divine word to be treasured. When wisdom is offered up by Christians for Christians, it may well be categorized as a third use of the law, a helpful guide for willing protégés. Wisdom guides us to choices that have eternal consequences. While folly leads to ruin, physical and spiritual, the wisdom of the cross lights the path of salvation (Prov 19:3).

Boys Thrive on Exhortation

As the Proverbs remind us, men are not born but raised. While wisdom begins with contemplation and thoughtfulness, exhortation leads to action. This is especially true for boys. As Anthony Esolen observes, "Boys have more muscle mass and

a higher metabolism; *therefore they crave action.*"²³ A healthy society will see boys wrestling, playing king of the hill and dodgeball, and engaging in other spirited and strenuous activity. Whether physical or mental, competition is the order of the day. Such vigorous training and sport prepare boys to be soldiers and soldiers of the cross, fathers and fathers in the faith, defenders of the home and the church.

The Duke of Wellington is said to have claimed, "The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton." Functional societies act accordingly. A mother's nurture is foundational, but mental and physical discipline are the ingredients of flourishing manhood. As Anthony Esolen observes, if we wish our boys to grow into good men, schools should have "more competition, not less," "more physical risk," not less.²⁴ This is true for athletes and soldiers, secular and Christian.

Exhortation involves cultivating a certain willingness. Pharaoh, in the business of discouragement, afflicted the Israelites with many burdens, making their slavery a bitter experience (Exod 1:8–14). Coaches and trainers also make physical demands but do so in a spirit of encouragement, to build up their charges.

Not surprisingly, locker-room speeches are a genre unto themselves. A wheel-chaired Knute Rockne urges the Fighting Irish to win one for the Gipper.²⁵ Coach Tony D'Amato cries out, "We can climb outta hell, one inch at a time."²⁶ But those were movies. Tim Tebow's halftime speech has become the stuff of legend: "We got thirty minutes for the rest of our lives! Let's go!"²⁷ Before the US hockey team faced the heavily favored Soviet Union, Coach Brooks woke up echoes of his own: "Great moments are born from great opportunity. And that's what you have here tonight, boys. . . . If we played 'em ten times, they might win nine. But not this game. Not tonight."²⁸ This sort of exhortation has nothing to do with threats but is in fact exhilarating, distilling the essence of a shared brotherhood in pursuit of a noble goal.

As in sports, so also in war. Shakespeare captures the spirit of exhortation in Henry V's famous Saint Crispin's Day speech. The battle will be bloody. Some will not return home. But the wounded warrior will "strip his sleeve and show his scars, / And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's Day.'" Dangers lurk, but men rise to the challenge and say, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers— / For he today that

²³ Esolen, *No Apologies*, 10.

²⁴ Esolen, "Boys Will Be Boys."

²⁵ *Knute Rockne, All American*, directed by Lloyd Bacon (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

²⁶ *Any Given Sunday*, directed by Oliver Stone (1999; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2001), DVD.

²⁷ "FLORIDA FLASHBACKS – Tebow's Halftime Speech," halftime speech from 2009 BCS National Championship Game, January 8, 2009, video, 0:59, August 18, 2020, https://youtube.com/watch?v=y_aBmOBRHD8.

²⁸ *Miracle*, directed by Gavin O'Connor (2004; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother." As for those who eschew the fray? "And gentlemen in England, now abed, / Shall think themselves accursed they were not here, / And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks / That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day."²⁹ Exhortation is powerful, because it ennobles the spirit and presents a life that has meaning and purpose.

Christian Exhortation: Athletes and Soldiers

And so it will be at life's end. No Christian will count it blessed that he did not engage in the fight, did not work in the field, did not answer the call. Not surprisingly, scriptural exhortation draws heavily on sports and martial imagery: biblical paraenesis is the sound of the bugle, the morning reveille that awakens us and calls us to willing duty. The preacher urges his confirmands, "[L]et us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb 12:1). The preacher becomes coach: "[L]ift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees" (Heb 12:12). Training and diet are of spiritual concern: "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:14).

