

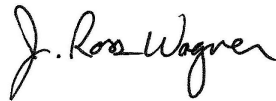
*Weakness, the Cross of Christ, and the 'Muscular' American Christian Man: Exploration and Significance of St. Paul's Theme of 'Strength in Weakness' in 2 Corinthians 10–13*

by

Joshua C. LaFeve

Date: 2/15/2021

Approved:



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Ross Wagner, 1<sup>st</sup> Reader



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William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2021

ABSTRACT

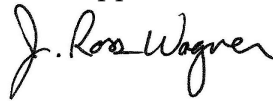
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## Abstract

There are American evangelical distortions of ‘muscular’ Christianity influencing the twenty-first century American Christian Church. These distortions unwittingly encourage Christian men to find their identity primarily in ‘being authentic men’ and lead them on *inward* journeys to discover their inherent masculinity. These pursuits, although well intentioned, can result in Christian men identifying with and embracing firmly human traits of power, strength, courage, and a sense of adventure in a way that eclipses Christ and their ultimate identity as Christian men in the crucified, risen, ascended, and reigning Lord. Such pursuits do not leave men content in Christ.

This thesis presents those distortions and offers one possible remedy by engaging a close reading of the Apostle Paul’s theme of ‘strength in weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13 and bringing it into conversation with Martin Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’. The thesis reveals that the Apostle Paul’s ‘muscular’ Christianity was *externally* rather than *internally* focused. Paul’s identity as a Christian man is rooted firmly as one who is ‘in Christ’. Paul did not look *inward* to himself when confronted with the challenges of his calling as an apostle and the sufferings of the Christian life but always fixed his eyes on the crucified and risen Lord Jesus who was crucified in weakness and was raised by the power of God. For Paul, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus was his ‘strength in weakness’. Paul’s ‘muscular’ Christianity involved embracing,

for the sake of the all-sufficient Gospel of Jesus Christ, his own weaknesses, inadequacies, inabilities, and insufficiencies in humility and in suffering. For Paul, being weak in Christ means he is his strongest (2 Corinthians 12:10).

## **Dedication**

To my patient wife.

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# 1. Introduction: The Late 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Evangelical ‘Muscular’ Christian Response to the Perceived Feminization of the American Christian Church

In my experience as a parish pastor on the West Coast and in the Midwest, many congregations are seeking to engage Christian men in the life of the church through a distinctive men’s ministry. Perceiving a lack of interest in church on the part of men, pastor and parishioner alike look for different ways to draw Christian men into greater participation in worship, Bible study, and service in the parish.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is a fervent desire on the part of Christian congregations that men more fully embrace the responsibilities of their vocations and callings as husbands and fathers.

And so, a group of young Christian fathers and husbands representing various congregations and denominations within a given community may get together at a coffee shop or brewery on a weekly basis. As a men’s group, they may discuss books about being a better Christian man and watch videos about being a better husband and father. To be sure, these are important conversations. There is a place for exhorting Christian men (and all men) to live into their obligations and for having honest discussion with other men about a Christian man’s responsibilities in church, in the home, and in other areas of life.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, I have seen churches hold weekly bacon-and-egg-breakfast men’s Bible studies, host car shows, attempt to decorate the church and fellowship halls in more ‘manly’ décor, and even serve beer for congregational clean up events.

Yet, as a participant in a number of these community Christian men’s groups over a period of years, it has been my experience that these conversations do not often begin and develop from the starting point of the Christian man’s identity in Christ. Instead, these conversations many times begin and develop from the concept of ‘authentic manhood’ and one’s identity as a man.<sup>2</sup> The talks often presuppose a particular masculine identity and cultural images of masculinity. The danger is that such a conversation runs the risk of leaving the Christian man looking to, striving for, and trusting in a certain image and identity of an ideal Christian man in a way that eclipses the Christian man’s chief identity as one who is redeemed by and baptized into Christ Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, at the conclusion of such a conversation, one can often observe that the discussion revolves around what men ‘ought’ to be doing as husbands and fathers without giving equal attention to what Christ ‘bought’ for men who try hard and still fall short. As a result, many men’s ministry initiatives can be heavy on moral exhortation and light on grace. Due to this lack of theological clarity, such initiatives can unintentionally leave men searching for and relying on their own inner strength and self-contrived identities. This can leave Christian men denouncing the value of

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<sup>2</sup> See *A Man and His Marriage*, Authentic Manhood—33 the Series (Little Rock, AR: Authentic Manhood, 2014). The introduction chapter is titled “Authentic Manhood.” Other volumes in the series include *A Man and His Design*, *A Man and His Story*, *A Man and His Traps*, *A Man and His Work*, and *A Man and His Family*.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 6:3–11. St. Paul then speaks about the significance of this baptismal identity in Rom 8:1, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references will be from *The Holy Bible*. English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

vulnerability along with anything that displays their inability, insufficiency, and inadequacy—that is to say, their human weakness. Men can then be ill-equipped for the challenges and sufferings they will inevitably face in their various callings and stations in life. A lack of theological clarity can unwittingly place men on an internal pendulum that swings from pride to despair<sup>4</sup> and does not fully center them with the good news and the comforting knowledge of their ultimate identity as those forgiven and redeemed in Christ.

What is needed is a more balanced approach to Christian men’s ministry that does not back down from speaking about the Christian man’s role in the church and his vocational responsibilities as husband and father, but that also begins clearly from the starting point of one’s identity in Christ as a baptized child of God and remains centered in the grace of God in Jesus. What is needed is an approach rooted in God’s strength in Christ for the Christian man that leaves room for owning and confessing spiritual weakness, inability, and insufficiency while also receiving daily the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. What is needed is a men’s ministry that more adequately helps men bear the cross of a life in Christ. This thesis presents one possible approach toward a more fruitful men’s ministry initiative by bringing St. Paul’s gospel of ‘strength in weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13 into conversation with Martin Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bryan Wolfmueller, *Has American Christianity Failed?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016). Men may feel pride when things are going well, and they are ‘doing it right.’ Conversely, men may feel despair when things are not going well and they ‘mess up.’

## **1.1 The Current State of Men's Participation in the American Christian Church and Efforts to Reverse a Trend**

Participation of men in the American Christian Church has lagged behind that of women for some time.<sup>5</sup> In the categories of church attendance, frequency of and participation in prayer, Scripture study, and religious education groups, women more consistently partake.<sup>6</sup> In reaction to the data, George Barna even concluded, "Women are the backbone of the Christian congregations in America."<sup>7</sup> John Eldredge, author of *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, went so far as to ask and answer the following question about Christian men and church: "What is a Christian man? Don't listen to what is said, look at what you find there. There is no doubt about it. You'd have to admit a Christian man is . . . bored."<sup>8</sup> Before Eldredge, Billy Sunday cried out, "The

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<sup>5</sup> See Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, "Religious Landscape Study: Gender Composition" at <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/gender-composition/>, Accessed 4-15-2020. See also "20 Years of Surveys Show Key Differences in the Faith of America's Men and Women" in Research Releases in *Faith and Christianity* from Barna Group, August 1, 2011 at [barna.com/research/20-years-of-surveys-show-key-differences-in-the-faith-of-americas-men-and-women](http://barna.com/research/20-years-of-surveys-show-key-differences-in-the-faith-of-americas-men-and-women). Also, David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, Revised and Updated (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011). In the beginning of his book, Murrow wonders, "What if church is built to reach women, children, and elderly folks" (5)? A page later he asserts, "The more I study churches, the more I come to believe the modern church system is engineered to reach women" (6).

<sup>6</sup> On page 18 of *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, Murrow cites the following statistics from George Barna regarding the participation of women compared to men in American Christian churches: 57 percent more likely to participate in adult Sunday school, 56 percent more likely to hold a leadership position at a church (not including the role of pastor), 54 percent more likely to participate in a small group, 46 percent more likely to disciple others, 39 percent more likely to have a devotional time or quiet time, 33 percent more likely to volunteer for a church, 29 percent more likely to read the Bible, 29 percent more likely to share faith with others, 23 percent more likely to donate to a church, and 16 percent more likely to pray.

<sup>7</sup> Barna Research Online, "Women are the Backbone of Christian Congregations in America," March 6, 2000. [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org). Murrow includes this Barna quote on page 20 in *Why Men Hate Going to Church*.

<sup>8</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart Revised and Updated: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 8.

Lord save us from off-handed, flabby-cheeked . . . effeminate, ossified, three-carat Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

Efforts have been made to reverse this apparent trend<sup>10</sup> by starting men’s societies, forming men’s groups and Bible studies, embarking upon men’s retreats, and even evangelizing men through sports.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, the YMCA and the Promise Keeper organizations were started within various strands of the American Christian Church to appeal to men and cultivate certain perceived or desired male characteristics and understandings of masculinity.<sup>12</sup> In some instances, the effort to infuse the backbone of Christian congregations in America with a greater number of men also involved branding Christianity with a certain ‘muscular’ or ‘masculine’ tone.<sup>13</sup> In these instances, the effort to make Christianity more appealing to men seems to be

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<sup>9</sup> Molly Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?” *New York Times Magazine* January 6, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11punk-t.html>. For more on Billy Sunday and his promotion of ‘muscular’ Christianity see Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How American Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 17–18.

<sup>10</sup> One notable example is the “Art of Manliness” group. See their website at [artofmanliness.com](http://artofmanliness.com). Also, see their book by Brett McKay and Kate McKay, *Muscular Christianity: The Relationship Between Men and Faith* Kindle Edition (Jenks, OK: Semper Virilis Publishing, 2018). The McKays promote a ‘manly,’ ‘muscular,’ Christian ethos in response to a perceived feminization of Christianity. Along the way they explore the origins and history of the ‘muscular’ Christianity movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian England and its subsequent influence in America.

<sup>11</sup> See Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also James A. Mathisen, “Reviving ‘Muscular’ Christianity: Gill Dodds and the Institutionalization of Sport Evangelism,” *Sociological Focus* Vol 23, no 3 August (1990): 233–49.

<sup>12</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 10, 72.

<sup>13</sup> In *Jesus and John Wayne* Du Mez makes a compelling case that white American evangelicalism can now be identified less by theological distinctives and more by the culture it sells (7). She demonstrates that this militant and patriarchal masculine culture has made deep inroads into mainline Christianity through religious merchandizing (7–8).

driven by a perceived feminization of the American Christian Church<sup>14</sup> and the broader American culture.

This intentional effort of promoting a kind of ‘muscular’ Christianity to address a perceived feminization of the American Christian Church gained traction among evangelical Christian churches in the latter half of the twentieth century. A recognizable tide of ‘muscular’ Christianity has swept through American evangelical churches beginning especially in the nineteen-nineties and continuing into the new millennium. The predominant messengers of this evangelical ‘muscular’ tide have been the Promise Keepers, John Eldredge, and Mark Driscoll.

With their original message the Promise Keepers presented a kind of ‘soft masculine,’<sup>15</sup> ‘muscular’ Christianity to encourage men not to vacate their God-given roles as husbands, fathers, and sons, but rather to ‘lean’ into them with integrity, sensitivity, love, and service. John Eldredge, on the other hand, presents a type of ‘counter-masculinity’ to the Promise Keepers by setting men loose on an inner adventure to discover their ‘wild heart’; one that is exemplified in Hollywood action

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<sup>14</sup> Or a “de-masculinization” of Christianity and the American Christian Church. For instance, John Eldredge, in his book, *Wild at Heart*, says this about Christianity, the American Christian Church, and masculinity: “Christianity, as it currently exists, has done damage to masculinity. When all is said and done, I think most men in the church believe that God put them on the earth to be a good boy. The problem with men, we are told, is that they don’t know how to keep their promises, be spiritual leaders, talk to their wives, or raise their children. But, if they will try real hard they can reach the lofty summit of becoming . . . a nice guy.” See Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> With the latest ‘rebranding’ of Promise Keepers led by CEO Ken Harrison, the organization appears to have ‘hardened’ this ‘soft-masculine’ message with an emphasis on being ‘Servant-Kings.’ In addition, the organization seems to have taken a ‘wild’ turn, akin to Eldredge and his ‘wild at heart’ masculine Christian message. See Harrison’s book, *Rise of the Servant Kings: What the Bible Says about Being a Man* (New York: Multnomah, 2019).

movies and certain cultural depictions of boyhood. Finally, Mark Driscoll promotes a ‘de-sissified,’ ‘muscular’ Christianity that emphasizes the ‘macho’ in a Billy Sunday-esque way. Though differing in style and emphasis, all three of these late twentieth to early twenty-first century American evangelical ‘muscular’ Christian approaches embrace a shared goal of resisting a perceived feminization of the American Christian Church and broader American culture. Holding onto that shared goal, they pursue different paths of evangelizing men with a Christian message while catering to a certain biblical interpretation of masculinity and manhood.

## **1.2 The Promise Keepers Movement and ‘Soft Masculine’ Christianity**

Started in 1990 by ex-college football coach Bill McCartney, the Promise Keepers movement began with a mission to “strengthen and equip every man to live with integrity.”<sup>16</sup> This conservative evangelical Christian parachurch organization envisions a “new movement of men” aimed at helping them “become who we’re created to be, knowing our identity, purpose, and destiny in Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

Promise Keepers gained traction by cultivating “a massive demographic of self-consciously male Christians—mostly evangelical men who conceptualized their faith deliberately around their gender.”<sup>18</sup> Promise Keepers was able to gain in popularity by

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<sup>16</sup> See [promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/](http://promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/) accessed 4-15-2020.

<sup>17</sup> [promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/](http://promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/) accessed 4-15-2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ryan Harper, “New Frontiers: Wild at Heart and Post-Promise Keeper Evangelical Manhood” in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* Volume 24, issue 1 Spring (2012): 97.



appealing to an apparent appetite for a Christian message that spoke specifically to men, or at least to certain conceptions of manhood and masculinity.<sup>19</sup> The Promise Keepers message calls men to embrace, rather than abandon, their unique God-given callings and stations in life.

For the Promise Keepers, masculinity is examined and used as a vehicle to proclaim the duties of men based on a conservative biblical reading of the Scriptures and proclamation of the basic doctrines of Christianity.<sup>20</sup> As one commentator observed, “Masculinity became an object of intentional scrutiny, the y-axis of spiritual discipline for husbands, fathers, and sons.”<sup>21</sup> By approaching the topic of Christian vocation through the lens of masculinity, the Promise Keepers hoped to appeal to men in order to evangelize them and exhort them in Christ to embody a Christian ethic in service to others, especially to their families.

One frequent observer of Promise Keepers rallies notes that the attendees seemed to embrace a kind of “soft-boiled masculinity that empowers them to be more sensitive and caring as husbands and fathers.”<sup>22</sup> In the original movement, this ‘soft masculinity’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In his case study of Promise Keepers, John Bartkowski identifies four models for Christian manhood promoted in the movement’s speeches and literature: The Rational Patriarch, the Expressive Egalitarian, the Tender Warrior, and the Multicultural Man. He observes that speakers often operated within different models, even in the same speech. One then might wonder if the apparent fluidity between the models ever led Bartkowski to question the adequacy of them? See Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> See current Promise Keepers CEO Ken Harrison’s recent example of this approach in his book, *Rise of the Servant Kings: What the Bible Says about Being a Man*.

<sup>21</sup> Harper, “New Frontiers,” 97.

<sup>22</sup> Melanie Heath, “Soft-Boiled Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender and Racial Ideologies in the Promise Keepers Movement,” *Gender & Society* 17, no. 3 June (2003): 441.

is heralded primarily as a reaction to more aggressive, cavalier portraits of men as husbands, fathers, and sons. Yet, in the current Promise Keepers movement, that “soft masculinity” has given way to the “rise of the servant kings.”<sup>24</sup>

The Promise Keepers organization today is a rebranding of the original movement founded by McCartney. Now led by CEO Ken Harrison, the revamped movement is about “Building on the Past to Redefine the Future.”<sup>25</sup> The current Promise Keepers movement still helps men live with integrity and “fulfill their destinies as godly husbands, fathers, and leaders.”<sup>26</sup> However, it is now “a movement reignited”<sup>27</sup> under Harrison’s leadership to reach the next generation.

In his book *Rise of the Servant Kings*, Harrison explores manhood from a biblical perspective. For Harrison, the hallmark of being a man is accountability—“being accountable to God for your marriage, for the state of your children, for providing for your family, and for protecting your family and anyone else who may need it.”<sup>28</sup> He concludes that a real man is one who is in love with and obedient to God and so acts in love toward others. For Harrison, a Servant King is one who is in love with Jesus and

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<sup>23</sup> Du Mez notes that many evangelicals in the original Promise Keepers era of the 1990s sought a middle ground between a ‘macho’ masculinity and a ‘softer’ modern one they found lacking. According to Du Mez, the popular answer was ‘soft patriarchy’. This ‘soft patriarchy’ was also expressed in the popular ‘tender warrior’ model for Christian manhood. See *Jesus and John Wayne*, 152, 159.

<sup>24</sup> This phrase is borrowed from the title of Ken Harrison’s book, *Rise of the Servant Kings*.

<sup>25</sup> [promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/](http://promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/) accessed 5-21-2020.

<sup>26</sup> [promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/](http://promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/) accessed 5-21-2020.

<sup>27</sup> [promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/](http://promisekeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/) accessed 5-21-2020.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison, *Rise of the Servant Kings*, 116.

whose outward actions are simply an expression of that love. He claims that, according to the Bible, a real man is proactive, courageous, and humble.<sup>29</sup>

The problem, according to Harrison, is that the man's sinful nature because of the Fall pulls him toward passivity, cowardice, and arrogance.<sup>30</sup> The sinful nature pulls a man toward himself in pride. On the contrary, a servant king is a humble man who places the needs of others above his own.<sup>31</sup> Harrison believes that "humility is the very nature of a servant king and is the foundation of Christianity; everything else is simply a symptom of it."<sup>32</sup> The solution then is to submit and surrender to God alone through the Holy Spirit in order to "get to know Him [God] and what He wants from us."<sup>33</sup> The Holy Spirit then works in the life of a man to teach him how to become a servant king. A true servant king is one reborn by the Holy Spirit in the image of Jesus, *the* servant-king.

According to the Promise Keepers, many men have vacated their roles as husbands, fathers, and sons according to a biblical picture of those vocations. The lack of attendance and involvement in the American Christian Church by men is largely due to

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<sup>29</sup> Harrison, *Rise of the Servant Kings*, 7–8. Scott Keith echoes some of these characteristics from a confessional Lutheran perspective in his book, *Being Dad: Father as a Picture of God's Grace* Second Edition (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Press, 2015). He defines masculinity as "a male's quiet confidence and strength of character that finds expression in graciousness" (21). He addresses fathers in his book and argues that an appropriate picture of "dad" is one who is a locus of grace and forgiveness within the household. And so, he believes that masculine men are "capable, strong, confident, and gracious" (23). His primary example of a "masculine dad" is the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Keith believes the father's compassion, kindness, and graciousness is a sign of strength that inspires awe and respect (32).

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, *Rise of the Servant Kings*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison, *Rise of the Servant Kings*, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Rise of the Servant Kings*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison, *Rise of the Servant Kings*, 8.

their abdication of a spiritual role in the household. The approach then for the Promise Keepers is to ask and answer questions of manhood, fatherhood, sonship, and husbandry according to a biblical perspective. In so doing, the Promise Keepers are convicted that true 'muscular' Christianity takes the form of loving, vocational service in the home, the church, and the world.

Shortly after the decline of the original Promise Keepers Movement in 1997, other evangelical Christian men began writing and speaking about masculinity within the American Christian context. Although taking different approaches, McCartney and others shared a concern regarding the perceived feminization of American culture and American Christianity.<sup>34</sup> The most popular of these evangelical post-Promise Keeper voices was John Eldredge.

### **1.3 John Eldredge and a 'Wild at Heart' Christianity**

In 2001, John Eldredge wrote *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*.<sup>35</sup> In the book, he describes a God-given 'wild' masculinity evidenced in Hollywood<sup>36</sup> and

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<sup>34</sup> Ironically, observers of Promise Keeper rallies were often left with the impression that men were being feminized. Some believed that "the men of the Promise Keeper movement were becoming good (American, consumerist, domestic) Christian women." See Harper, "New Frontiers," 99. See also W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Husbands and Fathers* (Chicago: University Press, 2004). Also, Jennie Chapman, "Tender Warriors: Muscular Christians, Promise Keepers, and the Crisis of Masculinity in Left Behind," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no 3 Fall (2009). Chapman argues that the paradoxical display of masculinity (as expressed in her title, "Tender Warriors") in the male characters of the LaHaye-Jenkins *Left Behind* series reveals not only ambivalent ideas of gender in the prophetic hermeneutic of dispensationalism, but also within conservative evangelicalism.

<sup>35</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*. Harper suggests that in *Wild at Heart* Eldredge makes two turns away from Promise Keeper rhetoric regarding masculine Christianity: "the descriptive turn—Eldredge's rejection of the PK's prescriptive, performative constructions of manhood in favour of a descriptive, essentialist masculinity; and the evidentiary turn—specifically Eldredge's employment of Hollywood and boyhood as

among some cultural depictions of boyhood. He calls for men to embark upon an adventure of self-discovery to find that ‘wild’ masculinity.

