

Why do men stay away?

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [November 1, 2011](#) issue



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Gathered around the coffeepot in a church fellowship hall on a fall Sunday, a gaggle of men are talking with animation and passion, joking and bragging in the way of males. The topic? Football, of course. "How 'bout them Devils! D'ya see that pick six in the third quarter? Amazing! Hey, Joe, sorry about your Dawgs! Maybe you'll get 'em next week, if they don't fire your coach first!" In a few minutes, many will wander into worship, the married ones joining their wives. As the first hymn begins, some of them will stand and keep silent guard, staring mutely into space as the women beside them sing.

What is it with men and church? We men are famously outnumbered, to be sure. According to a recent survey, we make up only 39 percent of the worshipers in a typical congregation. This is not just because we die earlier and leave the pews filled with the sturdier gender. The percentages hold across the board, for every age category.

Even when we do show up for worship, we're often not particularly happy about it. This is not breaking news, of course. Study after study has shown that many men who name themselves as Christian feel bored, alienated and disengaged from church. When we drag ourselves to church, researchers say, it is not for ourselves but to fulfill the obligations of our roles as son, husband, father or pastor.

Why are men and the church often at odds? Sadly, many of the answers are as insulting as they are misguided. Some researchers are persuaded that the antipathy of men to church resides at the hormonal level. They argue that men, loaded as they are with testosterone, have a proclivity to impulsive, risk-taking, occasionally violent action—exactly the behavior disallowed in the soft world of worship. Given this theory, what enticements can the wimpy church possibly offer us men when we compare it to the joys of hiding away in a man cave, stuffing our maws with pizza and beer as we watch Da Bears and heading out after sundown to rip off a few wheel covers and rumble in the Wal-Mart parking lot?

Others propose a more political and historical explanation, namely that centuries of male control of the church have yielded to an ineluctable force of feminization. Pastel worship, passive and sentimental images of the Christian life, handholding around the communion table and hymns that coo about lover-boy Jesus who "walks with me and talks with me" have replaced stronger, more masculine themes. One man reported that the first thing he does when he walks into a church is to look at the curtains. One glance tells him all he needs to know about who's making the decisions.

Really? The feminine erosion of the church? As David Foster Wallace said in a different context, this is an idea "so stupid it practically drools." Even sillier are the proposed masculine remedies. One website suggests "Ten Ways to Man Up Your Church," beginning with obtaining "a manly pastor" who projects "a healthy masculinity." This patently ignores strong women clergy, of course, but it also denigrates the capacity of men to recognize and respond to able leadership regardless of gender or stereotypes. I recently visited a church with a chest-thumping manly pastor. After worship, one man in the congregation confided, "I feel like I'm on the set of a Tarzan movie." As for "manning up" worship, I know that if my church begins handing out NASCAR jackets with the bulletins, I'm going to look for a different church—maybe one with lace curtains.

Still, the numbers don't lie. Men are staying away from church. The reasons are undoubtedly complex, but perhaps a clue can be found in a Christian group that attracts men and women in roughly equal numbers: Eastern Orthodoxy. A cynic might say that men are attracted to Orthodoxy because it is conservative, with an all-male clergy, many of them sporting beards. The finding of religion journalist Frederica Mathewes-Green, however, is closer to the truth. She surveyed male adult converts and discovered that Orthodoxy's main appeal is that it's "challenging." One

convert said, "Orthodoxy is serious. It is difficult. It is demanding. It is about mercy, but it is also about overcoming myself." Another said that he was sick of "bourgeois, feel-good American Christianity."

Yes, some churchgoers are satisfied with feel-good Christianity, but I think many Christians—women and men—yearn for a more costly, demanding, life-changing discipleship. Perhaps women are more patient when they don't find it, or more discerning of the deeper cross-bearing opportunities that lie beneath the candied surface. Men take a walk or hang around the church coffeepot talking in jargon about football: another disciplined and costly arena of life in which people sacrifice their bodies and their individual desires for a larger cause that matters to them, at least for the moment. Near transcendence is preferable to no transcendence at all.