Reflecting on his own life, Paul draws upon military and athletic imagery: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). Accordingly, Paul urges us to put on the armor of God, including the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the sword of the spirit. This is not the preaching of the law as an existential threat but as encouragement to willing soldiers who have enlisted to stand against the devil's schemes and wrestle against the cosmic powers (Eph 6:10–18). The Lord calls us to work in the vineyard, and that work is good (Matt 20:1–16).

The pastoral office is a manly office of the church militant. Pastors are called to bear the sword of the Spirit and to form a band of brothers. Paul speaks of Archippus as "our fellow soldier" (Phlm 1:2). He refers to Epaphroditus as "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Phil 2:25). Saint Paul urges Timothy, "Fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12) and "Share in the suffering as a noble [καλός] soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:3, my translation).

When Christ called Peter, James, and John, they were already a band of brothers, working for a common good. James and John are said to be *μετόχοι*—that is, Peter's partners or partakers in the fishing business (Luke 5:7). Later they are called Simon's *κοινωνοί*, engaged in a kind of fishing fellowship (Luke 5:10). But both words are ecclesial, describing participation in the life of the church. This is fitting,

²⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. Andrew Gurr, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 4.3.47–67.

for fishermen's partnership would be raised to a new level as this band of brothers would learn to cast their gospel nets for the sake of "catching men alive" (Luke 5:10, my translation).

Accordingly, the boat becomes our Lord's training ground for would-be soldiers of the cross. Upon the Galilean sea, the weather turned dangerous. Christ arose from sleep, and having rebuked the wind and waves he rebuked the disciples as well: "Why are you so cowardly?" (Mark 4:40, my translation). After the feeding of the five thousand, our Lord forced the disciples onto a boat that would again encounter stormy seas. To terrified disciples, our Lord says, "Be of good courage. Do not be afraid" (Mark 6:50, my translation). Thus, Christ offers at once both command and encouragement. Though he may appear to be sleeping or absent, Christ is always present with those who walk in the valley of death's shadow.

So it is—the prophetic office demands courage. Danger and persecution await. What the prophet hears whispered in his ear, he must shout from the rooftops. Hated by all, preachers must develop a thick skin. Christ weeps over Jerusalem but not when confronted by Pharisees. The ministry is not for those who wish to model soft clothes (Matt 11:8). Soldiers of the cross must be willing to endure imprisonments, shipwrecks and beatings, even the loss of a pension plan or a promotion (2 Cor 11:23–29). Peter may have faltered on the night our Lord was betrayed, but he bounced back. At Pentecost, Peter says, "I speak to you with bold courage [*παρρησίας*]" (Acts 2:29, my translation). Peter and John stand boldly before the Jerusalem council (Acts 4:13). Facing threats of imprisonment and beating, Peter prays for the strength "to continue to speak your word with boldness" (Acts 4:29). Saint Paul, even under house arrest continued preaching and teaching unhindered and "with all boldness" (Acts 28:31). Fearing God, prophets no longer fear men.

The church depends on soldiers, lay and ordained. And soldiers crave exhortation, the law's third use. Our Lord himself came to Paul saying, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you" (Acts 18:9–10a). The One who sits on the throne says to John, "The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (Rev 21:7). But as for the cowardly? "[T]heir portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (Rev 21:8). The truth not spoken has no power to save, and the prophet who remains silent will himself face judgment (Ezek 33:7–9).

The Third Use of the Law and Exhortation

The church militant is always in need of soldiers, but apart from the trumpet of exhortation, who will rise for battle? Scripture brings us the gospel, the good news of salvation. Yet as Saint Paul says to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God

and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16–17). Those who deny the third use of the law, or refer to it as "the so-called third use of the law," make Scripture much less profitable, especially when it comes to training in righteousness. Wisdom and exhortation are essential for raising boys into men. To abandon the law's third use is to put aside wisdom and to undercut scriptural courage and encouragement. To deny the law's third use is to leave our people rudderless, lost at sea, without purpose or direction.