Eldredge suggests that men learn to live according to the natural desires and motivations of their “deep” and “elusive” hearts to find true fulfillment and be all that God intends them to be. He points to three core desires that every man possesses from creation and that ought to be pursued: battle, adventure, and beauty.<sup>37</sup> Eldredge argues the problem is that Adam’s deep heart was lost when confined to the Garden of Eden. Adam was made from the earth itself—“born from the outback, from the untamed part of creation”<sup>38</sup>—and then brought into the Garden of Eden. Possessing an inner need for adventure, exploration, and danger, Eldredge believes that Adam was restless. For

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authoritative prooftexts to an essential masculinity.” See Harper, “New Frontiers,” 98. Yet, in the Harrison “reboot” of Promise Keepers, it appears that Eldredge’s ‘wild heart’ emphasis has rubbed off. See, for instance, the following line on the “About Us” page of the Promise Keepers official website: “Promise Keepers is here today to reunite, rebuild, re-imagine, and inspire the *hearts* of men” ([promiskeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/](http://promiskeepers.org/promise-keepers/about-us/) accessed 5-21-2020, emphasis, mine). Other works describing American Christian subcultures that appear to imbibe the ‘wild’ masculinity of which Eldredge speaks are Marie W. Dallam, *Cowboy Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Rich Remsberg, *Riders for God: The Story of a Christian Motorcycle Gang* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> In *Wild at Heart*, Eldredge cites the following movies to make his point: *Braveheart*, *Flying Tigers*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *Shane*, *High Noon*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Top Gun*, the *Die Hard* films, and *Gladiator*. He believes these films are movies that men love and that reveal what a man’s heart longs for (11).

<sup>37</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 9–10.

<sup>38</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 4.

Eldredge, Adam's alleged restlessness in the Garden is the reason why "boys have never been at home indoors, and men have had an insatiable longing to explore."<sup>39</sup>

Eldredge then goes further to help men understand why God made them as creatures who long to pursue adventure, battle, and beauty. He explores the "wounds" of men that hinder those pursuits and lead them to self-centered, misguided pursuits for adventure, battle, and beauty.<sup>40</sup> He points men to the healing of those wounds found in God alone.<sup>41</sup> And Eldredge takes his readers on a "safari of the heart to recover a life of freedom, passion, and adventure."<sup>42</sup> Along the way he presents a rugged, adventurous masculinity rooted in the heart of man at creation;<sup>43</sup> a masculinity he believes has been lost and needs to be rediscovered.

To make his case biblically for this "wild at heart masculinity," Eldredge points to Samson<sup>44</sup> as well as to Jesus.<sup>45</sup> He claims what men need most is permission—"Permission to be what we are—men made in God's image. Permission to live from the

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<sup>39</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 4. Following Eldredge's logic, one might conclude he is suggesting that God made a mistake by putting Adam in the Garden of Eden.

<sup>40</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, chapter four ("The Wound").

<sup>41</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, chapter seven ("Healing the Wound").

<sup>42</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, xi.

<sup>43</sup> Even within evangelicalism there was no lack of theological criticisms regarding Eldredge's view of masculinity. One critic alleged that Eldredge neglected the reality of sin and accused him of presenting an unbiblical view of God as a 'risk-taker' that does not have full knowledge of the future. Calvin College professors Mark Mulder and James K.A. Smith took issue with Eldredge rooting his 'warrior' notion of masculinity in a theology of creation, insisting that the things Eldredge attributes to the created essence of men and women, the Bible attributes to the Fall. See Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 175–76.

<sup>44</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 28. Although Eldredge does not promote a 'macho man' image, he does believe that the lion-killing, Philistine-pummeling, jawbone-of-a-donkey wielding Samson is a portrait of 'wild at heart' masculinity that embraces adventure, battle, and beauty.

<sup>45</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 29–31. To be sure, Eldredge mentions the temple clearing scene in John 2 and the warrior images of Jesus in Revelation 19. Yet, he points especially to Jesus' *resolve* and *courage* in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22, emphasis, mine).

heart and not from the list of ‘should’ and ‘ought to’ that has left so many tired and bored.”<sup>46</sup> Others, such as Mark Driscoll, have since taken up the torch of Eldredge’s male, ‘wild’ heart.

### **1.4 Mark Driscoll and a ‘De-Sissified’ Christianity**

During Mark Driscoll’s pastorate at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, many of the members did not claim that their favorite movie was *Amazing Grace* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*; they would say, “*Fight Club*.”<sup>47</sup> The Neo-Calvinist, Reformed pastor and former leader of Mars Hill quickly rose to fame and popularity as a ‘celebrity pastor’ by combining conservative, Reformed, Neo-Calvinist Christianity with his brash style. Before the decline and eventual dissolution of Mars Hill in 2014, Driscoll rose quickly to ‘superstar’ status.

Driscoll became known as the bold leader of New Calvinism who attempted to rebrand not only Mars Hill, but also the American evangelical culture from “the triumph of that friendly, fuzzy Jesus” to “hard-core Reformed preaching” that emphasized the sinfulness of man and the sovereignty of God.<sup>48</sup> He disassociated himself and Mars Hill from the “weepy” and “wimpy” liberal and mainstream evangelical churches, “singing

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<sup>46</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, xi.

<sup>47</sup> Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”

<sup>48</sup> Jessica Johnson, “Under Conviction: ‘Real Men’ Reborn on Spiritual and Cinematic Battlefields,” *Feminist Studies* Vol. 43, no. 1 (2017): 42. Through her extensive ethnographic work with Mars Hill, Johnson concludes that while Driscoll was pastor the Church promoted a militarized and sexualized visual culture, even engaging in ‘air war’ and ‘ground war’ efforts to promote ‘authentic’ embodiments of biblical femininity and masculinity (44). See a more extensive presentation of her ethnographic work as a participant-observer at Mars Hill in her book, *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll’s Evangelical Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

prom songs to a Jesus who is presented as a wuss who took a beating and spent a lot of time putting product in his hair.”<sup>49</sup>

Driscoll had a reputation as a “cussing pastor” and presented provocative sermon titles like “Biblical Oral Sex.”<sup>50</sup> In his preaching and teaching, Driscoll promoted a kind of ‘wild’ masculine, ‘muscular’ Christianity akin to Eldredge’s.<sup>51</sup> He was known for preaching on gender, sex, male headship, and generally promoting a kind of ‘muscular’ Christian ethos.<sup>52</sup> He saw it as his calling to preach to men and save them, particularly young men, “from an American Protestantism that has emasculated Christ and driven men from church pews.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, Driscoll embraced a perceived feminization of the church as the key problem. His ‘muscular’ Christian approach is then the proposed solution.

Driscoll and his staff framed the Christian life for men in terms of battle readiness, even hosting “men’s training days.” The Church also held other events to promote their biblical gender interpretations such as seminars titled, “Biblical Gender and Sexuality,” “Women’s Training Day: Christian Womanhood in a Feminist Culture,”

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<sup>49</sup> Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”

<sup>50</sup> Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”

<sup>51</sup> Additional examples of Eldredge’s ‘wild’ masculinity include two books by Eric Ludy: *God’s Gift to Women: Discovering the Lost Greatness of Masculinity* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003) and *The Bravehearted Gospel: The Truth is Worth Fighting For* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008). James Dobson, Eldredge’s former boss, also published a Christian book on masculinity and manhood the same year (2001) as Eldredge’s first edition of *Wild at Heart*. See James Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys: Practical Advice and Encouragement for Those Shaping the Next Generation of Men* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Jessica Johnson, “‘Muscular’ Christianity Not to Blame for Driscoll: A Response,” *Religion Dispatches* August 28, 2014, <http://religiondispatches.org/don't-blame-muscular-christianity-for-driscoll-fiasco-a-response/>. Accessed 5-26-2020.

<sup>53</sup> Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”



and “Reforming Female Sexuality.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the teaching of biblical, complementarian gender and sexual freedom within the confines of marriage was reinforced with visual and explicit sermons.<sup>55</sup>

At one time, Driscoll drew a huge following as a “Billy Sunday with more Calvin and more swearing . . . preaching a brash, ‘de-sissified,’ Reformed Christianity to thousands per week.”<sup>56</sup> The connection with Billy Sunday is echoed by Jessica Johnson in her ethnographic study of Mars Hill and Driscoll. She believes that Driscoll’s preaching on evangelical masculinity at the turn of the twenty-first century, and during a time of deindustrialization, echoes the preaching of revivalist Billy Sunday at the turn of the twentieth century under the impact of industrialization. In both situations, Johnson observes that the men spoke to their times. Driscoll spoke to the feminism he perceived was to blame for the disempowerment of men at work, war, and home.<sup>57</sup>

Driscoll’s embrace of a ‘macho’ caricature of Jesus<sup>58</sup> guided his message and ministry. It is the image that he sought to model and to have other men model. A

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson, “Under Conviction,” 43.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, “Under Conviction,” 43.

<sup>56</sup> Harper, “New Frontiers,” 106. Du Mez mentions that none other than Billy Graham also shared this affinity for a de-sissified, manly Jesus. See *Jesus and John Wayne*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Biblical Porn*, 60.

<sup>58</sup> In part 2 of his *Vintage Jesus* sermon series, “How Human Was Jesus?”, Driscoll stated emphatically, “The first thing that I want to tell you is that Jesus was a dude.” See Johnson, *Biblical Porn*, 44. He continues: “He was a carpenter, so he may have been in fairly decent shape, callouses on his hands for swinging a hammer, there were no power tools in that day so he was a manual laborer, he walked a lot so he may have been lean and thin and rugged” (44).

'muscular' portrait of Jesus who has "a commitment to make someone bleed" and in the Book of Revelation is heralded as "a prize fighter with a tattoo down His leg."<sup>59</sup>

### **1.5 A Distorted 'Muscular' Christianity, the Unintentional Inward Pursuit for God, and the Eclipse of Christ**

Although Eldredge's and Driscoll's 'muscular' Christian take differs from that presented by the Promise Keepers,<sup>60</sup> all these contemporary, American evangelical Christian portraits emphasize 'muscular' Christian characteristics and biblical masculinity.<sup>61</sup> The aim of all three is to make more male followers of Jesus, de-feminize the American Christian Church, attract more men to local congregations, exhort men to live within God's plan for marriage, and encourage Christian men to embrace their vocational responsibilities as husbands and fathers. The Promise Keepers movement, especially, is largely a moral exhortation to men to stand up and live into their obligations as fathers and husbands. As modern-day expressions of the late-nineteenth

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<sup>59</sup> Watts, "Mark Driscoll's Badass Jesus."

<sup>60</sup> In an online post titled "Pussified Nation," Driscoll himself distinguishes between his message and that of the Promise Keepers: "We could get every man, real man as opposed to pussified James Dobson knock-off crying *Promise Keeping* homoerotic worship loving mama's boy sensitive emasculated neutered exact male replica evangellyfish, and have a conference in a phone booth." See Johnson, *Biblical Porn*, 52, emphasis, mine.

<sup>61</sup> For a more nuanced view of biblical masculinity within the context of the first-century Greco-Roman world, see Brittany Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Wilson studies Zecharias, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Paul, and Jesus within Luke-Acts to show that these men would have been considered unmanly according to first-century Greco-Roman standards for elite masculinity. Their suffering was evidence of a loss of bodily control and a violation of physical boundaries. Wilson then contends that such portraits refigure notions of power and masculinity within the ancient world.

century 'muscular' Christian movement in Victorian England,<sup>62</sup> all three portraits overemphasize masculine traits and appeal to a masculine Christian identity to achieve their goals. Eldredge and Driscoll even stress a kind of 'wild', 'muscular' masculinity for the Christian man.

These three contemporary American evangelical approaches differ from the Apostle Paul's proclamation of Christ crucified and raised as his identity and strength regardless of his own 'weakness' or inability to perform the Christian life.<sup>63</sup> Paul does not point his hearers to themselves in any way for their sense of identity. Neither does he point them to their own inward performance but always to the 'performance' of God in Christ at work for them, in them, and through them. For Paul, Christ is first and foremost the Christian's identity. Christ is the Christian's 'strength in weakness.' It is a very Christ-centered message.

In contrast, Eldredge leads men on a misguided *inward* journey for the 'muscular' Christian life when he commissions them to embark upon a "safari of the heart"<sup>64</sup> to discover their 'wild' hearts and pursue adventure, battle, and beauty.<sup>65</sup> He wants them to find true fulfillment in life according to their natural desires and

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<sup>62</sup> For a survey of the origins and history of 'muscular' Christianity, see John J. MacAloon, "Introduction: Muscular Christianity after 150 Years," in *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Abingdon, VA: Routledge, 2008), xi–xxiv; Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, and Donald E. Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>63</sup> See 1 Cor 1:23, 2:2; 2 Cor 12:9, 13:4–5.

<sup>64</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, xi.

<sup>65</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 9–10.

motivations within their “deep” and “elusive” hearts.<sup>66</sup> This is how Eldredge suggests that Christian men become all that God intends them to be.

Whether one subscribes to Eldredge’s biblical view of manhood and ‘wild heart’ masculinity or not, his suggested solution for treating the ‘wounds’ of men and addressing the self-centered pursuits of adventure, battle, and beauty is—in the end—more of the same. He calls men *deeper into themselves* to solve the problem that exists within them. How different are the words and experiences of the Apostle Paul who, when beset by his own ‘wounds’ and human weakness, was drawn *outside* of himself to receive the all-sufficient grace of God in Christ Jesus.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, Driscoll simply calls Christian men to embrace and embody a certain macho-masculine persona in the pattern and following the example of his self-described ‘macho’ portrait of Jesus.<sup>68</sup> Along with this, he makes an appeal that men and women adopt a complementarian view of marriage and subscribe to various gender roles.

Setting aside agreements or disagreements over his views of manhood and his ‘muscular’ Christian take, Driscoll’s approach, largely influenced by his interpretation of the *Sitz im Leben* of a perceived effeminate American culture, leads him to overemphasize masculinity and ‘muscular’ Christian traits. This unwittingly results in a Christian message that in effect eclipses Christ and leads men to question the

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<sup>66</sup> Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 9–10.

<sup>67</sup> 2 Cor 12:9.

<sup>68</sup> Part 2 of Driscoll’s *Vintage Jesus* sermon series, “How Human Was Jesus?” and Watts, “Mark Driscoll’s Badass Jesus.”

authenticity of their own Christian faith by asking first, “Am I even a ‘real’ Christian man?” rather than, “Is Christ Jesus my Lord?” or, “Am I in Christ?”

Particularly the Eldredge and Driscoll portraits of the Christian man also tend to disparage notions of human weakness<sup>69</sup> and view human suffering as nothing more than failure at best and divine castigation at worst.<sup>70</sup> Such an emphasis leaves the Christian man *looking to himself* as a source of hope for the Christian Life. This *inward* journey leads to a fixation on one’s self—one’s self-image, status, and ambition—to the exclusion of God, the ‘other,’ and to the ultimate eclipse of Christ.

One might then ask what role descriptive (and even prescriptive) masculine portraits should play in the identity of the Christian man for the purpose of drawing him into the church and into further embrace of his God-given vocations. Can such an emphasis unintentionally lead the Christian man further into himself in misguided self-reliance rather than looking first outside of himself, to Christ, for his ultimate God-given

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<sup>69</sup> By ‘weakness’ here I have in mind what I suspect to be the prevailing cultural meaning: inadequacy, incompetency, insufficiency, vulnerability, and the surrendering of one’s own self-reliance. In a conversation with a pastor and seminary professor, the individual gave a personal anecdote that illustrates the unwillingness in some Christian circles to admit vulnerability and weakness. He had just preached a sermon on 2 Corinthians 12 and had a woman come up to him afterwards and quote correctly the thesis of the sermon: “In weakness we discover the sustaining power of God’s grace and so are disabused of our sense of self-reliance.” According to the seminary professor and pastor, the woman then said to him, “I got nothing [from it].”

<sup>70</sup> In this way, ‘muscular’ Christianity is a form of the so-called prosperity gospel, with the latter inappropriately identifying health, wealth, and success as indicators of divine blessing and favor. Conversely, suffering, pain, trial, and tribulation are signs of divine displeasure and judgment. For a helpful survey of the origins, history, and influence of the prosperity Gospel on the contemporary American Christian Church, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and John S. Haller, *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Press, 2012).

identity as a redeemed child of God? Furthermore, Eldredge in particular takes men on an *inward* journey of ‘wild’ masculine self-discovery in a way that confuses and distorts the Christian man’s sense of identity. In what way do these twenty-first American evangelical expressions of ‘muscular’, masculine Christianity stem the tide of ‘men hating the church’ by leading them to cultivate an image and identity from within their own inherent masculine traits rather than from their God-given image and identity in Christ?<sup>71</sup>

Such an inward pursuit and embracing of ‘muscular’ traits eclipses Christ as the Christian’s true source of hope: Christ, who was “crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.”<sup>72</sup> These deficient ‘muscular’ Christian emphases have also led the American Church to look primarily to the personal strengths of pastors—leadership

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<sup>71</sup> In this way, D.A. Carson would classify these ‘muscular’ Christian expressions as examples of *Group Two* of contemporary American evangelicals as he presents the model in his book, *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10–13* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984): “*Group Two* is aggressive, active, triumphalistic. Not a little of the American can-do mentality is mixed with it. It gains a substantial hearing, expects to see victory and joy in its followers, and harnesses enormous energy and many skills to the task of promoting its understanding of the gospel . . . In its most virulent forms, *Group Two* suffers from an over-realized eschatology—just as the Corinthians did. *Group Two* Christians so magnify the many promises of God for health, prosperity, and victory that they reflect little on what the Bible also says about suffering, persecution, steadfastness in defeat, and death” (62, emphasis, original). In *Jesus and John Wayne*, Du Mez’s articulation of the seventy-five-year history of American evangelicalism supports Carson’s *Group Two* analysis. She argues that American evangelicalism has become its own cultural and political movement driven by a religious culture of consumerism and a staunch commitment to Christian nationalism (4–8). She demonstrates that this cultural evangelicalism has distinctive identity markers that go beyond theology. One such marker, she concludes, is a militant, patriarchal, even ‘muscular’ masculinity (3). This thesis examines the theological implications of uncritically embracing this masculine American evangelical identity marker.

<sup>72</sup> 2 Cor 13:4.

skills, courage, rhetorical eloquence, charisma, and a confident physical presence.<sup>73</sup> In many churches throughout America, the gifts of the individual pastor are raised to a high level of importance, as if the congregation's success (however that is measured) is dependent upon the personal abilities and strengths of the pastor.

Moreover, large congregations with numerous financial resources, growing budgets, and fully stocked staffs are often seen as a sign of strength and a place where more effective ministry can be done for the sake of God's Kingdom. Smaller congregations that might struggle to meet a budget, have only one or two (if any) full time staff members, and might be facing steady decline or even closure, are seen as weak and perhaps inefficient and ineffective at carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ.

In the church, it is not uncommon for God's people, both from pew and pulpit, to proclaim a gospel of prosperity or a 'muscular' theology of human strength, might, and power. Such theologies appear to downplay the idea of weakness and humility and instead locate one's hope and trust in things other than God in Christ, fixating attention on pursuits of identity, image, status, and ambition.

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<sup>73</sup> One example is Mark Driscoll himself. He rose quickly to 'celebrity pastor' status on the strength of his 'macho', brash style and his crass way of framing the Christian life with the topics of masculinity, femininity, and a complementarian view of marriage.

## **1.6 Toward a Robust ‘Muscular’ Christianity: St. Paul’s ‘Strength in Weakness’ Gospel in Second Corinthians 10–13 and Martin Luther’s ‘Theology of the Cross’**

Given these distorted presentations of ‘muscular’ Christianity, how then does a careful reading of the Apostle Paul’s ‘gospel of weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13 promote a ‘theology of the cross’<sup>74</sup> that challenges American evangelical ‘muscular’ attitudes that show disdain for notions of weakness and dependance on others in *favor* human strength and self-reliance? And how can this corrective be beneficial for Christian men’s ministry initiatives? These are the questions that drive the research for this Doctor of Ministry thesis.

The methodology to be employed will be a careful reading of St. Paul’s theme of ‘strength in weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13. The work of Timothy Savage<sup>75</sup> is especially helpful for understanding Paul’s theme in Second Corinthians and within the Greco-Roman context of first-century Corinth. Particularly important is Savage’s claim that the four-fold critique of Paul within the Corinthian Church, gleaned from 2

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<sup>74</sup> As an ordained minister of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, I am especially interested in how Paul’s ‘strength in weakness’ theme undergirds Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther articulates a ‘theology of the cross’ centered in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus that is juxtaposed to ‘theologies of glory’ that are centered in the works and abilities of human beings. Luther argues that, in Christ, God works through suffering and human weakness, insufficiency, inability, and inadequacy. For Luther, a ‘theology of the cross’ speaks to the struggles and sufferings of the individual in a way that theologies of worldly glory do not. According to Luther’s thought, the prosperity gospel and ‘muscular’ Christianity would be considered theologies of glory. See Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being A Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). See also Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* Second Edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Reginald Prenter, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

<sup>75</sup> Timothy B. Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).



Corinthians 10–13, is a culturally influenced critique that measured Paul and his ministry over and against ‘pop’ cultural expectations for public speakers as well as norms for self-pursuits of identity, image, and status.

According to Savage, Paul was up against a congregation whose religious notions had been influenced by the broader society in such a way that led them to build up themselves, rather than the church, boast in their own self-image rather than the image of God in Christ, pursue the accumulation of worldly wealth rather than seek first the Kingdom of God, and find power and strength in themselves rather than in the gospel of the self-emptying Jesus Christ and the ‘word of the cross’. A word of power that is made known in humility, service, suffering, and weakness.<sup>76</sup> In similar ways, the American Christian Church in the twenty-first century has been influenced by ‘super-apostle’ theologies of contemporary times<sup>77</sup> that may locate identity, image, status, prosperity, strength, power, and control in things other than God and in a way that draws one into oneself and further away from Christ crucified and a ‘word of the cross’.

In this Doctor of Ministry thesis, I will demonstrate how ‘muscular’ Christianity has impacted the American Christian Church and led it to embrace ‘muscular’, masculine expressions of the gospel of Jesus Christ, favoring individual, ecclesial, and

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<sup>76</sup> Helpful here is D.A. Carson’s idea that, in 2 Corinthians 10–13, “‘Weakness’ probably bears its broader sense, referring to a lack of strength in any respect. Paul is talking about Christians who for some reason have been brought to a spiritual low point, and who seem to have no reserves of strength to overcome temptation, doubt, seduction, and opposition, or to get on with the business of discipleship.” See Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*, 132.