Christians, as Christians, need instruction. Solomon urges, "Train up a child in the way he should go" (Prov 22:6a). God's children need instruction in the law and crave guidance in the path of wisdom. The law reveals sin, but the third use of the law is given for edification: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

Of John the Baptist, it is said, "[T]he child grew and became strong in spirit" (Luke 1:80). Likewise, the boy Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" (Luke 2:40). The sinless one "increased in wisdom and in stature" (Luke 2:52). Indeed, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:8–9). The new man, growing in faith, needs instruction and takes to discipline. Inasmuch as we remain sinners, we need that instruction all the more. Training, which comes with great exertion, plays a role. The law acts as a curb on all men. That is the law's first use. The Christian, however, receives the law in a new way: "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb 12:6). Discipline finds weakness but creates strength among the willing. A patriotic soldier readily rises to the bugle's call. Young Christian men are drawn to the Office of the Ministry as something noble (1 Tim 3:1). Men thrive when they answer the call to sacrifice and to fight for the sake of the gospel. All God's children seek to do work that is good and pleasing to their heavenly Father, and they seek to know what those works might be and that those works do matter.

Saint Paul reminds us that Scripture is useful for training (*παιδεία*) and for righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). Training goes hand in hand with the preaching of the gospel. Paul writes, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11–12). A coach or teacher knows that training is a process. Accordingly, pastors are urged to exhort with all patience (2 Tim 4:2). When we think of training (*παιδεία*), we might imagine a runner who builds lung capacity and is taught to pace himself. Or we might think of a schoolboy strengthening his memory muscle and learning Scripture by heart. So also, a young Christian is trained up by Scripture to navigate life in a godly way, to defend his loved ones from harm and his church from false teachers.

This is the essence of *παιδεία* (training), meant to develop physical, mental, and, here, spiritual capacities. And this is all the third use of the law.

Like Solomon, we wish to raise up young men who are not afraid of their shadows: “[T]he righteous are bold as a lion” (Prov 28:1). Such training includes the telling of biblical stories and the singing of strong hymns. “A Mighty Fortress” invigorates.³⁰ “The Son of God Goes Forth to War” encourages participation in a glorious band, called to mock the cross and flame and face the tyrant’s brandished steel and the lion’s gory mane.³¹ Boys may learn from Samson, whose strength was well used and whose weakness tells a cautionary tale. Likewise, the stories of Daniel and the three men in the fiery furnace do not fail to inspire.

Spiritual discipline may include requiring children to know Bible passages and hymn stanzas by heart, as well as requiring seminary students to memorize various paradigms and vocabulary. Training naturally involves requirements and expectations and may fall under the category of the law, but it is a law that is welcome.

Good works do not, and can never, save us. Yet good works are good indeed and must be taught. Faith is a gift, but it must be cultivated; if faith is not exercised, it surely dies. Parents and pastors know that all the gospel talk in the world will not matter if a person no longer attends church. So, the preacher says, “And let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:24–25).

Perseverance is the essence of exhortation, the law’s third use. “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up,” urges Paul (Gal 6:9). The gospel is indeed good news. And so Stephen Paulson rightly asks, “Does the office of the law kill so the Spirit can use the office of the gospel to make alive by baptism, Lord’s Supper, and human preachers?” The answer is yes. But then Paulson offers up a false dichotomy, asking, “Or do we rely on speculations about how the church can endure through time only if it can establish discipline?”³² To answer this question, we do not rely on speculation but on God’s word, which tells us that godly discipline is indeed the friend and defender of faith. Training may be difficult, but “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom 5:3–4). Saint Paul plays the role of a coach and trainer: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Cor 9:25). So that

³⁰ Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” trans. composite, in *Lutheran Service Book*, ed. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 656.