<sup>77</sup> This thesis will demonstrate that the twenty-first century American evangelical distortion of ‘muscular’ Christianity is one such contemporary theology.

congregational strength, power, and control over a strength and power that is made known chiefly in the one who “was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.”<sup>78</sup> It is Christ crucified and risen—the ‘word of the cross’—that serves as the center of Paul’s ministry, the validation of his sufferings,<sup>79</sup> and his power in weakness.<sup>80</sup> As a remedy for a self-regarding church that is drawn *inward* and prone to self-boasting and fascination with markers of human strength and power, this thesis offers Martin Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ as a companion theology to Paul’s gospel of ‘strength in weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13.

### **1.7 Outline of the Thesis**

This Chapter has introduced the problem of distorted versions of a ‘muscular’, masculine Christianity, particularly within late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical Christianity. This has led to a captivity with notions of ‘muscular’ prosperity and the tendency to look inward for strength and power, especially in a culturally anxious time. It is suggested that the ministry of the Apostle Paul and his theme of ‘strength in weakness’ among the Corinthians, especially as articulated in 2 Corinthians 10–13, can be brought into conversation with Martin Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ as a more helpful ‘muscular’ Christianity.

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<sup>78</sup> 2 Cor 13:4.

<sup>79</sup> 2 Cor 11:16–29.

<sup>80</sup> 2 Cor 12:9.

The Second Chapter presents the original movement of ‘muscular’ Christianity, exploring its origins, history, and influence on American culture, the American Church, and the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical ‘muscular’ Christian portrayals outlined in Chapter One. Chapter Two suggests that the twenty-first century American Church and has been influenced by cultural ideas of strength, power, and prosperity that over-emphasize the strength and power of the individual.

The Third Chapter presents an exegetical reading of the Apostle Paul’s theme of ‘strength in weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13 within the Greco-Roman social-historical context of first century Corinth. In this chapter, contemporary Pauline scholarship will be brought into the conversation.

The Fourth Chapter presents one remedy to this current situation in Martin Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’. This chapter argues that Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ is a companion theology to Paul’s theme of ‘strength in weakness’ in that it recognizes, while one does not seek out suffering and struggle, God has not withdrawn his presence in such circumstances or situations of weakness. On the contrary, God is at work through the Holy Spirit to use even those experiences to draw us closer to God in Christ, to allow us to taste the sweetness of the gospel of Christ, to lead us to greater contentment in the ‘word of the cross’, and to make God’s power known in weakness. As the Apostle Paul says, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses,

insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”<sup>81</sup>

The Conclusion summarizes our findings and offers insights in four areas of parish life for rethinking and reimagining men’s ministry with a more robust proclamation of Paul’s ‘strength in weakness’ gospel accompanied by Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’. The four areas of parish ministry that will be explored are pastoral care, the church’s hymnody, liturgy, and sacred visual art.

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<sup>81</sup> 2 Cor 12:10.

## 2. 'Muscular' Christianity: Origins, History, and Influence

In many ways, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical 'muscular' Christian responses to the perceived feminization of the American Church and broader culture have their origins in the mid nineteenth century 'muscular' Christian response to the social and political ills of Victorian England. Though the two expressions arose in response to different cultural issues in two different continents and countries, the nineteenth century Victorian English 'muscular' Christian movement, like its contemporary American counterpart, shares a concern for a 'spiritually fit' masculine Christian man.

However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical 'muscular' Christian responses arose out of a concern for a loss of certain male traits and images as well as a fear of the feminization of American culture and the American Christian Church. The original movement was born of social, political, and class tensions because of English industrialization. Within these tensions there was a growing concern for the character of the English man. In response to these tensions, the Christian Socialists<sup>1</sup> acted.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the original movement in Victorian England (and its spread to America in the mid nineteenth century) began among the more politically and religiously liberal. Yet, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American 'revival' of the movement was among the politically and religiously conservative.

## **2.1 The ‘Muscular’ Christian Response to the Social and Political Ills of Mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century Victorian England**

In mid nineteenth century Victorian England, a group called the Chartists fought to gain political rights and influence for the working class. Dissatisfied with the social conditions in England at the time, the Chartists drafted the People’s Charter and listed six priorities for their social and political movement.<sup>2</sup> The group presented three petitions to the Parliament in 1839, 1842, and 1848, with each being rejected. Though the rejection of this last petition marked the end of Chartism, in some ways, it marked the beginning of a new movement, labeled by its critics as ‘muscular’ Christianity.

After the final rejection of their widely supported petition in 1848, the Chartist leaders in England were threatening physical violence. With the middle and upper classes in England on the defensive, a group of men called the Christian Socialists intervened both to address the Chartists and to represent their cause. The most influential of these men were F. D. Maurice, Thomas Hughes, and Charles Kingsley. These Christian Socialists were later labeled as the first ‘muscular’ Christians. They fought for the social cause of the Chartists to bring about improvements in living

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<sup>2</sup> “Chartists” in *Power, Politics, & Protest: The Growth of Political Rights in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* on <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/politics/g7/>. Accessed 7-20-19. The six priorities are as follows: 1. A vote for all men (over 21). 2. A secret ballot. 3. No property qualification to become a member of Parliament. 4. Payment for members of Parliament. 5. Electoral districts of equal size. 6. Annual elections for Parliament.

conditions.<sup>3</sup> Believing that industrialism was having a negative effect on English society, they attempted to give voice to social debates regarding gender, class, and imperial identity.<sup>4</sup>

The social and political context at the time was ripe for the 'muscular' ideas and program of Maurice, Hughes, and Kingsley. The connection between masculinity and social and economic power was alive in the minds of many marginalized men in Britain in the early to mid nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The Victorian English culture seemed too effeminate to some while Britain also began to feel discontent with the traditional roles of women. Men on the bottom rung of the social ladder expressed increasing impatience with problems they conceptualized in terms of gender. Women pushed against what they saw as repression of their natural abilities. And the men of the lower aristocracy were experiencing pressure from the middle classes. The result was an attack on both social and gender conditions and an attempt to fix some boundary or definition for both.<sup>6</sup> Kingsley, the primary champion of the 'muscular' Christian movement, believed

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<sup>3</sup> David Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral: Muscular Christianity and the Origins of Primal Manliness," in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 20.

<sup>6</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 20–21. Rosen adds that from about 1830 one can find writing in Britain with concerns about what is a manly man as well as what is a womanly woman. He makes his case by citing the Reform Bill of 1832 that gave power to the wealthier middle classes and may have encouraged more writings about gender and masculinity. He mentions that the debate over who should rule often devolved into a debate over who belonged to that privileged group called 'men'. He also mentions that the destabilizing of gender by the various social forces of the day and the pressure to recoup some notion of masculinity, can be seen most strikingly in a speech in favor of women's suffrage in 1848.

that the idea of masculinity held the key to solving England's social problems of that time.<sup>7</sup>

### **2.1.1 “Workers of England . . . you will be fit to be free”**

On April 10, 1848 Charles Kingsley, the Rector of Eversley in Hampshire and the newly published author of *The Saint's Tragedy*, addressed the Chartists as the “Workers of England.”<sup>8</sup> Expressing sympathy for their cause, Kingsley also urged for calm, for respect of property, and for faith in God. His statement, “Workers of England, be wise, and then you must be free, for you will be fit to be free,” encapsulates the central agenda of the Christian Socialist movement that also became a primary component of ‘muscular’ Christianity.<sup>9</sup> It was an effort to calm and educate the lower classes with the promise of rendering them ‘fit’ for freedom.

For Kingsley, the emphasis on being ‘fit’ included not only mental and spiritual fitness but also physical fitness. This ‘fitness’ program of the Christian Socialists turned ‘muscular’ Christians was expressed most clearly in the writings of Maurice, Hughes, and Kingsley. Between May and July of 1848, the three of them published seventeen

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Finally, he speaks of the insertion of the word ‘male’ into the voting clauses of all Poor Law and Local Government Bills. These instances and others were fuel for the ideas of Hughes and Kingsley.

<sup>7</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 22.

<sup>8</sup> Donald E. Hall, “On the Making and Unmaking of Monsters: Christian Socialism, Muscular Christianity, and the Metaphorization of Class Conflict,” in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 46.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, “On the Making and Unmaking of Monsters,” 46–47.



issues of the Christian Socialist weekly which promoted to the working class of England many of their ideas.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it was in reaction to the writings of Kingsley and Hughes that critics first coined the term ‘muscular’ Christianity, with the phrase first appearing in a review of Charles Kingsley’s novel, *Two Years Ago* (1857). A year later it was used to describe *Tom Brown’s School Days*, a novel by Hughes about life at Rugby School.<sup>11</sup> In their writings and through the characters of their novels, particularly Kingsley and Hughes attempted to give Anglicanism, and in turn, the English people, the health, spirituality, and manliness to spur on British imperialism, render the citizenry ‘fit for freedom’, and equip them to address some of the political and social ills of the day.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.1.2 Thomas Carlyle, Jacques Rousseau, and the Intellectual and Philosophical Background of ‘Muscular’ Christianity**

Amid the social and political context of mid nineteenth century Victorian England, Kingsley and Hughes tempered the unrest of the working class with their ‘muscular’ message. Simultaneously, they encouraged this group to become a people mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically ‘fit’ for the freedom they already enjoyed and for the freedom they continued to seek.

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, “On the Making and Unmaking of Monsters,” 45.

<sup>11</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 11. Hughes and Kingsley had mixed reactions to the phrase, as did the whole of Victorian society. See Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 17.

<sup>12</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 1.

The champions of the movement found biblical support for ‘muscular’ Christianity’s commitment to health and manliness in passages like Mark 11:15 and of physical health in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.<sup>13</sup> Yet, many of the philosophical ideas embedded in the ‘muscular’ Christian message had already been expressed years prior by the essayist Thomas Carlyle and the philosopher Jacques Rousseau. The marriage of social change along with changes in the concept of masculinity took place in Britain when Carlyle borrowed Rousseau’s notion of heroic manliness to deal with the problems of the social authority of men.<sup>14</sup> In an essay written in pre-revolutionary France, Rousseau had posited that manliness was the virtue most necessary to the hero.<sup>15</sup> His version of manliness involved moral principles leading to emotions that precipitated courage, the masculine “executive virtue.”<sup>16</sup> Rousseau’s ideas attempted to overcome class inequalities. He believed that the virtues of being a warrior, showing courage, and being fearless transcended social class and could be embodied by anyone.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 11. Putney also adds that, while ‘muscular’ Christianity has always been an element in Christianity, it has not always been pronounced. For instance, the early church sometimes praised health and manliness, according to Putney, but it was more concerned with salvation, which is given without being healthy and husky (11).

<sup>14</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 21. In *Jesus and John Wayne* Du Mez also speaks of white American evangelicals embracing John Wayne precisely because he represented for them a form of heroic-masculinity (30–32, 54–59).

<sup>15</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 20. This heroic manliness concept tended to lead to ‘hero-worship,’ an idea that Hughes especially critiques toward the end of his novel, *Tom Brown’s School Days*. See the section below: “Toward a More Robust ‘Muscular’ Christianity: Strength, Weakness, and the Cross of Christ in *Tom Brown’s School Days*.” According to Du Mez, this masculine hero-worship tendency is also evidenced in the seventy-five-year history of American evangelicalism. See *Jesus and John Wayne*, 32, 174, 199, 243–44.

<sup>16</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 20.

<sup>17</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 20.

Carlyle then used the ideas of Rousseau to create a category of manliness that is deeper than surface behavior. Even though the concept that manliness detaches itself from surface behavior was already present in Rousseau's work, Carlyle explicitly and directly connects manliness with God and the transcendent. Manliness, for Carlyle, produces the belief in a higher being that gives way to valor. For Carlyle, one cannot just enter manliness by behaving in a manly fashion.<sup>18</sup> Masculinity was the hook to pull men into a social order that was both egalitarian and stratified. Kingsley then brought about Christian socialist reform by taking this deeply masculine and manly concept and communicating it at a popular level in his speeches, sermons, and novels.

### **2.1.3 The 'Muscular' Christianity of Charles Kingsley**

#### **2.1.3.1 Manliness**

Although Maurice and Hughes certainly championed the 'muscular' Christianity movement, it was the ideas of Charles Kingsley that most firmly took hold in mid nineteenth century Victorian England. Kingsley carried forth the idea that masculinity held the key to solving social problems. He did this by promoting a few ideas that both build on and are distinct from those of Carlyle and Rousseau. Kingsley went further by suggesting that men naturally belong in groups and that no surface behavior, but

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<sup>18</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 22.

something inherently in men, makes them manly. Masculinity became the expression and perfection of this something.<sup>19</sup>

Kingsley then expressed a platonic conception of *thumos*,<sup>20</sup> a deep, central force from which manly action flows and through which virtue, sexuality, and masculine primacy are brought together and expressed.<sup>21</sup> Using the image of a volcano to describe *thumos*, Kingsley reconstructed masculinity as a private substructure of self. His masculinity came to be viewed as a deep, volcanic force which had a limited, but definite public display. In this way, Kingsley not only suggested that manliness had a 'deep' structure, but he also expressed what public and surface shape this structure should take.<sup>22</sup>

Manliness, then, was a key part of Kingsley's 'muscular' Christianity. He had a certain idea of what manliness entailed and looked to Christianity for its greatest expression. One example is in a letter he wrote regarding a line for a hymn. The line was, "Sacred heart of Jesus, heart of God in man." Kingsley suggested it should be "Heart of man in God," asserting that the union of man and God transpired "not by

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<sup>19</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 22.

<sup>20</sup> Kingsley interprets *thumos* as a vigorous force that is also the source of self-control and fortitude. This is similar to Hellenistic interpretations but differs from the 'wild', untamed, and spontaneous interpretations of the thymatic male in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical 'muscular' Christian expressions of Eldredge and Driscoll (and even the Harrison reboot of the Promise Keepers). These expressions appear to be motivated by a desire to present a version of masculinity that is free of society's constraints imposed by female norms. As a result, they speak of a 'wild' *thymatic* male.

<sup>21</sup> Donald E. Hall, "Muscular Christianity: Reading and Writing the Male Social Body," in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 19.

conversion of the Godhead to flesh, but by the taking of manhood into God.”<sup>23</sup> He believed that through the incarnation, humanity had achieved divinity. His connection of Christianity and masculinity is also expressed in these words, “I have to preach the divineness of the whole manhood, and am content to be called a Muscular Christian, or any other impertinent name.”<sup>24</sup>

Kingsley also believed that masculinity required boldness, honesty, plainness, stoic patience, and violent energy.<sup>25</sup> Bringing these ideas together with Christianity, athletics, and patriotism, Kingsley most clearly expressed ‘muscular’ Christianity through the characters in his novels. Through novels like *Westward Ho!* (1855), *Yeast* (1851) and *Hereward the Wake* (1866), Kingsley created a masculinist image of an imperial English nation.<sup>26</sup> The muscle-less modernity which surrounded Kingsley seemed insufficient for true nationhood.<sup>27</sup> So, connecting masculinity and manhood to Christianity, Kingsley set about his project of infusing especially the working class of mid nineteenth century Victorian England with a certain kind of nationalism that would render them emotionally, spiritually, and physically ‘fit’ for freedom.

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<sup>23</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 28.

<sup>24</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 28.

<sup>25</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 19.

<sup>26</sup> C.J. W.-L. Wee, “Christian Manliness and National Identity: The Problematic Construction of a Racially ‘Pure’ Nation” in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 66.

<sup>27</sup> Wee, “Christian Manliness,” 67.

### 2.1.3.2 The Body

In *Politics for the People* and other Christian Socialist and ‘muscular’ Christian works, Kingsley, Hughes, and Maurice emphasized the metaphor of the body when addressing the social situation in Britain at the time. The pedagogical goals and accompanying metaphors are linked for the Christian Socialists and the ‘muscular Christians.’<sup>28</sup> The soldier’s physical body is discussed to speak of the worker’s body in a nation. The national social body is comprised of worker bodies that belong to the nation and are arranged by class and function.<sup>29</sup> The Christian Socialists and ‘muscular’ Christians manipulated language as a pedagogical tool to repudiate demands they found uncomfortable and irreconcilable with their own class-bound view of the proper constitution of the body of the nation. Their words and representations help us understand the extent to which conceptions of identity, loyalty, and even life itself, are grounded in metaphor and can support, reject, or work in some way around and through the status quo and perceptions of duty to self, class, and nation.<sup>30</sup>

Kingsley attempted to prop up the potent but unstable image of a masculine, charismatic, and authoritative Englishman who stands as a representative of a resolutely Anglo-Saxon and Protestant nation-empire.<sup>31</sup> For Kingsley and Hughes, manliness was

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<sup>28</sup> Hall, “On the Making and Unmaking of Monsters,” 48.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, “On the Making and Unmaking of Monsters,” 49.

<sup>30</sup> Hall, “On the Making and Unmaking of Monsters,” 64. Hall ends his article with these striking words, “As both literary and social history has shown . . . when words are made flesh, they often form the bodies of soldiers.”

<sup>31</sup> Wee, “Christian Manliness,” 67.

synonymous with strength, both physical and moral. The term 'muscular' Christianity then highlights their consistent, even insistent, use of the male body, even if it was protested by the founders.<sup>32</sup> For the two men, bodily strength and moral strength are connected; as one grows so does the other.

#### **2.1.4 Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* and 'Muscular' Christianity**

Whereas Kingsley tended to use the metaphor of the body to emphasize the individual's body as well as the social and political body of England, Thomas Hughes spoke of Christ's body and the incarnation of Christ for the advancement of the Christian Socialist agenda.<sup>33</sup> Hughes' work begins in the mysteries of Christ's body and rests on the representational politics of the body of the bourgeoisie.<sup>34</sup> He then emphasizes the body as a class body, the body of the bourgeoisie.<sup>35</sup> Hughes also puts forth the idea of "Young England" which is analogous to the bodies of boys. He speaks

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<sup>32</sup> Hall, "Muscular Christianity," 9.

<sup>33</sup> Susan L. Roberson highlights a connection with Jesus and muscular, masculine traits in the sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson. See Roberson, "'Degenerate Effeminacy' and the Making of a Masculine Spirituality in the Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson," in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 150–72. Roberson notes that Emerson took as his model Jesus of Nazareth. He creates a hero who fuses thought and action, body and soul. He was concerned with expressing a Christianity that is 'manly' and hoped to bring about a transformation in religion that would speak more closely to the individual. The hero for Emerson is not the self-made man of the myth of success who confuses his identity with his dress and money, but a man-made self whose self-improvement is internal instead of merely external, whose new identity depends on his unity with the God within. Like Jesus, the "genuine man" acts always in character because he acts always from his character. And, like Jesus, the genuine man realizes his "likeness to God" by discovering and making real through word and action the unity between man and God and the unity of his own being. The genuine man speaks what he thinks and he acts his thought (166–68).

<sup>34</sup> Dennis W. Allen, "Young England: Muscular Christianity and the Politics of the Body in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*," in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, "Young England," 119.

then of the corporate body of “Young England,”<sup>36</sup> a concept that finds its fullest expression in his novel, *Tom Brown’s School Days*.

Hughes’ 1857 novel *Tom Brown’s School Days* was a popular portrayal of the ideas of the nineteenth century ‘muscular’ Christianity movement.<sup>37</sup> Though Hughes appears to be addressing the ‘prep school crowd’<sup>38</sup> that would eventually become the leaders of English society, the book did have a broader appeal and impact. The novel greatly influenced sports and athleticism in the latter half of nineteenth century England. It has since been made into movies and screenplays and has gained popularity even beyond England.

In the book, Tom Brown is an eleven-year-old English schoolboy at Rugby School who is described by Hughes as being energetic, kind-hearted, and athletic, rather than intellectual. In the first half of the book, Hughes details Tom’s childhood. After attending two different schools in his first two years, Tom is transferred to Rugby School.

The remaining part of the first half of the book covers Tom’s arrival and initial time at Rugby. The reader is introduced to an experienced classmate of Tom’s in Harry

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<sup>36</sup> Allen, “Young England,” 119.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days* (London: Macmillan & Company, 1869).

<sup>38</sup> Here is another difference with the contemporary American evangelical ‘muscular’ Christian expressions. The Promise Keepers, Eldredge, and Driscoll are not speaking to a ‘prep school crowd’—at least not directly like Hughes in *Tom Brown’s School Days*. Mars Hill, for instance, had a strong lower, middle class identity during the time of Driscoll’s leadership, perhaps because Driscoll himself is the son of a union drywaller. See Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”



“Scud” East, who looks after Tom and helps Tom endure and eventually defeat Tom’s bully, Flashman.

In the second half of the book, the headmaster, Dr. Thomas Arnold, puts Tom under the charge of a younger student named George Arthur. In many ways, George Arthur and Tom are portrayed as opposites by Hughes. Tom is athletic and energetic, while lacking in intellectual prowess. George Arthur, on the other hand, is frail, religious, and brilliant academically.<sup>39</sup> Over time, the two help each other, compensating for one another’s weaknesses and sharpening one another with their strengths. Together, the two of them come to pray regularly, demonstrate honesty in the classroom, and play cricket. The theme of the development of the boys, particularly of Tom and George Arthur, is a prominent one in the book.

#### **2.1.4.1 Manliness in *Tom Brown’s School Days***

The ‘muscular’ Christian themes are best depicted in the novel through the lives and bodies of both Tom and George Arthur. Hughes promoted an idea of manliness as both duty and moral courage. For instance, in one scene in the book, advice is given about saying, “No” to a fight if possible. For, saying, “No” is the highest courage if done with proper Christian motives and not done in fear of being beaten up or out of some pious fear of God.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 240.

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 257. At the same time, Hughes believes fighting is natural for boys and men: “Every soul of them is doing his own piece of fighting, somehow and somewhere” (283). After

For Hughes, manliness was more than just embodying traits of physical strength. Loyalty and steadfast obedience were “men’s first duties”<sup>41</sup> and disobedience was looked down upon as a lack of character. For instance, Tom’s bully Flashman and company are spoken of negatively for their ‘wild’ sense of adventure that leads them into all kinds of mischief. They are exemplifying a “loss of character for steadiness in their form.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, being brave, keeping a kind heart, and telling the truth are of importance.<sup>43</sup>

These positive attributes are captured well in a scene toward the end of the book in which Tom is having kind of ‘exit interview’ with the new headmaster. He explains to Tom why Dr. Arnold, the previous master, put George Arthur under Tom’s care: “In the hope that when you had somebody to lean on you, you would begin to stand a little steadier yourself, and get manliness and thoughtfulness.”<sup>44</sup> For Hughes, manliness, paired with thoughtfulness, and as the product of the passing of time and the embrace of responsibility, seems akin to maturity. At one point in *Tom Brown’s School Days*, there

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the fight between Tom and Slogger, Hughes comments that “fighting with fists is the natural way for English boys to settle their quarrels” (301).

<sup>41</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 188.

<sup>43</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 74. The Squire who drives Tom to the train station as the boy heads off to Rugby tosses around in his mind good advice to give him and his own desire for Tom. He thinks to himself, “‘If he’ll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman and a gentlemen, and a Christian, that’s all I want,’ thought the Squire.”

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 365.

is a concern that Tom and East will do great harm to the younger boys if they don't mature and "gain character and manliness."<sup>45</sup>

Hughes' view of manliness included courage, bravery, honesty, loyalty, and obedience in a way that also incorporated both the physical and the spiritual. Manliness certainly included improved physical condition for Hughes. He saw great value then for the "games of the old country" – back-swording, wrestling, racing.<sup>46</sup> In Tom's time at Rugby, much is made of the value of boxing, cricket and rugby football.<sup>47</sup> There is even a lengthy and riveting rugby match described in great detail as Tom begins his time at Rugby School. Moreover, the boys seek adventure and improved physical condition as they discover the outdoors, looking for bird nests and climbing trees with climbing irons.<sup>48</sup>

Spiritual matters were also a key part of Tom's time at Rugby. Tom and the other boys said prayers before bed.<sup>49</sup> George Arthur, Tom's charge, is the pious son of a Christian minister and routinely prayed and read his Bible.<sup>50</sup> Under the leadership of

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<sup>45</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 211.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 41. When speaking of plans of reform for England, Hughes laments that physical games are left out. He believes that to lay hold of the working boys and young men of England you need more than education; You need "some *bone fide* equivalent for the games of the old country 'veast' [village feast] in it. . . something to try the muscles of men's bodies and the endurance of their hearts, and to make them rejoice in their strength" (emphasis, original).

<sup>47</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 301.

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 265–67.

<sup>49</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 229. There are many instances throughout the book of the boys saying daily prayers.

<sup>50</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 240, 242.

George Arthur, the boys began reading the Bible together nightly after supper and discussing the passages. In other words, they started their own Bible study.<sup>51</sup>

In *Tom Brown's School Days*, the bodies of George Arthur and Tom were used by Hughes to portray his 'muscular' Christian ideas. Through the relationship with Arthur, Tom develops into a 'true man' who is both compassionate and brave, gentle and strong.<sup>52</sup> The theme of the 'development of English boys' is then played out through the relationship of Tom and Arthur. At one point the narrator comments on Tom and Arthur's friendship, mentioning that it was "the centre and turning-point of his [Tom's] school-life. Tom was becoming 'a new boy' in manfulness and thoughtfulness, as every high-couraged and well-principled boy must when at grips with self and the devil."<sup>53</sup>

It is perhaps significant that not all of Hughes' 'muscular' Christian traits can be evidenced in the body of one boy—at least not initially.<sup>54</sup> It takes both boys and a friendship between them to bring about Hughes' fully formed 'muscular' Christian who is both physically and spiritually mature.

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<sup>51</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 237, 242–45. In one scene, the boys read the account of Naaman being healed of his leprosy by the Word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Elisha. A conversation then ensues regarding compromise, principles, integrity, and doing the right thing (243–45).

<sup>52</sup> Allen, Dennis W. "Young England: 'Muscular' Christianity and the Politics of the Body in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*" in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117.

<sup>53</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 254–55.

<sup>54</sup> Allen makes this point in his article "Young England," 116. He believes that Hughes' problem in representing the whole of his 'muscular' Christian values in one body was so great that he used two bodies to solve the problem—those of Tom and George Arthur.

## 2.1.5 Influence on English Culture

The 'muscular' Christian concept of masculinity and emphasis on the male body were influential on English culture at the time and had a far-reaching impact. The 'muscular' Christianity ideals were influential in English public schools to help discipline unruly boys through athletics. Through athletic metaphors the character of manliness was taught and connected to Christ. Missionary organizations also picked up on the value of athletics to help in evangelizing foreigners.<sup>55</sup> The ideas of 'muscular' Christianity even led to the formation of late, nineteenth century English organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Boy's Brigade, and the Boy Scouts.<sup>56</sup>

Though the institutions grew and attracted many attendees and members, they failed to maintain Kingsley's balance between athleticism, patriotism, and Christianity. The purpose and message drifted into nationalism and the sports were played more for

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<sup>55</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 18. Putney mentions the famous "Cambridge Seven," a group of Christian athletes who left England in 1885 to do mission work in China. The "Cambridge Seven" stressed athletic prowess and the ability to preach Christ to the Chinese through such an emphasis (18).

<sup>56</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 18. Of course, many of these organizations also formed in America. Putney notes that in England, 'muscular' Christianity in the Boy Scouts appeared in a basic form which was less about bringing boys to Christ and more about promoting in boys "a wholesomeness and reverence for king and country" (18). With the Boys' Brigade, Putney observes that Christianity and church worship were essential, and that the club's object was to advance Christian manliness through military drill (18). For the YMCA, its original purpose was the evangelization of young men in the cities through traditional means of tent meetings, street-corner preaching, and the passing out of tracts. However, Putney mentions that once the New York City YMCA introduced the use of a gymnasium for Christian outreach in 1869, English YMCAs followed (18).

themselves than for their supposed Christian benefits.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the movement was not without its critics.

For many, 'muscular' Christianity simply meant machismo, with an emphasis on boxing, fighting, and rugby.<sup>58</sup> Just as the movement spread through the novels of Hughes and Kingsley, so its criticism spread through the pen. Bret Harte wrote a parody of 'muscular' Christianity in *Guy Heavystone*.<sup>59</sup> His parody suggests that certain educated Englishmen in the mid-nineteenth century found toughness and violence physically exhilarating, intellectually justified, and morally acceptable. Charles Dickens attempted to deconstruct the movement in certain ways through *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.<sup>60</sup> And Charles Kingsley's second daughter, Mary St. Leger Kingsley Harrison, resisted her father's ideas in her most famous novel, *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901).<sup>61</sup>

While some critics understood the 'muscular' Christians to be championing toughness and physical violence, it is fair to say that this was not the intention of Hughes, Kingsley and others. Especially Hughes would have disparaged such an understanding as a misguided application of the 'muscular' Christian ideas. For

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<sup>57</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 19. Thomas Hughes noticed the problem of immoral athleticism and tried to address it by calling for a revival of the original tenets of 'muscular' Christianity, but this appeal failed to gain traction in England (19).

<sup>58</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 17.

<sup>59</sup> Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral," 18.

<sup>60</sup> David Faulkner, "The Confidence Man: Empire and the Deconstruction of 'Muscular' Christianity in *the Mystery of Edwin Drood*" in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 175–93.

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Srebrnik, "The Re-Subjection of 'Lucas Malet': Charles Kingsley's Daughter and the Response to Muscular Christianity" in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 194–214.

Hughes' emphasis on manliness included virtues such as godliness, self-control, courage, bravery, honesty, loyalty, and obedience. The emphasis on physical fitness served those ends. His goal (along with the other 'muscular' Christians) was to train up men with the kind of character who could contribute positively to English society and the advancement of the nation's goals. Unbridled toughness and violence for its own sake, as Harte characterizes 'muscular' Christianity in *Guy Heaveystone*, certainly runs counter to this kind of character. Despite criticism of 'muscular' Christianity in England, the movement and its ideas still found traction across the Atlantic.

## **2.2 'Muscular' Christianity and Mid 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America**

In America, 'muscular' Christianity gained momentum among White Protestants through its emphasis on health and manliness. Educated, mid nineteenth century Americans were introduced to English 'muscular' Christianity very early on.<sup>62</sup> In the 1870s, Hughes toured America and addressed Harvard College with a speech titled, "Muscular Christianity and Its Proper Limits." Hughes also helped to found the colony of Rugby, Tennessee where the tenets of 'muscular' Christianity were taught to sons of English immigrants from 1880 to 1887.<sup>63</sup> These events, along with the promotion of

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<sup>62</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 19. Putney attributes this exposure and attraction to the tendency among this demographic toward Anglophilia and to the accessibility of muscular Christian novels, such as Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* (19).

<sup>63</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 19.

'muscular' Christianity by Theodore Roosevelt,<sup>64</sup> helped to engrain the movement and its ideas in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture.

The evidence shows that 'muscular' Christianity was primarily a white Christian phenomenon in the Progressive Era of America (with some exceptions).<sup>65</sup> Between 1880 and 1920,<sup>66</sup> American Protestants in many denominations witnessed the flourishing of a strain of religiosity known as 'muscular' Christianity.<sup>67</sup> Converts included Josiah Strong, a Social Gospel minister who thought bodily strength a prerequisite for doing good; G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer psychologist who wished to reinvigorate 'old stock' Americans; and President Theodore Roosevelt, an advocate of strenuous religion for the 'strenuous life'. Roosevelt's own transformation into a 'muscular' Christian man spurred his efforts to make American culture more vigorous and manly.<sup>68</sup>

Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson was also a proponent and American enthusiast of 'muscular' Christianity. He praised Hughes and Kingsley for being supportive of health and manliness.<sup>69</sup> Higginson's view that the American Protestant churches of his time were unhealthy and unmanly had some support. The

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<sup>64</sup> Putney highlights the connection between 'muscular' Christianity and Roosevelt's emphasis on the strenuous life (33–37). He also mentions that the President's embrace of Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* as "one of the two books that every boy should read" also helped to push the ideas of the movement, despite suspicion by many Americans of the belief that sports built Christian character (20). For more on Roosevelt and 'muscular' Christianity, see Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 16–17.

<sup>65</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 7. Putney posits that after 1920 pacifism, cynicism, church decline, and the devaluation of male friendships combined to undercut 'muscular' Christianity—at least within the mainline Protestant churches.

<sup>67</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 1–2.



protestant churches in the colonial and antebellum periods may have fostered ill health because they tended to view artificial exercise as an immoral waste of time. Also, since the late seventeenth century, Protestant churches in America had more female than male adherents.<sup>70</sup> This gender imbalance led some to view the church as unmanly.

The 'muscular' Christian call for manly men was loud. The emphasis on the 'strenuous life,' aided by Roosevelt and others, was also picked up by secular figures in politics, academia, and the press. Many even pushed for Protestant churches to heed the call and get in step with the times. Some suggested that churches needed to embrace a more vigorous, robust, and 'muscular' Christianity that shows the character and manliness of Christ.<sup>71</sup> There was suspicion that the church had clung too long to a sentimentalized, Victorian era-influenced Christianity of the past. Some Christians then found a solution in the Social Gospel movement.

### **2.2.1 The Social Gospel and 'Muscular' Christianity**

The need to be socially relevant motivated the Social Gospellers, who addressed problematic labor conditions in industrial American and also had fears about physical weakness among the broader culture.<sup>72</sup> As part of their response, the Social Gospel proponents called for strenuous service and even helped set up charitable agencies such

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<sup>70</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 40.

<sup>72</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 40.

as soup kitchens and homeless shelters.<sup>73</sup> To connect Christianity with the masses and help fulfill their dream of evangelizing the cities, this group downplayed the image of God the Father and instead concentrated almost exclusively on Jesus, whom they portrayed as a “rough-handed carpenter and social activist.”<sup>74</sup>

Many within the Social Gospel movement at this time also had concerns about the gender imbalance within mainline American Protestantism.<sup>75</sup> It was clear to those within the movement that the form of Christianity at the time was unmanly. To attract more men to Christianity and show the manliness of Jesus, the Social Gospellers attempted to rid the culture of Victorian hyper-femininity and help form more manly, Christian men. One of the Social Gospel movements’ main proponents, Josiah Strong, believed that they needed to promote a more physical Christianity.<sup>76</sup> This meant not only fixing up the physical living conditions of urban areas, but also strengthening the human body. The movement then accepted and promoted sports and bodily exercise. By bringing together the Christian religion and the emphasis on the ‘strenuous life,’ the Social Gospel movement echoed Hughes and Kingsley and urged a “strenuous religion for a strenuous life”<sup>77</sup> that became associated with ‘muscular’ Christianity.

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<sup>73</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 41. See also Mark Driscoll’s portrait of Jesus in Chapter One above.

<sup>75</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 41. Putney notes that in 1899 women reportedly comprised three-quarters of the church’s membership and nine-tenths of its attendance (41).

<sup>76</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 44.

## 2.2.2 Wider Influence on American Sports and the Development of Young American Boys and Men

### 2.2.2.1 YMCA

The Social Gospellers' promotion of 'muscular' Christianity influenced different parts of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture. One of the most notable areas of influence was on sports and athletics.

The absence of sports in antebellum America troubled certain liberal Christians who were critical of the puritanical strain in American culture. Reverend Horace Bushnell, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke in favor of play and physical exercise.<sup>78</sup> Higginson blamed Protestants for the lack of healthy people in America. It was in the postbellum era that sports in America then saw a great surge. Those years witnessed the growth of college sports, the spread of amateur athletics, and other recreational activities.<sup>79</sup> Many mainline churches, though at first reluctant, came to see sports as beneficial. This change in attitude was aided by Christian athletic organizations like the YMCA.<sup>80</sup> Also influential, was 'body as temple' theology that made health biblical, glorified the body, and refuted the idea that the body is sinful and

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<sup>78</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 20–21.

<sup>79</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 72.

<sup>80</sup> The following YMCA song shows undercurrents of 'muscular' Christianity: "Body, mind, and spirit freed; No more bruised and blighted; Build the new humanity; Holy, strong united" (Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 72).

weak.<sup>81</sup> This led to a greater emphasis not only on physical health, but also led churches to take moral leadership of athletics.<sup>82</sup>

The YMCA was most influential in this endeavor.<sup>83</sup> After the first YMCA in Boston (1851), many others were founded in major cities across America. The YMCA originally had an evangelical church basis, with these words comprising part of the its statement: “The Young Men’s Christian Association seeks to unite those young men who, regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Savior. . . desire to be His disciples in their doctrine and in their life.”<sup>84</sup> That commitment to religious conversion eventually gave way to other priorities. At a most basic level, the YMCA was committed simply to the ideals of the strenuous life first popularized by President Roosevelt and his embrace of ‘muscular’ Christianity.<sup>85</sup> This included the ideals of physical hardiness, vigorous action, and the rejection of a more refined life, seeing it as constraining. This last ideal led to the Association’s popularization of outdoor camping in the 1880s.<sup>86</sup> Also, a part of the

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<sup>81</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 56. Putney writes that the YMCA promoted ‘body as the temple’ theology and that other promoters of this theology “came close to calling musclemen saints and the sick sinners” (56–57). He also says that “at their most extreme, ‘body as temple’ men completely dropped the traditional Christian emphasis on confessing weakness in oneself and forgiving it in others” (57).

<sup>82</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Putney also notes the influence of ‘muscular’ Christianity on women in Chapter Six, “Muscular Women,” of *Muscular Christianity*, 144–61. He speaks especially of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), the Girl Scouts, and the Camp Fire Girls. These groups rejected the idea that rugged outdoor experiences and sports were meant for boys alone. They also sought to draw strength from nature, the outdoors, and from athletics.

<sup>84</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 66.

<sup>85</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 66.

<sup>86</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 66.

YMCA's mission was the character building<sup>87</sup> of young boys through physical exercise.<sup>88</sup> Under the leadership of Luther H. Gulick in the late 1800s, the YMCA became more intentionally infused with the ideas of 'muscular' Christianity and embraced the idea that the "Y" is "a fundamental and intrinsic part in the salvation of man." Gulick originated the red triangle symbol for the YMCA and created its accompanying phrase, "body, mind, spirit," after Deuteronomy 6:5.<sup>89</sup>

#### **2.2.2.2 National Groups for Men**

Another goal behind the spread of 'muscular' Christianity in America was to form religious men's groups to get more men into church. The "Businessmen's Awakening"<sup>90</sup> revival was one attempt. This revival, which flourished in several cities from 1857–1858, sought to bring men into church. The "Business Awakening" and the YMCA were connected by their focus on men as well as by their association with evangelist Dwight L. Moody. He participated in both in the Chicago area. Other attempts to connect men to a 'masculine' Christianity were through organizations called Captains of Christ<sup>91</sup> and Protestant Brotherhoods.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Other church organizations influenced by 'muscular' Christianity and aimed at character building for young men were the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor (YPSCE), the Junior Brotherhood of Saint Andrew, the Knights of St. Paul, and the Knights of King Arthur. Most famous was the Boy Scouts of America, which was originally backed by the YMCA. See Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 113–21.

<sup>88</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 67.

<sup>89</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 70.

<sup>90</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 2.

<sup>91</sup> See Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 78–83.

<sup>92</sup> See Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 83–89.

Captains of Christ sought to fortify the American clergy in hopes of making them more vigorous. It also attempted to emphasize the manliness of ministry, depicting ministers as brave, strong, and courageous servants.<sup>93</sup> Protestant Brotherhoods, on the other hand, were directed toward establishing men's groups and Bible studies in churches. The Brotherhoods flourished in Protestant churches from the 1880s until World War I. They even found popularity within Catholic churches.<sup>94</sup> One of the more well-known influences of Christian brotherhoods was with the Gideons and their work in promoting Bible reading and Bible study even outside a church setting with the placing of Bibles in hotels. Brotherhoods seemed to have left a mark on society, with their most important work being that of "winning young men for Christ."<sup>95</sup> Though many of these aforementioned groups are now extinct or have a much smaller presence, some of their ideas and the tenets of 'muscular' Christianity are alive today with the emergence of "neo-muscular Christian groups" like Promise Keepers and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 81–82.

<sup>94</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 88.

<sup>95</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 10. One might also think of outspoken Christian athletes like Tim Tebow, or of the 'muscular' ministry of Pastor Mark Driscoll. In my own church body, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), efforts have been made through publications to promote a more 'masculine' Christianity to reach men. For instance, the book, *Man Up: The Quest for Masculinity*, by Jeff Hemmer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017). Other influential men's ministry efforts within the LCMS include the "Men's Network" of the Lutheran Hour Ministries and the men's devotional book, *Man of God, Strong to Serve* by Dr. David Schmitt (Fenton, MO: Christ to All Publications, 2013). Even the more secular work of the psychologist Jordan Peterson has resonated with many young men as he calls on them to shirk apathy and excuses, to acknowledge that much of life involves suffering, and to embrace their

## **2.3 Assessment of the Original ‘Muscular’ Christianity Movement and its Influence**

‘Muscular’ Christianity and the founders’ ideas of masculinity formed in the social conditions of mid-nineteenth century Victorian England had a noticeable influence in Anglo-American culture. For over one hundred and twenty-five years the ideas spread from the Social Gospel movement and its desire to improve urban areas and inject Victorian-era America with toughness and Christian morals, to the advent and impact of the YMCA to connect Christianity and athletics, to the Boy Scouts and the formation of Christian Brotherhoods and the Gideons.<sup>97</sup> Even today, the movement’s influence can be felt through phrases like “Jesus was no Wimp,” and biblical arguments to prove Jesus could “kick ass.”<sup>98</sup> In baseball parks, players mix macho and Bible-thumping: “If Jesus were on the field, he’d be pitching inside and breaking up double plays.”<sup>99</sup> Hints of ‘muscular’ Christianity and Kingsley’s masculinity can even be

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responsibilities. See Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2018).

<sup>97</sup> As Putney demonstrates, ‘muscular’ Christianity in America has even had an international influence through missionary endeavors (Chapter Five, “Worldwide Redemption,” 127–43) and through war and peace efforts (Chapter Seven, “Christians in Khaki,” 162–94).

<sup>98</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 40. See also Watts, “Mark Driscoll’s Badass Jesus.” Driscoll preaches a Jesus who has “a commitment to make someone bleed.” He goes on to say that “I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.”

<sup>99</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 40.

detected in the US Army and its self-actualization appeal to American teenage boys and young men to “be all that you can be.”<sup>100</sup>

Though the original ‘muscular’ Christian movement arose within a different social, political context, the concern for Christian men and their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is evidenced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical ‘muscular’ Christian expressions, particularly the expressions of John Eldredge and Mark Driscoll.

The original ‘muscular’ Christian movement and its ensuing iterations are also not without critics. And, perhaps, for good reason. By attempting to strengthen the nation and address the social and political ills of the time, did the founders and proponents of ‘muscular’ Christianity push the pendulum too far in the other direction? Was the response then too reactionary in a way that lacked proper balance? In emphasizing strength and attempting to fortify a populace, did the proponents leave adequate room for the work of God in the ‘strengthening’ process? Furthermore, is there sufficient space in the ‘muscular’ Christianity project for talk of weakness and sin? Though Roosevelt’s embrace of the ‘muscular’ Christian emphasis on the ‘strenuous life’ seems to recognize the concept of weakness, where is one then led because of such a

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<sup>100</sup> Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 40.



recognition? What about the association between weakness, Christ, and the cross? For instance, the Apostle Paul's declaration that "when I am weak, then I am strong"?<sup>101</sup>

Within the context of the twelfth chapter of Second Corinthians, St. Paul takes time to list his sufferings as an Apostle and places them under the category of 'weakness'. He then boasts of those weaknesses, claiming that God's grace is all he needs and that God's power is made perfect in such weakness and suffering. Paul even claims that he is content with weakness.<sup>102</sup> The Apostle seems to find power in weakness. Paul even proclaims a 'theology of the cross' that makes room for weakness, with the weakness of Christ and the cross being at the very center of its message. Yet, for Paul, the weakness of sin and death is ultimately overcome through a resurrected Christ who defeated it.