³¹ Reginald Heber, “The Son of God Goes Forth to War,” in The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book*, 661.

³² Stephen Paulson, “Law and the Danger of Freedom,” *Word & World* 21, no. 3 (2001): 277.

we might pursue the path of salvation, our Lord himself urges Christians to strive (ἀγωνίζεσθε) to enter through the narrow door (Luke 13:24). This is not some sort of foreign discipline or discipline for discipline’s sake. Christ, the prophets, and all the apostles urge Christians to conduct themselves in such a manner that they might hear the words “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:23).

Good Works are Natural and Spontaneous, Planned and Prepared

One of the obstacles to offering exhortation is that good deeds are sometimes said to be entirely spontaneous. Because good works are the fruit of a good tree, there is supposedly no need for the law’s third use, which would spoil the process. In this vein, Gerhard Forde says that good works are “free, uncalculating, genuine, spontaneous.”³³ Forde illustrates it in this way: “It would be like a mother who runs to pick up her child when it is hurt. There is no calculation, no wondering about progress, morality, or virtue. There is just the doing of it, and then it is completely forgotten.”³⁴

Indeed, the left hand ought not know what the right hand is doing. But this is not the full story. Forde claims that when it comes to good works, there is no calculation. Of course, the word *calculated*, like the word *scheme*, has negative connotations and is meant to poison the well. Good works are not calculated in some sort of devious way, but they are often the result of thoughtfulness and preparation. Surely, a mother will run spontaneously to a hurting child. Yet such motherly love is also modeled and taught. A good Christian mother is much more than spontaneous. She plans for the future, taking time to provide healthy meals, insisting upon a safe home, and giving due consideration to her child’s education. This is not a matter of calculation but of thoughtful planning. Good works flow naturally, yet the Christian life is nevertheless to be tended. Christians are given a new heart, yet they are also called upon to cultivate the mind of Christ. This is the law’s third use.

Both wisdom and exhortation take into account the long-term effects of any activity. To embrace a hurting child may be thought of as an act of spontaneous love. But to train a child in the way he should go takes time and effort (Prov 22:6). Our Lord often speaks about the Christian life in terms of thoughtful planning. The virgin does well to have extra oil for her lamp (Matt 25:1–13). Talents are to be used, and buried talents are liable to judgment (Matt 25:14–30). Following the example of the steward who was fired, Christians should act with such shrewdness that they might be received into the eternal dwellings (Luke 16:1–9). True wisdom involves

³³ Gerhard Forde, “The Lutheran View of Sanctification,” in *The Essential Forde: Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, ed. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Stephen Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 98.

³⁴ Forde, “The Lutheran View of Sanctification,” 98.

investing in heavenly treasures (Matt 6:19–24; Luke 12:16–21). Those who intend to build a tower should count the cost (Luke 14:25–33). Faith is thoughtful and active, with the law as guide. Faith does not look into the mirror to find virtue and morality, but it does look to the Scriptures as a guide to do what is right, to live the life of Christ that Christians have received as a gift.

The War Against Exhortation and the Law's Third Use

Some see the third use of the law as a retreat from the gospel and a return to works-righteousness. Accordingly, Forde asserts, "Faith does not ask about good works."³⁵ But does the assertion ring true? The crowds, convicted by the preaching of John the Baptist, repent and ask, "What then shall we do?" (Luke 3:10). And to these newly faithful soldiers, the Baptist offers concrete suggestions. Offer up a second tunic, collect no more than is authorized, be content with your wages (Luke 3:13–14). And so John the Baptist reminds us that the third use of the law is for proclamation.

According to Stephen Paulson, those tempted to introduce the third use of the law are asking such questions as these: "Doesn't the church need discipline along with the authority to enforce it? Doesn't the church need law for Christians lest they misuse their freedom?" And again, "Don't the free also need a disciplinarian?"³⁶ For Forde and Paulson, the third use of the law is regularly equated with the whipping of the unwilling, flogging the faithful into lives more moral.