By not communicating weakness within a 'theology of the cross' and pointing ultimately to our hope in a crucified and resurrected Christ, does 'muscular' Christianity end up promoting a deficient and even misleading Christian message? How then could one address the social concerns of the 'muscular' Christians and the idea of the 'strenuous life' through a 'theology of the cross' that takes seriously the biblical description and emphasis of weakness? How might a dynamic, powerful proclamation of a crucified and resurrected Christ and his experience of weakness and defeat of it ultimately render one 'fit' for freedom and equip the Christian man for the 'strenuous

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<sup>101</sup> 2 Cor 12:10.

<sup>102</sup> 2 Cor 12:10.

life'? Perhaps one place to begin a connection between the 'muscular' Christianity movement and St. Paul's theology of strength in weakness is where Thomas Hughes ends in *Tom Brown's School Days*.

## **2.4 Toward a More Robust 'Muscular' Christianity: Strength, Weakness, and the Cross of Christ in *Tom Brown's School Days***

Although much of the original 'muscular' Christian movement and its later expression lacked a sufficient emphasis on human weakness, the strength of God, and the cross of Christ, one notable exception can be found in the final pages of *Tom Brown's School Days*. As the novel reaches its conclusion and the boys develop into men and embody Hughes' ideal of English manliness, the picture of a man becomes more nuanced. Toward the end of the book, Hughes explores questions about the meaning of friendship, strength, weakness, and 'hero' worship, in a way that leads the novel's protagonist, Tom, quite literally to the cross.

At one point toward the end of the book, Tom and East, much older students at Rugby now, are having a conversation that quickly turns to a moment of confession and the baring of one's soul. East confesses honestly to Tom his feelings about church, religion, good, and evil in the world. And Tom speaks honestly to East about being confirmed and receiving the Sacrament.<sup>103</sup> Tom shares with East his experience of coming to love his enemy—the bully Flashman—in a way that is centered ultimately in

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<sup>103</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 338–39.

God's love and forgiveness in Christ. He says that as he grew in love and knowledge of God and received the Sacrament, he also grew in love for his enemy:

I tried to put him out of my head; and when I couldn't do that, I tried to think of him as evil, as something that the Lord who was loving me hated, and which I might hate too. But it wouldn't do. I broke down: I believe Christ Himself broke me down; and when the Doctor gave me the bread and wine, and leant over me praying, I prayed for poor Flashman, as if it had been you or Arthur.<sup>104</sup>

As Tom matured and grew older, the Christian Faith, combined with the spiritual disciplines and practice of it, seemed formative for him. Hughes presents Tom toward the end of the book as one who embodies, as a man, the very character of Christ. In such a portrayal and development weakness in the form of confession had a role. The spiritual practice of confession even became a part of friendship,<sup>105</sup> leading Tom and East closer to one another and closer to God in Christ.<sup>106</sup>

Toward the end of the book, as Tom is preparing to graduate from Rugby, Hughes explores the idea of 'hero' worship. For Tom, Doctor Arnold, his former headmaster and preacher, became almost an object of worship as a true 'muscular'

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<sup>104</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 339.

<sup>105</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 335. Before the confession scene between Tom and East, the narrator speaks about friendship and implies that true friendship includes confession. He mentions that friendship includes going down into the depths of yourself, laying bare what is there to your friend and waiting in fear for his answer. Hughes adds, "Done it must be, if the friendship is to be worth the name" (335).

<sup>106</sup> This idea of confession and a closer relationship between God and one another is shown in Doctor Arnold's treating of East when East goes to him with his confession. East describes to Tom the Doctor's response: "When I stuck, he lifted me, just as if I'd been a little child. And he seemed to know all I'd felt, and to have gone through it all . . . But when I'd done he just talked a bit—I can hardly remember what he said, yet; but it seemed to spread round me like healing, and strength, and light; and to bear me up, and plant me on a rock, where I could hold my footing, and fight for myself" (340).

Christian. It was the Doctor who paired him up with George Arthur, leading to the 'turning point' of Tom's time at Rugby and his development from a boy to a man. It was Doctor Arnold's sermons and counsel that guided Tom like a compass throughout his school days. And it was the Doctor's two-volume set of sermons that Tom held under his arm as he departed Rugby.<sup>107</sup> Tom exalts Dr. Arnold to a level that Hughes seems to equate with 'hero-worship.'<sup>108</sup> Yet, Tom ultimately comes to see the futility and danger of such worship upon hearing of Dr. Arnold's death.

It was the first great wrench of his life, the first gap which the angel Death had made in his circle, and he felt numbed, and beaten down, and spiritless. Well, well! I believe it was good for him and for many others in the like case; who had to learn by that loss, that the soul of man cannot stand or lean upon any human prop, however strong, and wise, and good; but that He upon whom alone it can stand and lean will knock away all such props in His own wise and merciful way, until there is no ground or stay left but Himself, the Rock of Ages, upon whom alone a sure foundation for every soul of man is laid.<sup>109</sup>

The Death of Dr. Arnold leaves Tom at a moment of weakness. His source of strength throughout his Rugby days had been the headmaster. And now Tom is left exposed as death knocked away his human prop, this heroically masculine human figure. Hughes uses this situation as an opportunity to make his point about the dangers of 'hero-worship'.

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<sup>107</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 367.

<sup>108</sup> With the concept of 'hero-worship,' Hughes is alluding to the influential ideas of Carlyle and Rousseau and their 'heroic masculinity.' See Chapter Two above for details regarding the influence Carlyle and Rousseau had on Hughes.

<sup>109</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 370.

At the end of the book, as he finishes up ‘developing’ Tom Brown from an English boy to an English man and decorating him with his ‘muscular’ Christian ideals, Hughes steers the protagonist away from the vain pursuit of finding strength ultimately in himself and others. Instead, as the final scene in the book reveals, Hughes would rather the Englishman find his strength in Christ crucified and risen.

After hearing of Dr. Arnold’s death, Tom comes back to Rugby School one more time to visit the Doctor’s gravesite. This takes Tom to the altar of Rugby’s chapel underneath which his former headmaster is buried. In the final scene of the book Tom is at the foot of the altar, before the crucifix. Above the altar is a painted window of Mary cradling the child Jesus with that same child grown and crucified behind them.<sup>110</sup> The juxtaposition between ‘hero-worship’ and worship of “Him who is the King and Lord of heroes” is clear.<sup>111</sup> Also clear is Hughes’ suggested posture for all the would be ‘muscular’ Christian English heroes. Hughes portrays this posture as Tom stands beneath the crucified Lord at the altar and then takes a seat in the pew—the same seat he sat in on his first day at Rugby. After sitting in humility as both a man and a child, Tom then steps up to the altar, kneels humbly and hopefully before it to “lay down there his share of a burden which had proved itself too heavy for him to bear in his own strength.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 375. See especially the illustration in the book.

<sup>111</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 376.

<sup>112</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 375–76.

Here, in these final pages of *Tom Brown's School Days*, the reader catches a glimpse of a 'muscular' Christianity imbued with the tones of the Apostle Paul and his theology. To be sure, Hughes' ideal 'muscular' Christian in the image of the adult Tom Brown is strong, physically fit, and is equipped with godly moral character that will serve him well in any potential future vocations as husband, father, or leader of English society. Yet, in these concluding scenes of the novel, Hughes also makes room for human weakness alongside pursuits of physical, emotional, and spiritual strength in the life of every man. He leaves his characters vulnerable by exposing their faults, shortcomings, sin, and weakness. He shows the real dangers of 'muscular' Christianity leading to a kind of 'hero-worship.' Hughes has his readers pondering the importance of vulnerability in the life of a man while also taking them to the one who alone heals their wounds and whose strength made known in the weakness of the cross is sufficient. It is to St. Paul's theology of 'strength in weakness' for the 'muscular' Christian that we now turn.

### 3. St. Paul's 'Strength in Weakness' Theme in 2 Corinthians 10–13

The word 'weakness' has significant representation in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> In the letters of Paul, especially in First and Second Corinthians, Paul embraces 'weakness' and finds strength in his own weakness and suffering by looking to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus who suffered the weakness of the cross and was raised in glory by the power of God. At times, the Apostle even seems to use 'strength in weakness' as a pastoral strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the influence of the original 'muscular' Christianity movement in American culture and especially upon late twentieth and early twenty-first century distorted American Evangelical 'muscular' Christian expressions, a study of Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' is urgently needed. As we saw in Chapter One above, there is a proclivity in the American Christian Church for finding identity in and locating success within the strength of an institution and the strengths and positive attributes of laypeople, church staff, and pastors. There is also a tendency within the recent American evangelical 'muscular' Christian proposals<sup>3</sup> to lead Christian and non-

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<sup>1</sup> See Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), ἀσθένεια, ἀσθενέω, ἀσθενής.

<sup>2</sup> On the idea of Paul using 'strength-in-weakness' as a pastoral strategy, see 2 Cor 11:29. See also 2 Cor 12:10 and the phrase, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

<sup>3</sup> See the Promise Keepers, Eldredge, and Driscoll sections in Chapter One above.

Christian men on an *inward* masculine, 'muscular' journey of self-discovery to seek, find, embrace, and develop their own inherent strength.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, as is demonstrated in this Chapter, such a method is antithetical to the theology of the Apostle Paul and his approach when confronted with his own weakness and when attacked by distorted 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman 'muscular' Christian theologies and pop-cultural notions. The following pages undertake a careful reading of Paul's theme of 'strength in weakness' as it occurs in 2 Corinthians 10–13 and against the backdrop of the epistle's first-century Greco-Roman context.

After demonstrating the significance of studying Paul's theology of 'strength in weakness' within the final chapters of Second Corinthians, this Chapter surveys relevant scholarship on the social-historical background of Paul's letters, with special attention to the biblical Corinthian correspondence. Particularly important here are the ideas of Bruce Winter and Wayne Meeks.

Having situated the study within its appropriate first-century Greco-Roman context, different scholarly portrayals of the conflict in 2 Corinthians 10–13 with the 'super-apostles' and Paul's response are examined. The question concerning the identity

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter on the origins, history, and influence of the mid nineteenth century Victorian 'muscular' Christianity movement in England, Theodore Roosevelt encouraged this kind of self-discovery approach in order to locate and then overcome weakness through one's own 'pick yourself up by your bootstraps' self-reliance. This is exemplified in the 'strenuous life' emphasis of the original 'muscular' Christian movement. Prior to Roosevelt and the Victorian England movement, this self-reliant, self-discovery idea is evidenced within the first century, 'self-made man' concept of Greco-Roman culture.



of the 'super-apostles' is considered, looking to the scholarship of Ernst Käsemann and Gerd Theissen.

The Chapter then engages Timothy Savage's understanding that in 2 Corinthians 10–13, St. Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel is a paradoxical response to pop-cultural notions of rhetoric and rhetoricians that form the basis of the objection to and critique of Paul and his gospel message in the first-century Corinthian Church. That is, Savage suggests that the critique of Paul was not as much theological or religious in nature as it was cultural. Paul's message and his approach were counter cultural in a way that irritated some—especially the 'super-apostles'—within the Corinthian Church.

Following a careful reading of Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel in 2 Corinthians 10–13, an assessment is given of the Apostle's response to the distorted 'muscular' Christian theologies of his day. His views are brought into conversation with the original mid nineteenth century Victorian movement and the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical expressions.

Finally, the conclusion looks forward to Chapter Four and Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross' as articulated in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. In many ways, Luther's 'theology of the cross' is supported by Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel in 2 Corinthians 10–13. It thus serves as a remedy to the contemporary American evangelical distortions of 'muscular' Christianity and points a way forward for pastoral ministry and parish life.

### 3.1 The Significance of Studying ‘Weakness’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13

The *asthen-* root is the Greek root underlying the ‘weakness’ words in the New Testament. The root appears in the writings of the New Testament a total of eighty-three times and typically carries the idea of ‘weakness’.<sup>5</sup> Of those eighty-three New Testament occurrences, forty-four of them (fifty-three percent) are in the Pauline Epistles.<sup>6</sup> Of these forty-four appearances, twenty-nine<sup>7</sup> are in the Corinthian correspondence (First and Second Corinthians), with the highest concentration of ‘weakness’ language in 2 Corinthians 10–13.<sup>8</sup> In these four chapters, the *asthen-* root appears fourteen times.<sup>9</sup>

The large concentration of the *asthen-* root in First and Second Corinthians, especially in 2 Corinthians 10–13, implies that ‘weakness’ plays an important role in

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<sup>5</sup> BDAG, *Greek-English Lexicon*, ἀσθένεια, ἀσθενέω, ἀσθενής. The *asthen-* root can also be used to speak of weakness and poverty. Though poverty is a form of weakness in some sense, this is not the specific focus of ‘muscular’ Christianity nor of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> David Allen Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Asthenia and its Cognates in the Pauline Literature* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 7. By Pauline epistles, I mean the thirteen that are traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. See also Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Gorman lists five ways in which Paul understands his entire apostolic ministry as weakness: his personal presence and rhetorical skill, his suffering, his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7), his refusal of financial support and performance of manual labor, and his attitude of humility and meekness (281–93). Gorman argues that each of the five items would be understood as weakness within the first-century Greco-Roman understanding of weakness, strength, and power (268–72).

<sup>7</sup> Paul uses the *asthen-* root twenty-nine times in the noun, verb, and adjective forms. The noun ἀσθένεια occurs eight times in 1 Cor 2:3, 15:43; 2 Cor 11:30, 12:5, 9 (twice), 10, 13:4. The verb ἀσθενέω occurs nine times in 1 Cor 8:11, 12; 2 Cor 11:21, 29 (twice), 12:10, 13:3, 4, 9. The adjective ἀσθενής occurs twelve times in 1 Cor 1:25, 27, 4:10, 8:7, 9, 10, 9:22 (three times), 11:30, 12:22; 2 Cor 10:10. See James A. Swanson, John R. Kohlenberger III, and Edward W. Goodrick, *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 124–25. See also Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 53ff.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), xxxi.

<sup>9</sup> Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 53.

Paul's argument within First and Second Corinthians, most significantly in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Moreover, there are multiple occurrence of the root in the opening chapters of First Corinthians.<sup>10</sup> This means that the Apostle begins and ends the New Testament Corinthian correspondence with the *asthen-* root, even connecting the theme to the proclamation of the crucified Christ in the first few chapters of First Corinthians<sup>11</sup> as well as in 2 Corinthians 10–13.<sup>12</sup> This suggest that, for Paul, there is a strong connection between 'weakness', 'suffering', and the gospel proclamation of Christ crucified and raised by the strength and power of God.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is appropriate for a study of 'weakness' in the New Testament to begin with the Apostle Paul and the final chapters of Second Corinthians.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See 1 Cor 1:25, 27; 2:3; 4:10. The occurrence of the 'weakness' theme in 1 Corinthians 1–2 as it relates to the character of God and the 'word of the cross' (1 Cor 1:18) is engaged in John D. Caputo, "The Weakness of God: A Radical Theology of the Cross," pages 21–65, and Christophe Chalamet, "God's weakness and Power," pages 325–39 in *The Wisdom and Foolishness of God: First Corinthians 1–2 in Theological Exploration*, edited by Christophe Chalamet and Hans-Christoph Askani (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Brown sees 'power and weakness' along with 'wisdom and folly' in 1 Cor 1:18–31 as part of the "Pauline apocalyptic" in which the new age is inaugurated in the death of Jesus. In the "Pauline apocalyptic," the cross demonstrates God's destruction of the old world and the creation of the new world, into which he calls the weak, among others. See *The Cross & Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 96.

<sup>12</sup> See 1 Cor 1:18–31; 2:2; 2 Cor 13:4.

<sup>13</sup> Brown names 'weakness and strength' in 1 Cor 1:25 and 27 as part of Paul's "paradox of the cross" in *The Cross & Human Transformation*, 86–87.

<sup>14</sup> There is much debate among scholars about the unity of chapters 10–13 with chapters 1–9 of Second Corinthians. See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 17–23 and D. A. Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*, 22–28 for a discussion of the issues and the common views. In this thesis, I will view chapters 10–13 and chapters 1–9 as belonging to one letter. For a Second Corinthians commentary that also adopts this view see Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity* and Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, xxix–xxx. They believe that the argument of 10–13 is largely dependent upon that of 1–7. For a commentary that adopts a cautious two-letter hypothesis, see Victor Carl Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness: A Commentary on 2 Corinthians* (Lutheran Publishing House, 1992), 13–16.

### **3.2 'Weakness' in 2 Corinthians 10–13 and the Social-Historical Background of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinth**

How then is Paul's 'strength in weakness' argument in 2 Corinthians 10–13 and his battle with the 'super' or 'false' apostles to be understood considering the first century social-historical background of the city of Corinth? To answer this question, it is helpful to look especially at the work of Bruce Winter and Wayne Meeks.

#### **3.2.1 Bruce Winter and Competitive Sophism in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinth**

Bruce Winter locates the problems that arose in Corinth after Paul's departure in the character of the city. That is, he stresses the importance of understanding Corinth as a Roman colony filled with cosmopolitans.<sup>15</sup> This contrasts with viewing Corinth primarily as a Greek city with a Roman façade. According to Winter, part of Paul's challenges in Corinth were because the Christians in the city were 'cosmopolitans' or identified foremost as citizens of the world, especially of Roman Corinth.<sup>16</sup>

Winter suggests that the Roman influence led to social changes and secular ethics that eventually stirred up problems after Paul left Corinth. He points to the creation of a federal or imperial cult in AD 54 and to the Isthmian Games that may have influenced ideas about eating meat in the idol temple.<sup>17</sup> He also considers grain shortages in

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 4–5.

Corinth during the early days of the Corinthian Church as a significant socio-political crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Concerning objections to Paul's apostolic authority and criticisms of his ministry in Corinth, Winter looks to the influence of sophism. He argues that there was a type of cultural and professional competitiveness within sophism and among teachers at the time that explains the divisions regarding different teachers in Corinth,<sup>19</sup> such as those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1–4.<sup>20</sup> The norm within Roman sophism was to show honor and loyalty to the teacher by challenging the teacher's ideas. Winter suggests that these sophistic norms within Roman Corinth began to influence the character of the Corinthian Church. According to Winter, Paul saw the replication of sophistic behavior among the Corinthian Christians as inappropriate.

Winter believes that Paul then responds to this inappropriate replication in five ways throughout 1 Corinthians 1–4.<sup>21</sup> First, the Apostle shows that the Corinthians all belong to the body of Christ, not to an individual leader. In this way, Paul demonstrates that their relationship is misconstrued. Paul, Apollos, and Peter are not to be elevated above the Corinthians as exalted teachers and leaders like in the sophist tradition. The Corinthian Christians do not belong to Paul or any other apostolic authority or teacher

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<sup>18</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 36–38.

<sup>20</sup> Though, there is a question as to whether the teachers in 1 Corinthians 1–4 and challenges to Paul's apostolic authority are the same as those mentioned in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Regardless, many of the criticisms of Paul seem to be the same. See "Timothy Savage" below.

<sup>21</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 41–43.

within the Corinthian Church. Rather, they all (Paul, Apollos, and Peter included) belong to the communal church—to the body of Christ, even Christ himself.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Winter claims that Paul cast Apollos and himself in functional terms, pointing to their task among the community rather than paying specific attention to their credentials or status, as would be the case within sophism.<sup>23</sup> Paul refers to both himself and Apollos as servants of the Lord<sup>24</sup> who merely had different functions (planting and watering) within the Corinthian Church.<sup>25</sup> The status and credentials of the servants are insignificant because it is God alone who accomplishes the growth through them.<sup>26</sup> Among the socially elite and others influenced by Roman sophism, Paul and Apollos' servant status and 'planting' and 'watering' roles were despised. Within sophism, the individual's status, image, credentials, and notoriety were of primary concern. These aspects constituted one's identity in society and so were fervently pursued. Paul's ministry and the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ then flip this notion on its head.

Third, Winter understands Paul as declaring the instructors or teachers to be employees of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. This is the precise way Paul

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<sup>22</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 41–42. He cites 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4, and 3:21–22a in making this first point.

<sup>23</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 42. He believes Paul is doing this in 1 Cor 3:5–7 when he asks in vs. 5, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul?”

<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor 3:5.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Cor 3:6.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor 3:6b and 3:8.

says the Corinthian Christians should view their apostolic leaders and teachers.<sup>27</sup> Again, this is contrary to sophism. The designation, “stewards of the mysteries of God,”<sup>28</sup> points ultimately to the truth that their task was to proclaim the mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to make use of the resources God had provided and to meet the needs of the members of the church.

Fourth, Winter believes that Paul rejects identification between his entry into Corinth and that of a sophist entering a city and seeking disciples. In this way, Paul explains his own coming to the Corinthian Christians in anti-sophistic ways.<sup>29</sup> He did not come to them with great rhetoric and wisdom of his own.<sup>30</sup> There was no topic assigned to him by his hearers. He resolved to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified.<sup>31</sup> Paul did not have special rhetorical delivery and he had a presence that he self-described as “weakness, trembling, and much fear.”<sup>32</sup>

Since he was not in search of disciples to follow him, Paul was not concerned with the sophist’s tricks and persuasive feats.<sup>33</sup> The Apostle was simply not interested in the Corinthian Christians’ allegiance to him or to any of the other apostolic leaders and teachers within the Church.

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<sup>27</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor 4:1.

<sup>29</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor 2:1.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Cor 2:2.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor 2:3.

<sup>33</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 42.