Stephen Paulson claims that the Christian "is not freed from hating the law into loving it."³⁷ But is this true? Does the Christian not love every word that comes from our Lord's mouth? The psalmist delights in the law and meditates on God's word day and night (Ps 1:2). The one who has been given the gift of salvation proceeds to say, "I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. I will lift up my hands towards your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes" (Ps 119:47–48). This is nothing else than to say that the Christian loves all of God's word, every jot and tittle, every word of law and gospel.

The Christian does not thereby seek to justify himself by means of the law. Nor does the Christian simply want to become, as Forde and Paulson claim, more moral. The Christian, having been redeemed, is no longer Pharaoh's slave but God's son. Christians seek to be obedient to the law, but not because they harbor some secret desire for conformity or adherence to rules. Christians delight in the law because,

³⁵ Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 55.

³⁶ Paulson, "Law and the Danger of Freedom," 273.

³⁷ Stephen Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, vol. 1, *Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 73.

quite simply, they delight in God's will and wish to be of service. In an earthly sense, we know it true that people find satisfaction in their work, in a job well done. Apart from sin, it remains for man to work. How much more does the Christian love the law that teaches the works that are truly good.

This attitude is embodied in Luther's "These Are the Holy Ten Commands." The accusatory Thou Shall Not Murder becomes positive encouragement: "Be kind and patient; help, defend." The sixth commandment extols "self-controlled discipline." The commandment against false witness turns into exhortation to speak the truth in kindness.³⁸ All of this is predicated on the Christian need and desire for instruction and, likewise, the Christian's positive view of the law. Sin and evil are our enemies, not the law.

Paulson's Call to Arms against Moses

Forde and Paulson, the leading lights of Radical Lutheranism, have long expressed objections to what they so often refer to as the "so-called third use of the law."³⁹ In their view, the Reformation of 1517 was soon derailed by a lack of confidence, by a returning to old ways. In a recent journal article, Paulson notes how Gerhard Forde would preface his lectures on the Augsburg Confession with a reminder that church visitations "set in motion the beginning of the end for Lutherans."⁴⁰ The very idea of the law's third use, which Stephen Paulson calls Melancthon's experiment, was meant to solve "the problem of running a church that had gone to the pigs."⁴¹ For good reason, soft antinomianism is attracted to the year 1517, not to the Formula of Concord's 1580.

But things are getting stranger still. Paulson also claims that Moses himself was a kind of Melancthon. Having received the gospel, Moses no longer believed that it would be sufficient and thus turned to the law as a means to keep the children of Israel in line.⁴² Paulson's article well illustrates the problem on our hands.

³⁸ Martin Luther, "These Are the Holy Ten Commands," st. 6, tr. *Christian Worship*, st. 7, tr. F. Samuel Janzow, in *The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Lutheran Service Book*, 581.

³⁹ Gerhard Forde coined the term "Radical Lutheranism" in an article of 1987 in which he tries to steer a path for the Lutheran churches between conservative neo-Evangelicalism and Evangelical Catholicism. For him, "Radical Lutheranism" emphasizes the preaching only of justification by faith and rejects an instructive, third use of the law with any anthropology that sees the human will as capable of being reformed and made free. Gerhard O. Forde, "Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America," *Lutheran Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 5–18.

⁴⁰ Stephen Paulson, "Freedom from the Law and the Experimental 'Third Use,'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2023): 271.

⁴¹ Paulson, "Freedom from the Law," 272.

⁴² Paulson, "Freedom from the Law," 281–283.

As we have seen, as Moses neared death, he spoke words of encouragement. To Joshua, he said, “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you” (Deut 31:6). Love the Lord, Moses pleads, to which he adds, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life” (Deut 30:19–20a). This is the essence of exhortation, the word of a father to son, a coach to an athlete, a general to a soldier. Moses says, “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off” (Deut 30:11). Again, “But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deut 30:14). Yes, you can do it. By God’s grace, you can do it.