In addition to the concern that such an allegiance would take away from the message of Christ crucified he and the others were sent to preach, Paul seemed to know that if the Corinthian Christians were to follow him or any other leader, their confidence would then rest in the wisdom and power of men rather than in the power of God and the one who is the incarnate wisdom of God—Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Fifth, Winter asserts that, unlike the sophists, Paul never addresses the Corinthian Christians as disciples.<sup>35</sup> He does not primarily see them as his own disciples or followers. Rather, Paul addresses the Corinthians with familial language. He refers to them as ‘brothers’ or ‘beloved brothers’ twenty-nine times.<sup>36</sup> He also sees himself as a father to his children.<sup>37</sup> And when he refers to the Corinthians as their father, Paul does so in a way that still directs attention beyond himself to Jesus.

Especially in 1 Corinthians 1–4, there is evidence that Paul is correcting the Corinthian Christians’ misunderstanding of their relationship with the Apostle and the other apostolic teachers and leaders. The secular ideas and system of the sophists had become prevalent and highly influential in first-century Corinth. Paul needed to make it clear that he, Apollos, and Peter are not sophists and have not come into Corinth to

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<sup>34</sup> 1 Cor 1:24. Here Thomas Hughes writes in the same vein as the Apostle Paul when he leaves Tom Brown at the altar where an image of the crucified Christ rests above and Tom’s revered former headmaster is buried (sacrificed?) beneath. In this final scene of *Tom Brown’s School Days*, Hughes speaks directly of the dangers of ‘hero-worship’ and replacing the worship of God with the worship of men in a way that sounds remarkably similar to Paul in the Corinthian correspondence. See Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 376 and Chapter Two above.

<sup>35</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Cor 4:15.



spread sophism. They have simply not come to preach themselves or exalt their own image or status. Their identity is not found in such things. Rather, they have come to preach Christ crucified, and they see themselves as servants and members of the body of Christ on par with the other members of the church. Paul will then use every opportunity—including the chance to boast in his own weakness and suffering<sup>38</sup>—to direct the Corinthian Christians beyond themselves and away from himself. He points them to their crucified and risen Lord, where the ideas of ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’ find their ultimate, most meaningful expression.

### **3.2.2 Wayne Meeks, the Urban World of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinth, and St. Paul’s Homological Approach**

Taking a social-descriptive or social-historical approach<sup>39</sup> to the urban world of Corinth, Wayne Meeks locates much of the discussion around Paul’s conflict with the ‘super-apostles’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13 under the topic of governance.<sup>40</sup> In his socio-historical study, Meeks attempts to locate the city as the chief focus of Paul’s missionary work. He then seeks to explain the interrelation of historical events and religious beliefs with the patterns and customs of urban, social life. Whereas Winter focuses on the Roman character of Corinth and the influence of that culture upon the Corinthian

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<sup>38</sup> See especially 2 Corinthians 10–13.

<sup>39</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (Yale: Yale University, 2003), 1–7. Meeks attempts to connect the dots with his approach in the concluding pages of his book: “From these fragmentary, sometimes confusing pictures we may now list some aspects of the symbol system that seems to match aspects of the social process. Such a list may help us to consider a little more specifically the ways in which sacred symbols affect social reality and social experience affects symbolization” (190).

<sup>40</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 111–39.

Christians, Meeks' task is to describe the social context of Paul's mission within first-century Greco-Roman urban centers and then examine the life of Christians within that environment.

Meeks sees a homology or similar relationship among Paul's beliefs, their eschatological frame, and the conditions of early Christian social life in the urban contexts of Paul's congregations. In 2 Corinthians 10–13 and the conflict with the 'super-apostles', Meeks views Paul's message of Christ-crucified as a controlling paradigm<sup>41</sup> to which the theme of weakness is connected and by which it is influenced. Paul is weak in terms of the dominant value system of the Greco-Roman world but he also, perhaps remarkably, survives despite immense pressure and extreme afflictions.<sup>42</sup> For Meeks, this is a testament to the reality that Paul's power is not his own but God's<sup>43</sup>—a power Paul attributes to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus and to his union with Christ.<sup>44</sup>

Meeks believes that crucifixion and resurrection serve as a foundational metaphor for Paul and give Paul's whole belief system and theology a paradigm for God's Christ-centered action among them.<sup>45</sup> Paul does this in a way that reinforces solidarity among those who suffer, norms ethical behavior, offers an appeal for unity,

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<sup>41</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> 2 Cor 11:16–33.

<sup>43</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 183.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Cor 13:2–4.

<sup>45</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 180.

and gives a basis for hope.<sup>46</sup> The ‘word of the cross’<sup>47</sup> then results in the development of homologies<sup>48</sup> for Paul in Corinth that he uses in response to his opponents. According to Meeks, Paul uses ‘weakness’ homologically with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to proclaim the ‘word of the cross’<sup>49</sup> as a response to the ‘super-apostles’ and their criticism of his character and ministry.

### **3.3 The Identity of the ‘Super-Apostle’ Opponents in 2 Corinthians 10–13**

If in First Corinthians apostolic life and authority is an important topic, it is the key issue in Second Corinthians.<sup>50</sup> It becomes clear to the Corinthians that the weakness and suffering that characterizes the Apostle Paul’s life and ministry also characterizes the form and nature of Christianity and the gospel he proclaims.<sup>51</sup> Evidence suggests that the Corinthian Christians began to prefer other apostolic teachers.<sup>52</sup> Throughout Second Corinthians Paul frequently defends his apostolic authority over and against

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<sup>46</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 180–82.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Cor 1:18.

<sup>48</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Seifrid also believes that Paul’s message in chapters 10–13 is grounded in the ‘word of the cross’ which he develops in chapters 1–9. See Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 370.

<sup>50</sup> Seifrid, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, xxiv–xxv.

<sup>51</sup> Seifrid, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, xxv. For instance, Paul’s opening words in 1 Cor 1:18–31 in which he connects the gospel to Christ crucified and incorporates language of weakness and foolishness. In the opening words of Second Corinthians, 1:3–11, Paul speaks about being afflicted and sharing abundantly in Christ’s sufferings for the sake of the Corinthian Christians.

<sup>52</sup> Barnett suggests that visits of Apollos and Peter (Cephas) to Corinth raised questions regarding both Paul’s rhetorical abilities and his qualifications as an apostle. The questions and doubts only increase, according to Barnett, with the arrival of the ‘false apostles’. See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 10. See also “Bruce Winter and Competitive Sophism in 1st Century Corinth” in Chapter Three above.

opponents,<sup>53</sup> the ‘super-apostles’,<sup>54</sup> whom he calls ‘false apostles’.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the Corinthians were clamoring after a message, identity, and life that appeared far more glorious<sup>56</sup> than that which God was proclaiming to them through the apostolic ministry of Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 10–13, the mood of the letter changes from pastoral exhortation regarding matters such as the collection for the poor in Jerusalem to a defense of Paul’s apostolic authority. The Apostle’s ‘strength in weakness’ argument then takes shape in 2 Corinthians 10–13<sup>57</sup> as he responds to his opponents or ‘super-apostles’.<sup>58</sup> The question of the identity of the ‘super-apostles’ mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11:5 and 12:11 remains a key question in 2 Corinthians 10–13.

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<sup>53</sup> See 2 Cor 3:1–18; 4:1–15; 4:16–5:10; 5:11–21.

<sup>54</sup> 2 Cor 11:5 and 12:11.

<sup>55</sup> 2 Cor 10:2, 12; 11:4, 12–13, 15, 18, 19, 21b, 23a. The question concerning the identity of the ‘false apostles’ is a major one for interpreters of Second Corinthians. C. K. Barrett has even called the question “one of the crucial questions for the understanding of the New Testament and the origins of Christianity” (233). See C.K. Barrett, “Paul’s Opponents in II Corinthians,” *NTS* 17 (1971) 233–54. In his commentary, Barnett lays out the three most common ways that the identity of the opponents or ‘false apostles’ have been classified: 1. Judaizers 2. Gnostics 3. “Divine Men.” See Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 32, n 128. See also Brown, “The Gospel Takes Place,” 274, for a few examples. Scholars have seen them as Judaizers, Gnostics, or even “Christian propagandists from a Hellenistic-Jewish background” (Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* AB 32A (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 48–54). For a digestible conversation on the matter, see Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*, 28–38.

<sup>56</sup> This idea is suggested by Seifrid, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, xxv. Compare this with a ‘theology of glory’ in Chapter Four below that seeks meaning, identity, and even salvation within oneself and the created things of this world.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, “The Gospel Takes Place,” 273. Seifrid also mentions a change in mood to self-defense from earlier in the letter. See Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, xxx.

<sup>58</sup> Gorman points out the corollary between ‘defense,’ ‘weakness,’ and ‘the cross’ in Paul’s letters. He observes that whenever Paul explains or defends himself, he is explaining and defending his weakness because of the gospel of Christ crucified as the power of God. See Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 293.

### 3.3.1 Ernst Käsemann and the ‘Legitimate Apostle’

Ernst Käsemann argues that the opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians were a delegation from the Jerusalem apostolate rather than legalistic Jews.<sup>59</sup> They were sent to determine if Paul was a legitimate apostle, according to Käsemann.<sup>60</sup> They sought to determine whether he had properly subordinated himself to the Jerusalem apostolate following what Käsemann calls the ‘principle of tradition’. Only then could Paul rightly claim to possess apostolic authority.

In keeping with the ‘principle of tradition’, the outward marks of a true apostle include a personal commission from Jesus, evidence of the signs of an apostle, and acceptance of monetary support. Paul was deficient in each respect. Thus, his opponents accused him of being ‘no legitimate apostle’.<sup>61</sup>

According to Käsemann, Paul then responds to complaints against him by defending his authority as an apostle in 2 Corinthians 10–13.<sup>62</sup> He even takes up boasting, Käsemann suggests, to defend his apostleship.<sup>63</sup> Although, Paul’s boasting is in contrast to the self-regarding and self-promoting culture of first century Corinth and of the ‘super-apostles’. Paul boasts in his own weakness and suffering, and for the goal of pointing not to himself or his own power, but to the power of God. In so doing, Paul

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<sup>59</sup> Ernst Käsemann, “Die Legitimität des Apostels: Eine Untersuchung zu II Korinther 10–13,” reprinted in K. Rengstorf (ed.), *Das Paulusbild in der neueren deutschen Forschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 33–71.

<sup>60</sup> Käsemann, “Die Legitimität,” 34–52.

<sup>61</sup> Käsemann, “Die Legitimität,” 35.

<sup>62</sup> Käsemann, “Die Legitimität,” 35–36.

<sup>63</sup> Käsemann, “Die Legitimität,” 48, 69–70.

seems to be claiming that “the legitimation of an apostle lies not in strength but in weakness.”<sup>64</sup>

### **3.3.2 Gerd Theissen and ‘Itinerant Charismatics’**

Whereas Käsemann identifies the ‘super-apostles’ as a delegation from the Jerusalem Apostolate tasked with determining Paul’s apostolic legitimacy, Gerd Theissen classifies this group as ‘itinerant charismatics’ who took issue with Paul’s approach to mission work on the grounds that it violated their customs for itinerancy.

Theissen uses a sociological-analytical methodology to examine the social-historical environment of Corinth at the time of Paul. He suggests that 2 Corinthians 10–13 reveals two brands of missionary workers in Corinth—the ‘itinerant charismatics’ and the ‘community organizers.’ He believes that the ‘false apostles’ or ‘super-apostles’ were ‘itinerant charismatics’<sup>65</sup> who arose in the social circumstances of the Palestinian region. On the other hand, the ‘community organizers’ represented by Paul and Barnabas arose in the movement of the mission into urban, Hellenistic territory.<sup>66</sup> Both groups worked side-by-side but came into conflict in Corinth.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 435.

<sup>65</sup> See also Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 132.

<sup>66</sup> See Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 58.

<sup>67</sup> Theissen, *Social Setting*, 28.

Theissen believes that the ‘itinerant charismatic’ missionaries were not ‘false apostles’ and servants of Satan as Paul suggests<sup>68</sup> but normal early Christian missionaries who simply held more closely to the rules of itinerant charismatics and views regarding subsistence for workers and claims to poverty.<sup>69</sup> They had different ‘brands’ of missionary work and different attitudes regarding itinerant preachers, teachers, and church leaders.

### **3.4 Evaluation of the Social-Historical Background of 2 Corinthians 10–13**

Whether the ‘super-apostles’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13 were a delegation of the Jerusalem apostolate, ‘itinerant charismatics’, or something else, it is clear that a group existed in the first-century Corinthian congregation that sought to undermine Paul’s character, authority, apostleship, and ministry while attempting to persuade the Corinthians to follow their leadership.<sup>70</sup> The work of Winter and Meeks reveals a first-century Corinthian environment highly influenced externally by Greco-Roman cultural norms and social customs in all spheres of life. Winter’s hypothesis concerning the influence of sophism among the Corinthian Christians (as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 1–4) and Meeks’ description of the interplay between historical events and religious beliefs

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<sup>68</sup> 2 Cor 11:13, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Theissen, *Social Setting*, 49.

<sup>70</sup> Carson characterizes this antagonist ‘group’ as spiritually immature ‘triumphalists’ and their teaching as ‘triumphalism.’ In contrast, Carson casts Paul’s response in 2 Corinthians 10–13 as a ‘model of Christian maturity’. See Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*.

with the customs of urban social life in Corinth reveal that the first-century Greco-Roman culture had greatly influenced the ideas of the Corinthian Christians.

Relevant to this study is how the external Greco-Roman cultural ideas would have influenced the Corinthian Church's attitudes and expectations regarding identity, image, status, self-worth, honor, shame, and the concepts of strength and weakness within that matrix.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the Corinthian Church's disposition toward teachers, preachers, and church leaders is of importance. Were the Corinthian Christians expecting certain qualities or a specific performance from Paul that he was not delivering? Were the 'super-apostles' then able to exploit such cultural expectations to their own advantage over and against Paul? Does this get closer to understanding the nature of the conflict behind Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 10–13 and his gospel of 'strength in weakness'? Does it help us better understand his use of a crucifixion-resurrection root metaphor and Christ crucified paradigm<sup>72</sup> as a response?

Furthermore, considering the internal environment of the Corinthian Christian Church during Paul's time in light of the work of Käsemann and Theissen, we may ask

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<sup>71</sup> For this thesis, one might also add 'manliness' to the list. See Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 39–75. Wilson argues convincingly that Paul, among others, would have been considered unmanly according to first-century Greco-Roman standards of elite masculinity. It was important for elite men to exercise power over themselves (through self-control and bodily care) and others to be considered manly. This power over others was made known in four ways: sexual, paternal, political, and military (58–59, 74). By these standards, Paul was unmanly. Through his own sufferings (see 2 Cor 11:16–33, for instance) he showed a lack of bodily control and an inability to protect his own body. He allowed others to exercise power over him and his body. This rendered Paul 'weak' and unmanly in the eyes of first-century Greco-Romans—a reputation he happily embraced. For, Paul's trust was in the power of God through Christ rather than his own expression of power.

<sup>72</sup> See Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 180–82.



in what ways would the questioning of Paul's apostolic legitimacy and a possible conflict with compensation and rules for itinerancy have led Paul to boast in his own weakness? It is to these questions and to Paul's 'strength in weakness' response that we turn next.

### **3.5 Timothy Savage and St. Paul's 'Strength in Weakness' Response to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinthian 'Pop Culture'**

Paul's 'strength in weakness' reply to his opponents in 2 Corinthians 10–13 has garnered no lack of attention from scholars. Alexandra Brown suggests that, in these final chapters of Second Corinthians, Paul builds on the theme of 'power in weakness'<sup>73</sup> to the point that it is now "a weapon in battle"; a battle takes place in the weakness experienced and sufferings endured in the very 'place' of Paul's body.<sup>74</sup> V. C. Pfitzner emphasizes the weakness theme as representative of Paul's life under the cross.<sup>75</sup> Going further, Timothy Savage speaks of Paul's theme of weakness in 2 Corinthians 10–13 as a paradoxical expression of the self-emptying gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> On the development of the 'theology of the cross' and the 'strength in weakness' theme associated with it, Brown makes the argument that, while the 'theology of the cross' in First Corinthians is consistent with 2 Corinthians 10–13, "Paul's own change of status between the two bodies of correspondence demands a fresh consideration of the way in which power is conceived, placed, and employed with the Corinthian congregation . . ." See Alexandra Brown, "The Gospel Takes Place: Paul's Theology of Power-in-Weakness in 2 Corinthians" *Interpretation* 52 no 3 Jul 1998, 272.

<sup>74</sup> See Brown, "The Gospel Takes Place," 273. She believes that Paul's theme of 'power in weakness' is located apocalyptically over and against his opponents in the 'place' of his own body in which weakness and suffering is experienced as an apostle and for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. See also Brown's exploration of the theme within First Corinthians in *The Cross & Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians*.

<sup>75</sup> Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 16.

Savage seeks to explain the paradoxical language<sup>77</sup> of Paul regarding the nature and character of his ministry in Second Corinthians. He articulates Paul's response to his opponents in terms of 'power through weakness' and believes that to fully understand what Paul means by this description of his ministry one must identify the criticisms that precipitated it.<sup>78</sup> Savage locates the attacks on Paul's ministry and the Apostle's defense of his ministry against the social-historical backdrop of Corinth and certain 'pop' cultural views<sup>79</sup> regarding religion and the expectation it would bring divine benefits such as health, wealth, protection, and sustenance.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, he argues that in the Corinthian context people looked to impressive displays of public religious discourse.<sup>81</sup> Since Paul's gospel did not meet those culturally-influenced expectations, he was attacked.

Savage demonstrates that the Apostle Paul is attacked primarily for the following four reasons: his lack of boasting,<sup>82</sup> his unimpressive physical presence, his

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<sup>77</sup> See also Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 19. He believes that Paul's argument in Second Corinthians is perfectly summed up in two statements that express a paradox: "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (4:7). The Lord . . . said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (12:9)."

<sup>78</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Savage notes that traditional scholarly attempts to account for the Corinthian congregation's displeasure with Paul are threefold: a. that it originates with the missionary intruders at Corinth who oppose Paul; b. that their criticisms are of a religious kind; and c. that these may be inferred from Paul's apology (10–12).

<sup>80</sup> There are similarities here with twenty-first century American expressions of the 'prosperity Gospel.' See Bowler, *Blessed*. Some expressions of 'muscular' Christianity both within the mid nineteenth century Victorian English movement and the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical movement also carry notions of prosperity as related to pursuits of human strength, power, and health.

<sup>81</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Boasting is a common theme in 2 Corinthians 10–13. This section contains the highest concentration of 'boasting' language in the whole Bible. It seems that Paul was refuting a kind of boasting that was equivalent to self-glorification. This was part of the Greco-Roman culture in first-century Corinth. We

inferior public speech, and his refusal to accept monetary support for his work among them.<sup>83</sup>

However, departing from most modern scholarship on the issue, Savage locates the source of these attacks not in Paul's 'super-apostle' opponents<sup>84</sup> but in first-century pop-cultural 'self-regarding' and 'self-exalting' views<sup>85</sup> within Corinth. He contends that the criticisms coincide with the broader cultural view of proper public orators and expectations<sup>86</sup> for how they are to go about their business. It is then Savage's thesis that Paul is the victim of the 'self-regarding', 'self-exalting', 'self-boasting' cultural values and social prejudices of the first-century world in which the Corinthians lived.<sup>87</sup> To put it concisely, they were appalled by Paul's humility and counted it as 'weakness.'<sup>88</sup>

Savage shows that Late Hellenism stressed an individual's ability to determine one's own worth. It was a culture of self-promotion. The tendency then was to boast in

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might think of bragging about one's associations, talents, gifts, or works as an equivalent. See Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All: Status, Ambition, and the Way of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 92–94.

<sup>83</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> See 2 Cor 11:4–5, 18–20; 12:11 for the identification of these 'super-apostles' and insight into their teachings and potential criticisms of Paul. See also "The Identity of the Super-Apostle Opponents in 2 Corinthians 10–13" in Chapter Three above.

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps this is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the 'wisdom of the world'. See 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6 and 3:18–19.

<sup>86</sup> See also Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*.

<sup>87</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 12–13. About the criticisms of Paul identified from Paul's rhetoric in 2 Corinthians 10–13, Savage observes that none of them are religious in nature but, instead, have a *cultural overtone*. They represent the sort of charge that anyone living in the first century might bring against Paul (12, emphasis, mine). He sees this as support for arguing against the prevailing view within modern scholarship that the criticisms originated from and are primarily spoken by the 'super-apostle' opponents.

<sup>88</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 187. See also Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*, 13, 45.

oneself.<sup>89</sup> When the Roman emphasis on social stratification infiltrated Greek society, a framework for measuring worth was introduced and there was an incentive for reaching higher. Status was attained through wealth and/or some other social advantage and was meaningless unless acknowledged by others. Consequently, people competed for attention. Assertiveness and pride characterized their efforts and boasting was encouraged. When people evaluated others, they looked for markers of worth and status that they themselves valued. That is, impressive and noteworthy displays garnering public praise.<sup>90</sup>

Savage believes that religion in the ancient Greco-Roman world was influenced by this cultural ethos. People looked to the cults for contact with the divine to obtain benefits such as health, wealth, protection, and sustenance. They were *not* looking to the divine or to religious cults for moral transformation. They were *not* primarily interested in religious teaching or doctrine but were attracted to inspiring displays of seemingly divine power.<sup>91</sup> The one who spoke publicly with flair, force, and pride was honored. "In short, they wanted religion to serve them on their own terms— not to change them, but to exalt them."<sup>92</sup> All of this, according to Savage, was true of Corinth.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Paul regarded the ‘super-apostles’ self-promotion as utter foolishness and unlike the character of Jesus. Yet, it was clear that the Corinthians, perhaps influenced by the cultural and social ethos, were willing to entertain this foolishness. See Hill, *Servant of All*, 100.

<sup>90</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 25.

<sup>91</sup> See, for instance, Acts 12:21–23, where the people acclaim Herod Agrippa after he delivered an oration to them, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” The king’s ensuing death was because he was assuming glory for himself rather than giving glory to God.

<sup>92</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 34.

So Paul, especially in 2 Corinthians 10–13, proclaims a ‘strength in weakness’ gospel centered in Christ crucified and resurrected to an audience that was fully influenced by the opposite—a self-exalting, self-interested, and self-absorbed message aimed at lifting up one’s self-image and finding identity in it.<sup>94</sup> In a countercultural way Paul offers the self-emptying gospel of Jesus Christ and does so in paradoxical terms. He points to Paul’s antitheses of ‘glory through shame’, ‘life through death’, and ‘power through weakness’.<sup>95</sup> Savage contends that Paul ultimately shows the Corinthians that the power of God was made known in himself as it was made known in Jesus— “in cross-shaped humility.”<sup>96</sup>

### **3.6 Assessment of St. Paul’s ‘Strength in Weakness’ Response to the Corinthian Christians**

It is against this cultural background that criticisms of Paul in Corinth can be assessed. Paul’s refusal to boast in himself is understood in Corinth as a lack of self-

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<sup>93</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 52–53. Savage notes that the culture in Corinth merely differed in emphasis. In comparison with the broader Greco-Roman culture, the Corinthians were more inclined to honor success and reward primacy since there was a greater opportunity in a city like Corinth for social climbing. Conversely, they were more prone to ridicule the poor and humble.

<sup>94</sup> Paul subverts “the perverted structure of their false judgments through ‘the word of the cross’, which he bears in his body and life.” See Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 373.

<sup>95</sup> Though the language of ‘weakness’ does not occur explicitly in chapters 1–9, it is present in those chapters through these paradoxes. Seifrid believes that Paul uses the language of ‘weakness’ in 10–13 to summarize the theology of 1–7 and, “at the very least, *suggests* that the letter was composed as a single piece.” See Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 370, emphasis, original.

<sup>96</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 189. See 2 Cor 11:7, “Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God’s gospel to you free of charge?”

confidence and personal prestige.<sup>97</sup> His physical presence is considered weak because he is not bold when dealing with opposition. His public speaking delivery does not have the superiority and dynamism that overpowers his hearers. His refusal to accept financial support from the Corinthians denies them the chance to boast in their generosity and leaves them in a position of identifying with his poverty.<sup>98</sup>

The usefulness of Savage's account of Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel in 2 Corinthians 10–13 is his demonstration of the role 'pop culture' played in shaping religious attitudes among first-century Christians in the Greco-Roman world. In some ways, the situation parallels that of the American Christian Church today where cultural ideas of image, status, health, wealth, strength, and power might influence the preaching and teaching within local congregations. In what ways might the broader consumerist culture, for instance, influence the ministry and message of the American Christian Church? In what ways might a cultural proclivity towards displays of power and strength lead to disparaging views in the Church of weakness, suffering, and even the 'word of the cross'? As in first-century Corinth there are examples in twenty-first century American culture of people looking to religion for divine benefits like health, wealth, protection, and sustenance rather than some sort of religious transformation. One might think here of the influence of the prosperity gospel (of which 'muscular'

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<sup>97</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 57.

<sup>98</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 93.

Christianity is but one strand) in American Christianity and the broader American culture.

Savage's work shows that the broader culture was a contributing factor in forming the religious and social attitudes and ideas of the Corinthian Christians. When comparing Savages' assessment with those of Winter and Meeks, one could easily see how Paul's message and ministry would be perceived as countercultural, cutting against the grain of a sophist-influenced Corinth. This could help explain the content of Paul's message to the Corinthians, especially his words in 2 Corinthians 10–13.

However, Savage's reconstruction does leave one wondering whether the objection to Paul in Corinth is fully explained on pop-cultural grounds. Does the 'self-regarding,' 'self-exalting,' 'self-boasting' cultural milieu of first-century Corinth *fully* comprise the source of criticisms levied against Paul? What about Paul's concern that 'another Jesus' and 'a different gospel' were being preached?<sup>99</sup> Does Savage's thesis adequately account for the challenges to Paul's apostolic authority that seem to be more religiously and theologically based?<sup>100</sup>

Whether the criticisms were primarily culturally based or religiously *and* theologically based, it does seem to be the case that the criticisms have theological

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<sup>99</sup> 2 Cor 11:4.

<sup>100</sup> Here the ideas of Käsemann and Thiessen are helpful as they attempt to identify the source and content of the criticisms by determining the intended referent of the 'super-apostles'.

implications.<sup>101</sup> That is, the ‘self-regarding,’ ‘self-exalting,’ and ‘self-boasting’ will inevitably result in a kind of theology that is inherently ‘self-regarding’ and concerned primarily about one’s own image, status, and performance—even before God. This is akin to the kind of *inward*, ‘self-discovery,’ ‘muscular’ Christianity that we observe within late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical Christianity.

Therefore, perhaps the best explanation is that the criticisms of Paul in the first-century Corinthian Church have their source both in the cultural environment and in a divergent theology. Could it be that the ‘super-apostles’ were coopting first-century Corinthian cultural ideas and language to advance their own theological and religious agenda among the Corinthian Church? Thus, Paul’s ‘strength in weakness’ gospel is a paradoxical and countercultural theological response that also refutes the religious opposition to his ministry and apostleship. Therefore, Paul speaks counterculturally and theologically of ‘glory through shame’ and ‘strength in weakness’ through the lens of the glory of Christ, the weakness and shame of the cross, and the power of Jesus’ resurrection.

Most instructive for this investigation is the way in which Paul responds theologically to the cultural and religious opposition to his ministry and the proclamation of Christ crucified. He does not acquiesce to the culture and its ideas

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<sup>101</sup> See Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 410. When speaking of the criticisms inferred from Paul’s words in 10–13, Seifrid points out that, although Paul is dealing with practical judgments and not explicit theological formulations from his opponents, these practical judgments themselves bear an implicit theology that has a close connection with life.



regarding honor, shame, power, weakness, image, status, and self-worth. For to do this would require Paul to preach something other than the 'word of the cross' and Christ crucified. He makes it abundantly clear that this is his only message for the Corinthians.<sup>102</sup> Paul does not choose to boast in himself but in Christ alone. Knowing that it is difficult to see God at work when human strength seems adequate, Paul highlights his weakness, his insufficiency, to show the genuineness of his ministry.<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless, Paul does not ignore the Greco-Roman cultural environment of first-century Corinth as if it did not exist and he was preaching in a vacuum. Rather, perhaps out of his desire to "become all things to all people"<sup>104</sup> to save some, Paul engages the cultural and religious ideas, language, and emphases of the Corinthian culture and the criticisms of the 'super-apostles' while showing how all things are ultimately fulfilled in Christ crucified and raised.<sup>105</sup>

For Paul, honor, shame, power, weakness, image, status, and self-worth seem to be rightly understood and seen through the lens of the cross. Through the cross these concepts are given shape and one finds a true, lasting, and ultimate identity. In this way, Paul "becomes all things to all people"<sup>106</sup> and stays committed to his resolve to "know

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<sup>102</sup> 1 Cor 1:18, 23; 2:2

<sup>103</sup> See Hill, *Servant of All*, 101.

<sup>104</sup> 1 Cor 9:22.

<sup>105</sup> Here, one might think of Meeks' idea that Paul speaks homologically in his letters, drawing together different concepts and ideas and connecting them relationally to his Christ crucified paradigm. See Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 180.

<sup>106</sup> 1 Cor 9:22.

nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”<sup>107</sup> As Paul says at the end of Second Corinthians, “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we live with him by the power of God.”<sup>108</sup>

It is clearly not Paul’s aim to make the Corinthians followers of himself.<sup>109</sup> He has resolved to preach Christ crucified among them<sup>110</sup> and he is interested in boasting only in the Lord.<sup>111</sup> To the extent that Paul boasts in suffering<sup>112</sup> and weakness, it is to the end that God in Christ be glorified among the Corinthians. It is for this reason that Paul accepts his weakness and suffering as an apostle and even rejoices in it. For Paul, there appears to be no other option. To deny his weakness and suffering as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus would be to deny Christ and abandon his call as an Apostle. To do so would risk a kind of self-boasting focused on building himself up rather than the church and

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<sup>107</sup> 1 Cor 2:2.

<sup>108</sup> 2 Cor 13:4.

<sup>109</sup> See 1 Cor 3:1–23. One might raise an objection here since Paul encourages the Corinthians elsewhere, “Become imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). However, in those passages Paul is not ultimately calling the Corinthians to be followers of himself or even imitate him for his own sake. He is calling the Corinthians to imitate Jesus as Jesus is present in the Christian. In verse 15, preceding 1 Cor 4:16, Paul points to Jesus and uses the “in Christ” language to show clearly *who* the Christian is to follow. He says, “For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” It is on that basis that Paul exhorts the Christian to imitate him. Furthermore, in 1 Cor 11:1 Paul tells the Corinthians to be imitators of him “*as I am of Christ*” (emphasis, mine).

<sup>110</sup> 1 Cor 1:23 and 2:2. The connection between ‘weakness’ and a ‘theology of the cross’ is evident at the outset of First Corinthians, is present throughout First and Second Corinthians, and is emphasized again in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Brown, in “The Gospel Takes Place,” suggests that Paul’s ‘power in weakness’ argument “is consonant with Paul’s profoundly incarnational theology of the cross. Because he has been newly formed by the revelation of Christ crucified, Paul’s own body has become the place where one finds a sign of the present activity of the redeemer in the word” (280).

<sup>111</sup> 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 11:30; 12:1–10.

<sup>112</sup> 2 Cor 1:3–7; 11:16–31; 12:9–10.

drawing disciples to himself rather than to the Lord Jesus. For Paul, weakness and suffering as an Apostle authenticate his ministry and reveal the truth of his gospel message over and against the ‘false’, ‘super-apostle’ opponents.<sup>113</sup>

Rather than sidestep or cover up his own personal weaknesses to avoid having them exploited by his critics, Paul not only confronts them, he boasts<sup>114</sup> in them like a fool!<sup>115</sup> He gladly points to his own hardship and sufferings<sup>116</sup> where his weakness was laid bare and he was left vulnerable and exposed. Paul does so because he is content with his weaknesses.<sup>117</sup> And he is content with his deficiencies because he rests in the all-sufficient grace of God<sup>118</sup> and knows that therein lies his strength in weakness.<sup>119</sup> He finds his identity in Christ alone rather than in an image or status he creates for himself. Not strength that comes from within, but the strength and power of God that comes from outside himself—from God in Christ who was “crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Brown, “The Gospel Takes Place,” 272. She believes that Paul develops a defense of his apostleship in response to the ‘false,’ ‘super-apostles’ that is based on the idea that true apostolic power is manifested in weakness.

<sup>114</sup> 2 Cor 11:17, 21, 30; 12:1, 5–9

<sup>115</sup> 2 Cor 11:1, 16–17, 21, 23–29; 12:11. Pfitzner adds a helpful observation when he says, “Christ’s fool does *not lie* when priding himself on weakness rather than strength.” See Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 171, emphasis, original.

<sup>116</sup> 2 Cor 11:23–33.

<sup>117</sup> 2 Cor 12:10a. Though, as Pfitzner points out, “His contentment has nothing to do with the self-sufficiency of the Stoic philosopher, who can bear any trials with a stiff upper lip.” See Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 181.

<sup>118</sup> One might ponder, with Carson, that “the greater the Christian’s weakness, the greater the grace poured out.” See Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity*, 154.

<sup>119</sup> 2 Cor 12:10b.

<sup>120</sup> 2 Cor 13:4a. See also Phil 2:6–11. Pfitzner’s comments here are insightful: “The paradox that the gospel is a message of both weakness and power begins with the more fundamental paradox of Christ’s own

Paul knows that being vulnerable, ‘weak,’ and suffering in Christ is to truly be strong and to live in power.<sup>121</sup> Living in Christ, Paul is formed in Christ by the Spirit through his own sufferings, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. He is then free to be content<sup>122</sup> and even boast<sup>123</sup> in them. For, Paul knows that, in the end, his opponents, critics, and enemies, will not and cannot ultimately win. For they are fighting against Paul’s Christ and Lord who already lives by the power of God<sup>124</sup> and reigns victorious over them.<sup>125</sup>

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The content of Paul’s ‘strength in weakness’ gospel is instructive precisely because it is countercultural. And his method of engaging the culture while preaching

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weakness and power. He was *crucified in weakness*; his death was a demonstration of absolute powerlessness, when viewed in purely human terms. No power was evident as a Jew hung from a cross. Yet God’s power was at work in just that event (see 1 Cor 1:17–25). It turned out to be nothing less than a demonstration of divine power at work in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). The same Christ who was crucified now *lives by the power of God.*” See Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 192–93, emphasis, original.

<sup>121</sup> 2 Cor 13:4b. A ‘muscular’ Christian lesson that Tom Brown was beginning to learn at the end of *Tom Brown’s School Days* as he returned to Rugby School to pay respects to his deceased former headmaster buried beneath the altar in the school’s chapel. There, kneeling in humility before the image of the crucified Christ, Tom was learning the strength and power of Christ in suffering and weakness. See Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, 375–76.

<sup>122</sup> 2 Cor 12:10. Pfitzner articulates Paul’s meaning well when he says, “Paul is content to be weak as long as Christ and his gospel remained powerful and made others strong.” See Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 197.

<sup>123</sup> 2 Cor 12:9. Paul knows that this is true service for Christ. He is “carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor 4:10). See also Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 193.

<sup>124</sup> 2 Cor 13:4.

<sup>125</sup> As Seifrid suggests, “In Christ and in the Gospel, therefore, weakness performs a hermeneutical function. It exposes the truth about us as human beings: we are weak, not only in being subject to suffering and death, but also in being under the power of sin. Within the sphere of the Gospel, weakness opens saving communication with God in Christ, in confession, lament, thanksgiving, and praise.” See Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 454. This ‘hermeneutical function’ gets us closer to Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ to be explored in the next Chapter.

the countercultural message of Christ crucified is informative. As Hughes slays the 'hero-worship' tendencies that arise out of his 'muscular' Christian emphasis on the altar of the Rugby School chapel,<sup>126</sup> so Paul challenges the self-reliant 'hero' culture of first-century Corinth, crucifying it and raising it with Christ just as surely as the Apostle himself has been crucified, raised, and suffers in Christ. In contrast to culturally influenced ideas of weakness, power, strength, and control, Paul's message of 'strength in weakness' is 'other'-centered. It is 'other'-centered because it is Christ-centered and rooted in humility. In this way Paul subverts the self-reliant, self-promoting, self-regarding, and self-boasting culture of his time.

In contrast to the inwardly focused, self-discovery theologies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical expressions of 'muscular' Christianity, Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel promotes the love, care, and building up 'in Christ' of the other, rather than oneself. Whereas the contemporary versions of 'muscular' Christianity can mislead particularly Christian men into searching within themselves for an 'authentic manhood', Paul directs the Christian man's attention outside of himself and his own glory and points him to the crucified, risen, and glorified Lord Jesus as the source and activity of strength, power, and love.<sup>127</sup> That is where the Christian man, and all people, find an ultimate identity. The crucified and risen Lord Jesus shows the church and the world what true power, strength, and love look like.

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<sup>126</sup> See Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, 375–76. See the discussion in Chapter Two above.

<sup>127</sup> 2 Cor 13:3–4.

Moreover, Paul's theology of weakness speaks to individuals' own questions and struggles with suffering and weakness in a way that draws them *not* further into themselves in self-justification, self-pity, pride, denial, or despair but points them in hope to God in Christ. He knows what it is like to experience human weakness and suffering and not be overcome by it.

For Christian pastors and church workers, Paul's theology of weakness, especially in 2 Corinthians 10–13, gives voice to the real challenges and struggles of being faithful to the preaching and teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>128</sup> By claiming that his own sufferings, hardships, and experiences of weakness authenticate his ministry, St. Paul testifies to the countercultural nature of the Christian ministry and joins in solidarity with fellow ministers and church workers today. At the very least, Paul's theology of weakness can reassure pastors and church workers that suffering, struggle, and weakness are not necessarily signs of failure in their ministry or a signal that God has withdrawn God's power, presence, and blessing. They might even be evidence of the faithful proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

Paul's theology of weakness also has significance for Christian laypeople who struggle with their own weaknesses and feelings of inadequacy, inability, and insufficiency. The idea that Paul's suffering and weakness in Christ would be seen as

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<sup>128</sup> Pfitzner expresses as much with his suggested theme for the entire letter: "The ministry, authorized by Christ, is divine power at work in human weakness. Those who seek to impress with their own strength are not true servants of Christ." See Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 22.

'unmanly'<sup>129</sup> by first-century Greco-Roman standards, could actually be helpful to Christian men who might wrestle with similar views regarding power, strength, masculinity, and a 'muscular' Christian portrait. It could lead them to reconsider what it means to be a 'muscular' Christian.<sup>130</sup> It could lead men to orient their identities in Christ—the ultimate 'unmanly man' as the suffering servant<sup>131</sup>—and less in terms of a cultural portrait of a man or of masculinity.

Indeed, Paul's theology of 'strength in weakness' can speak to the suffering and struggle of every Christian and point us to hope in Christ in the midst of it all. Such a theology of weakness can reorient ideas of power and strength in a way that turns the Christian outward—not inward—toward God in Christ. This is where Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross'<sup>132</sup> is a helpful corrective. As Savage ends his monograph, "The apostle guides us to the paradoxical—yet now more intelligible—conclusion that it is only in cruciform sufferings like his that the Lord can perform his powerful work,

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<sup>129</sup> See Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 58–59. Even though God's power was made known in the life of Paul for God's salvation purposes in Christ, his suffering (and boasting in it—2 Cor 11:16–33; 12:5, 9) would have been considered unmanly according to first-century Greco-Roman standards of elite masculinity. According to Wilson, such physical suffering defied cultural norms of elite masculinity because it showed a violation of physical boundaries and a loss of bodily control, allowing other men to exercise control and power over Paul.

<sup>130</sup> So, Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 247: "God's revelatory action in Jesus unveils itself in unexpected ways and restructures the way humans are to think and be in the world. As those who ostensibly wield power, men in particular are urged to emulate God's paradoxical power on the cross, even if that emulation leads to their own 'unmanning'."

<sup>131</sup> Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 241. She suggests that, according to elite masculinity norms within the ancient world, Jesus is *unmanned* on the cross (emphasis, mine). For, "God has entered the world as an unmanly man" (247).

<sup>132</sup> V.C. Pfitzner even suggests that "Second Corinthians is a wonderful application of Paul's theology of the cross to his own ministry." See Pfitzner, *Strength in Weakness*, 19.

introducing glory into an age of darkness, salvation into a world of despair, a new age within the old."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Savage, *Power Through Weakness*, 189.



## 4. Martin Luther's 'Theology of the Cross' and St. Paul's 'Strength in Weakness' in 2 Corinthians 10–13

As demonstrated thus far, late twentieth and early twenty-first American evangelical expressions of 'muscular' Christianity distort what it means to be a Christian man. These versions of the movement aim to reach Christian men with the gospel of Jesus Christ to engage them more actively in congregational participation and vocational service by heavily emphasizing a masculine, 'muscular' identity.

These contemporary 'muscular' Christian emphases unintentionally direct men on *inward* pursuits to become manly men, to embrace certain masculine characteristics, and to be authentic Christian men in their vocations as husbands and fathers without adequately grounding them theologically in their identity in Christ. The real concern on a parish ministry level is that such approaches to men's ministry tend to mislead men whose souls are often crushed by the demands and expectations our culture places on them. These masculine, 'muscular' approaches do not appropriately address the inevitable weaknesses that men face as they confront their own insufficiency, inadequacy, and inability through the trials and sufferings of life.

To say it another way, these initiatives tend to be light on grace and its meaning and application for everyday life. If the primary message Christian men hear is an exhortation to embrace an ideal masculine, 'muscular' Christian character and to not abdicate their God-given stations in life as husbands and fathers and they are not also

given the good news of God's grace in Christ and reminded of their identity in Christ and in the Spirit,<sup>1</sup> then these same men are being robbed of the assurance and comfort of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and are susceptible to living a Christian life that swings from pride to despair. Either way, it is a Christian life that is inwardly focused and self-regarding, however unintentional.

Though traces of this unintentional inward journey can be seen in the original nineteenth century Victorian 'muscular' Christian movement in England, it has taken a more individualistic and 'wild' turn in its latest American evangelical manifestation. In this expression men are even called upon to embrace their innate 'wild' muscular-masculine hearts<sup>2</sup> and selves.

In the work of Thomas Hughes one can see a nuanced 'muscular' Christianity in the nineteenth century Victorian era movement. Hughes presents a version that is aware of the dangers of such inward pursuits and cautions against them. In addition, with the example of the Rugby School headmaster, Dr. Arnold, Hughes portrays the problem of 'hero-worship' within 'muscular' Christianity that can lead men to look *outward* to another, but in an idolizing way. Hughes thus warns men against embracing a masculine, 'muscular' Christianity that leads to the worship of ideal masculine, 'muscular' Christian men rather than to the worship of God in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rom 8:1–39.

<sup>2</sup> See "John Eldredge" in Chapter One, pages 20–23 above.

Toward the end of *Tom Brown's School Days* one can see a version of 'muscular' Christianity that is remarkably like Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' in 2 Corinthians 10–13. In this section, and indeed in all of Paul's letters,<sup>3</sup> the Apostle subverts first-century Greco-Roman ideas of power, strength, self-promotion, self-image, and self-reliance within the Corinthian Church by embracing his sufferings and hardships. He owns such sufferings as expressions of weakness and ultimately finds his strength and power in God who is crucified and raised in Christ, so much so that, as an Apostle, he has committed to speaking this 'word of the cross'<sup>4</sup> to the Corinthians. Even more forcefully, Paul can say to the Corinthians, "I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."<sup>5</sup>

In Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross'<sup>6</sup> one finds a theology informed by Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' and equipped to challenge the distorted American evangelical 'muscular' Christian theologies.