But Stephen Paulson claims that Moses has faltered, that his speech was a mistake, a return to the law, which has no power. According to Paulson, Moses had indeed received the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Moses met the Lord upon the mountain, he received a sermon and a promise. Paulson writes, “With his face in the cleft of the rock, the cowering Moses got a promise from Christ—while whimpering for fear of death. Moses himself got something better than what he ever wanted! He wanted to see God, but he actually got to *hear* God instead!”⁴³ Paulson is right that Moses knew the gospel, but Moses knew that the gospel was founded not just on a word but upon a sacrifice. During the Passover, death had passed over the Israelites. The blood of a lamb had marked their doors and pointed to the atonement that would be accomplished by the coming Savior. Moses knew not just a promise, but he had experienced a taste of the atonement to come in Christ’s all-availing sacrifice.

But now, according to Paulson, Moses has lost sight of the gospel and has mistakenly returned to the word of the law. Moses let frustration get the best of him and applied the law like a stick to beat his people into submission. According to Paulson, “Moses invented the theological idea of ‘sanctification’ as something to be added to justification because he couldn’t believe that he himself was declared righteous by the second person of the Trinity.”⁴⁴ And again, “Moses must have begun thinking: the gospel cannot work forensically—without the law working ‘really’ and in addition—otherwise we would end up with a whole nation of people who have dead faith.”⁴⁵

What shall we say to this? Shall we not defend Moses and his clear preaching? Or shall we abandon him, along with all ideas of exhortation? If we do so, scissors must be applied to every letter Paul wrote and to much of the gospels as well. What

⁴³ Paulson, “Freedom from the Law,” 283.

⁴⁴ Paulson, “Freedom from the Law,” 283.

⁴⁵ Paulson, “Freedom from the Law,” 283.

we are left with then is not the pure gospel but the death of courage and encouragement.

Abortion Is Not Simply an Ethical Issue

One particular verse from Deuteronomy 30 draws special attention. In the midst of exhortation, Moses calls out to the people, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live" (Deut 30:19). Naturally, the exhortation "Choose Life" has long been a favorite of the pro-life movement. This encouragement is more than a law; it is a noble calling. "But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut 30:14). Too often, abortion is treated simply as a moral or ethical issue. If it is ethical, it is of this world but not heavenly. If it is simply moral, it is of the law, which must always give way to the gospel. In such circumstances, the exhortation to choose life can never really be of the utmost importance, though of course it is a matter of life and death. But this is the problem when the third use of the law is taken off the table or seen as simply more instruction. Solomon tells his son, "Rescue those who are being taken away to death." This is bold and living faith in action, the life of Christ that is now our own. One may debate the ethics of drinking this or smoking that, but godly exhortation means much more than that.

Conclusion: Wisdom, Courage, and the Third Use of the Law

No time in human history has a culture witnessed a fall so far so fast. The basic building blocks of our humanity are being pulled away. Many Christians are understandably afraid for careers. Many Christian institutions are wavering. To see through the madness, wisdom is required. And to speak the truth, there must be courage. This is not simply, has never been, about making our people more moral, demanding better ethics, or following of rules for the sake of rules. The fulfillment of the law is love, the commandments seen in a positive light. The third use of the law is simply a description of the better life into which we have been invited, the life that has been purchased for us by Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Wisdom turns boys into men, and exhortation creates courage. "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong" (1 Cor 16:13). So says Paul to his Corinthian brothers. But this is no arbitrary rule, nor is it a command that the men of Corinth were incapable of keeping. Among us, we continue to see new generations enlisted as soldiers of the cross. Some of them, sensing the difficulty of the times, wear their beards as a uniform. But whether bearded or clean shaven, seminarians enter the ministry that they might bear the sword of the spirit. Likewise,

Christians everywhere are heeding the call to courage. And so we, too, pray for wisdom, strength, and courage to rise at reveille and answer the bugle's call. The Strong Man himself leads the way (Matt 12:29). Who follows in his train?