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<sup>3</sup> In *Cruciformity*, Gorman shows that Paul's narrative spirituality depicts an encounter with Christ in such a way that the individual can be conformed to Christ and his cross—cruciformity. Gorman identifies four fundamental patterns of cruciformity within Paul's narrative spirituality: cruciform faith, cruciform love, cruciform power, and cruciform hope (93). In this way, Paul's aim is to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2).

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 1:18.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 2:2.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the 'theology of the cross' see the following works: Richard Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* revised edition (St. Louis: CPH, 2014); Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); McGrath *Luther's Theology of the Cross*; Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*; Gene Edward Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, Revised Edition (St. Louis: CPH, 2010).

## **4.1 Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518**

Luther's 'theology of the cross' was first articulated in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. Yet, one can see a primitive form of the 'theology of the cross' even prior to the Disputation. In Luther's own existential experience with the question of "how one is to be righteousness before God?"<sup>7</sup> one sees the suffering and spiritual struggle that helped inform his articulation of a 'cross theology' in the Heidelberg Disputation.

Luther tried the inward way of self-sufficiency and self-help<sup>8</sup> before God and was brought to despair. The combination of medieval scholastic theology and the monastic system brought Luther quite literally to his knees. At the end of himself and confronted with the full extent of his own sin and human weakness, there he met Christ and his cross anew as his only source of righteousness before God.<sup>9</sup> It is this question of righteousness before God that serves as the basis for the Heidelberg Disputation. In answering this question in the Disputation, Luther formally expresses his 'theology of the cross' first experienced years prior.

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<sup>7</sup> For adequate narrative accounts of these experiences, see the following well-known Luther biographies: Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950) and James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 33–34.

<sup>9</sup> Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, 94–95.

### 4.1.1 A Response to Medieval Scholastic Theology

The Heidelberg Disputation is set against the background of scholastic theology that served as the operating theology of the Roman Church at the time of Luther. In the Disputation Luther is criticizing the application of Aristotle's thought to the question of how one is justified or declared righteous before God. Luther is then critical of the *facere quod in se est* ("to do what is in you") motto of scholastic theology.<sup>10</sup> This motto is based on the concept that every human being has a 'spark' or *scintilla* of good will within them that allows them to cooperate with God's grace and work out their own righteousness.

In contrast, Luther makes the case, based on the Scriptures and the church fathers, that the will is bound<sup>11</sup> before God to the extent that the individual sinner must rely completely on the grace of God in Christ as an *external* work for righteousness and salvation. The work of Christ is gospel and serves as eternal merit before God for the sinner. It is received in faith by the Holy Spirit and through the Word of God that proclaims this gospel. The alien, *extra nos* Word of God delivers the gifts of the gospel—forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. In the context of medieval scholastic theology and the questions regarding righteousness before God, knowledge of God, and the state and condition of the human will, Luther ultimately arrives at the cross.

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<sup>10</sup> For more of the scholastic theological background from which Luther writes the Heidelberg Disputation, see McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.

<sup>11</sup> Luther articulates this view more fully in *The Bondage of the Will*. See John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His writings* (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 166–203.

During the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther refutes this scholastic theology that promotes a righteousness of works (or of the law) before God. Luther sees that the cross of Christ is the sole place where knowledge of God is revealed to humans while also hidden in suffering.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, only through the cross is one declared righteous before God, and only through the cross does one truly come to *know* God. This is not achieved through human works or cooperation with God's grace in any capacity.<sup>13</sup> In articulating this 'theology of the cross', Luther appeals to the authority of the Holy Scriptures and the church fathers. Specifically, Luther looks to St. Paul and St. Augustine.

#### **4.1.2 The Theses and Theological Movement of the Heidelberg Disputation**

The Heidelberg Disputation consists of twenty-eight theses in which Luther contrasts a 'theology of glory' with a 'theology of the cross'. In the Disputation, Luther was asked to explain and defend his theological position in Heidelberg, Germany, before the German Congregation of his Augustinian order.<sup>14</sup> As was the custom at that

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<sup>12</sup> McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 203, 220–21. When speaking of the 'hiddenness' of God in relation to the 'theology of the cross', Luther would use the phrase *Deus absconditus* in typically two ways: 1. To refer to God who is hidden *in* revelation 2. To refer to God who is hidden *behind* revelation. On Luther's distinction between God 'hidden' and God 'revealed' in connection with the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation and his 'theology of the cross', see also Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 2–3.

<sup>13</sup> Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, 2. Kolb mentions that Luther's 'theology of the cross' teaches that "coming to know God's true nature requires the crucifixion of human reason's attempts to fathom the Divine. It also teaches that the climax and apex of God's revelation of his nature came on Christ's cross." Also, Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 26: "The theology of glory knows God from his works; the theology of the cross knows him from his suffering."

<sup>14</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 19. For other takes on Luther's 'theology of the cross' see Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 25–34; McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*; Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.

time, Luther's defense was done in the form of theses open for debate. The Heidelberg Disputation<sup>15</sup> was perhaps the most influential of Luther's disputations. Six future reformers present at Heidelberg either became Luther's disciples or were heavily influenced by him.<sup>16</sup>

In many ways, the Disputation moves from a discussion of the law of God to a discussion of the love of God. Luther scholar Gerhard Forde suggests that the structure of the Heidelberg Disputation can best be viewed as an arch stretching from one pillar to another.<sup>17</sup> The first pillar is the law of God. This is where Luther expounds a 'theology of glory'. The arch is the 'theology of the cross'. The second pillar is the love of God. The way then from the law of God to the love of God goes through the cross.<sup>18</sup>

Theses one through twelve discuss the problem of good works. These theses present good works over and against the question of sin. They reveal God's 'alien' and 'proper' work—to kill with the law of God and to make alive in Christ with the gospel, respectively.

Theses thirteen through eighteen deal with the problem of the human will. They describe the impotence of the fallen human will to avoid sin. Luther attacks the

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<sup>15</sup> For an English translation of the Theses see Dillenberger., *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, 500–03. For an English translation with commentary, see Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*.

<sup>16</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 20. Forde mentions Martin Bucer and Johannes Brenz as two of the future reformers. He even suggests that the theological theses of the Heidelberg Disputation are "almost a kind of outline for Luther's subsequent theological program" (21).

<sup>17</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 21.

individual's best works, which are sins when relied upon for justice and righteousness before God.

Theses nineteen through twenty-four address the great divide between the 'way of glory' and the 'way of the cross'. A 'theology of glory', Luther asserts, seeks the invisible things of God (justice, wisdom, and the law, for instance), while the 'way of the cross' looks to the visible, revealed things of God in Christ. The 'theologian of the cross' seeks the visible things of God by looking always to the suffering and resurrection of Christ. The 'theologian of the cross' lives with eyes fixed on the cross and makes sense of the world through it.

Theses twenty-five through twenty-eight address God's work in us: the righteousness of faith. These theses deal with God's love in Christ as a creative act that brings believers into being. For Luther, "The love of God does not first discover but creates what is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through attraction to what pleases it."<sup>19</sup>

As one can see, through his presentation of the theses Luther does move from the law of God to the love of God by going through the cross. Along the way, he deals with the question of human works and sin, the question of free will to avoid sin, and the contrast between approaching these questions as a 'theologian of glory' versus a 'theologian of the cross'.

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<sup>19</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 112.



## **4.2 The ‘Theologian of the Cross’ and the ‘Theologian of Glory’**

For Luther, the cross of Jesus Christ is, of course, salvation from sin. The cross is also used by God in the life of a Christian both to confront sin and through daily contrition and repentance. Luther would call this God’s ‘alien work’.<sup>20</sup> The Christian suffers God’s wrath over sin. The old Adam is crucified and drowned daily with Christ in baptism and the individual rises as a new creation in Christ. The cross confronts and reveals that the real problem of sin is in our distorted spiritual aspirations, our insatiable appetite for a ‘theology of glory’.<sup>21</sup>

The Lutheran theologian Regin Prenter succinctly sums up how Luther relates Jesus’ cross to the crosses of Christians.<sup>22</sup> He mentions that the content of the cross is the historical cross of Christ, while the proclamation of the cross of Christ is always involves the individual cross of the Christian. This relationship, Prenter concludes, points to the crucifixion of all human sin and self-justification.<sup>23</sup> This multi-faceted emphasis on the role of the cross of Jesus Christ in the life of a Christian leads Luther to assert

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<sup>20</sup> See McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 216.

<sup>21</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 1. ‘Glory’ here is to be contrasted with the glory of God. In contrast to the glory of God, the glory of a ‘theology of glory’ is made, sought, and appropriated by fallen creatures in the attempt to usurp divine glory (15, n. 15).

<sup>22</sup> Prenter, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 5. Prenter suggests that Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ views the cross on Golgotha and the cross laid upon the Christian as one and the same since Christ bore our punishment on the cross (3–4, 18).

<sup>23</sup> Prenter, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 5. Prenter points out that, for Luther, the relationship of the cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian is always brought into conversation with the Word of God and faith. The ‘word of the cross’ is proclaimed and received in faith by the Christian.

emphatically, and in a way that echoes St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:2, *Crux sola est nostra theologia* (the cross alone is our theology).<sup>24</sup>

In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther makes a firm distinction between a ‘theology of the cross’ and a ‘theology of glory’. For Luther, ‘glory theology’ and ‘cross theology’ are the only two types of theology.<sup>25</sup> Yet, when Luther speaks of theology in the Heidelberg Disputation he is not thinking in terms of an academic discipline or a conversation about God. Rather, he is speaking more of a pastoral theology concerned with daily life and one’s Christian existence in the world.<sup>26</sup> The concern is for the spiritual tasks of “creating and sustaining the life of faith, coping with doubt and difficulty, and being shaped by the passion of Christ.”<sup>27</sup> A ‘theology of the cross’ is a theology of Christian living that is “patterned after the life and death of Christ, which creates humility, faith, and love for others.”<sup>28</sup>

Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’, then, is concerned about the work of the cross in the daily life of the Christian. Therefore, Luther would say, a ‘theologian of the cross’

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<sup>24</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 3. He cites this phrase from *Luther’s Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*.

<sup>25</sup> Eyer offers a succinct definition of the two theologies: “In short, the theology of the cross says that God comes to us through weakness and suffering, on the cross and in our own sufferings. . . .The theology of glory, on the other hand, says that God is to be found not in weakness but in power and strength, and therefore we should look for Him in signs of health, success, and outward victory over life’s ills” (Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*, 24).

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 2–3.

<sup>27</sup> McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 3.

tells the truth and “calls a thing what it is.”<sup>29</sup> A ‘theologian of the cross’ calls sin what it is and presents the cross (rather than human works or effort) as the only means for justification before God. On the other hand, the ‘theologian of glory’ inevitably calls evil good and good evil.<sup>30</sup> The ‘theologian of glory’ ends up calling human effort before God and for salvation something good. The theologian of glory ends up calling Christian suffering something that is evil.

In contrast, the ‘word of the cross’ confronts sin—it kills and makes alive. It crucifies the ‘old self’ in anticipation of the resurrection of the ‘new self’ in Christ. For this reason, a ‘theology of the cross’ takes sin seriously and emphasizes the grace of God in Jesus Christ (rather than the law or human effort) as the only hope for resurrection and life. All religious options that sidestep the cross, merely talk *about* the cross, or emphasize human works of the law for salvation in some way, are just different variations of a ‘theology of glory’. Such glory theologies offer no ultimate hope in overcoming the enemies of sin and death.<sup>31</sup>

Only a ‘theology of the cross’ that takes seriously the event of the cross<sup>32</sup> and the proclamation of the cross in the life of the individual can be of any lasting, eternal hope for one confronted with the reality of their own sin and its consequences. This means

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<sup>29</sup> See Thesis 21 of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation. See also commentary on it in Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 81–90.

<sup>30</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 4. He helpfully points out that the proclamation of the cross to the sinner is an ‘event’ in the sense that it is the “doing of God to us.”

that the cross is most effective when 'done' to an individual rather than merely talked about. In this way, as Forde observes, the cross is quite polemical.<sup>33</sup> It is constantly revealing and exposing the 'theologies of glory' which the individual sinner (even unintentionally and unknowingly) seeks to hide behind. It is constantly attacking even the *best* (in contrast to the worst) that the individual has to offer God.<sup>34</sup>

### **4.3 Thesis 20 and the 'Theologian of the Cross'**

Most conversation regarding Luther's 'theology of the cross' and the Heidelberg Disputation involves theses 19–24 as the centerpiece of the discussion.<sup>35</sup> Luther takes the time in these theses to distinguish the 'theology of the cross' as a particular way of doing theology in contrast to a 'theology of glory'. The claim in this project is that theses 19–24 of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation speak directly to the inward 'glory' pursuits of contemporary, American evangelical 'muscular' Christian expressions. Special attention is then given to thesis 20 and its emphasis on suffering and the cross in the daily life of the Christian.

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<sup>33</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Forde laments the tendency of commentators to treat Theses 19–24 in such a way that strips them of their context within the whole Heidelberg Disputation and misses Luther's point that at this stage in the Disputation, the reader as theologian has come to an existential crisis in which his or her survival and viability is at stake. I will attempt to avoid such a tendency here. See Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 69–70.

The particular emphases of Promise Keepers, John Eldredge, and Mark Driscoll are examples of a larger ‘muscular’ Christian American evangelical culture<sup>36</sup> exhorting men and proclaiming a message for men that unintentionally leads them further into themselves to be ‘manly’ men. Such an exhortation can lead them to look to themselves in various ways to find hope and strength for the trials, sufferings, and difficulties of the Christian life rather than outward to God’s answer in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. This inadvertently leads adherents of these ‘muscular’ Christian expressions to become comfortable as ‘theologians of glory’. They become accustomed, as Regin Prenter puts it, “To erect a theology of the word without the cross.”<sup>37</sup>

As a corrective, Thesis 20 of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation states, “That person deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross.”<sup>38</sup> In many ways, this is how St. Paul answers the ‘super-apostle’ ‘theologians of glory’ in 2 Corinthians 10–13. They are the ones who decry Paul’s humility and label him as weak because of his sufferings for the sake of Christ and his unwillingness to conform to the cultural ‘glory’ norms of first-

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<sup>36</sup> In *Jesus and John Wayne* Du Mez makes the case for a militant, patriarchal, and nationalistic evangelical masculine culture cultivated around the image, personality, and conservative ideals of John Wayne (10). At the very least, her work points to the deeper theological concerns within American evangelicalism addressed in this thesis. Concerns regarding an *inward* embrace of masculine strength, power, and might in ways that marginalize the place of weakness and suffering within the Christian life and ultimately eclipse Christ and the cross.

<sup>37</sup> Prenter, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 12. He also points to the opposite temptation of arriving at a theology of the cross without the word (13). He looks to Rudolph Bultmann and his “demythologizing” program as one example.

<sup>38</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 77.

century Greco-Roman Corinth. Paul owns his weakness and doubles-down on his sufferings, showing how they glorify God in Christ.

In Luther's words in Thesis 20, Paul is there (and throughout the Corinthian correspondence), a 'theologian of the cross' who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross. In 2 Corinthians 10–13 Paul is making sense of his own external experiences, weaknesses, and sufferings through the cross. He is not, like Luther's 'theologian of glory', trying to get around or behind the cross. He is not avoiding the cross in favor of other 'glory' pursuits as Paul's 'super-apostle' opponents and today's misguided 'muscular' Christians appear to be doing. To do so would be to chase after the invisible things like virtue, goodness, godliness, wisdom, justice, strength, and power in a way that ignores the visible realities of Christ and the cross. It would be to miss the point that those characteristics are the very things that God revealed through Christ on the cross.<sup>39</sup> For Luther, the visible and revealed things of God are always centered in Christ and the cross. They are made known through the suffering of Christ. They are visible in Christ's human nature and looked upon by the world as weakness and folly.<sup>40</sup> This is God's 'backside', Luther would say, alluding to Exodus 33:18–23 and God's revelation to Moses.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 77. Also Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 17: "The cross is the interpretive, or hermeneutical, lens through which God is seen; it is the means of grace by which God is known."

<sup>40</sup> 1 Cor 1:25.

<sup>41</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 78. See also Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 26.

The antidote, then, for any ‘glory’ pursuit is *only* the cross. Not Jesus ‘plus something else’. Not self-reliance. Not self-sufficiency. Only the crucified and risen Lord Jesus will do;<sup>42</sup> the one who was crucified in weakness and raised by the power of God. All other pursuits drive the individual further *into themselves*<sup>43</sup> in a way that leads to either pride or despair.

Furthermore, through the cross, individuals can make sense of their own weakness and suffering and see God’s strength revealed in it. Christian men can come to see their full identity is found in Christ and in their union with him—the one who was crucified in weakness and raised by the power of God. The ‘theology of the cross’ opens a new understanding of reality. The true reality of God and of his salvation is “‘paradoxical’ and hidden under its opposite.”<sup>44</sup> Through one’s suffering, God is made

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<sup>42</sup> See Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 146–47. They show that Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ (or ‘theology of the word of the cross’ which they believe is more accurate) proposes that “precisely through the contradiction of power-in-dying and wisdom-in-weakness, God is present to lead people out of imprisonment to their own power games and to substitutes for genuine understanding.”

<sup>43</sup> Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*, 12–13. As an experienced hospital chaplain, he mentions that there is “always the temptation to leave the sufferer preoccupied with his own resources rather than to help him focus on God.” He points to an urging in our culture and within the medical field to gain credibility and acceptance by thinking in psychological rather than spiritual terms. He then makes a distinction between a ‘clinical’ (psychology-based) model of care and a ‘pastoral’ (spiritual) model. His ‘pastoral’ model is like the ancient ‘cure of souls’ understanding of pastoral ministry within the early church. For more on the prevalence of the ‘cure of souls’ model in the early church, see Christopher A. Beeley, *Leading God’s People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 54–76. For a contemporary application of this ancient model by a pastor and professor of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, see Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 32. Althaus goes on to say that, for Luther, only by faith is this reality understood. Therefore, “the ‘theology of the cross’ is the ‘theology of faith’ and that the ‘theology of faith’ is and remains, however, the ‘theology of temptation’ or *Anfechtung*” (33–4).

known.<sup>45</sup> As Luther says, “This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore, he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Luther could say, as he did in his commentary on the first twenty-two Psalms, “The cross alone is our theology.”<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.4 The ‘Glory Story’ and The ‘Story of the Cross’**

Throughout the Heidelberg Disputation Luther essentially tells two stories: the ‘glory story’ and the ‘cross story’.<sup>48</sup> Framing a ‘theology of glory’ and the ‘theology of the cross’ in terms of ‘story’ helps accentuate the pastoral nature of the ‘theology of the cross’ and shows the existential character of each: an existential character that was first highlighted in Luther’s own story and struggle with the question of righteousness before God.

In his commentary on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, Gerhard Forde suggests that the ‘glory story’ is the most common, overarching story that human beings tell themselves.<sup>49</sup> This narrative, according to Forde, assumes that the individual has come from glory and is bound for glory but has gotten off track in the middle. In this kind of story, the solution is proper religious effort in some form or fashion to get back on “the

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<sup>45</sup> McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 214.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer* vol 1 Luther’s Works (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 53.

<sup>47</sup> See Martin Luther, “Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms” in Weimar Ausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883), 5.176.32.

<sup>48</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 5.



glory road.”<sup>50</sup> In the ‘glory story’ the individual is turned inward toward themselves and the world to find religious meaning before God. The ‘glory story’, in whatever version it is told, always leaves room for the human will to perform before God. The emphasis on the work of God in the life of the individual tends to be downplayed at best and absent at worst. It is the human will, Forde suggests, that wants to be in control. Therefore, the instinct is for human beings to make a theology attractive to a supposed ‘free will’.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, the ‘cross story’ assumes that the will is bound before God and that individuals cannot rely on themselves in any way for freedom. The only solution is the end of the ‘glory story’ through the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the individual’s own participation in it by dying and rising. Through the ‘cross story’ individuals then come to see that the ‘cross story’ is their story. They come to see in the death of Jesus their own death<sup>52</sup> and are brought to the humble truth that they are dust.<sup>53</sup> The individual begins to take on this truth and learns dying—even daily dying to sin and self-reliance. The individual comes to see all things through

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<sup>50</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 5. Throughout his book, Forde uses the analogy of addiction to illustrate the difference between how one approaches the problem and solution in the ‘glory story’ and the ‘cross story’. A ‘theologian of glory’ might try to cure an addiction by optimistic exhortation. In contrast, the ‘theologian of the cross’ knows that the cure is much more drastic because, in truth, the problem is worse than the ‘theologian of glory’ believes it to be. To resort to optimistic thinking and appeals for moral effort is to approach the problem of sin and death before God by the law and to reinforce one’s illusions about oneself. It is the behavior of an addict trying to hide the addiction and put on a false front (15–16).

<sup>51</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 9. Genesis 3 and the Fall is biblical evidence often cited for the desire of the human will to be in control before God and even over God.

<sup>52</sup> Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 28.

<sup>53</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 9. One might think here of the Ash Wednesday liturgical ritual of marking ashen crosses on a person’s forehead. In addition to the placing of ashes, words are spoken to the individual that allude to Adam’s creation from the dust of the earth in Gen 2:7 and the curse after the Fall in Gen 3:19: “You are dust; and to dust you shall return.”

the lens of suffering and the cross and lives only in the strength of God in Christ<sup>54</sup> — a strength and a power outside of oneself.

For Luther, the ‘glory story’ and the ‘cross story’ are always in conflict and combat with one another in the life of the individual. What is needed is the word of the cross that comes *outside of the individual* to kill and make alive in Christ. This word comes to the individual in the proclaimed word of the gospel in absolution and through the sacramental word of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In remembrance of one’s baptism, especially, Luther emphasizes the daily renewal of the individual who dies to sin and death and rises to new, resurrection life with Christ.<sup>55</sup> Yet, in all of these means through which the grace of God comes, the individual participates in the event of the cross and receives in faith the word of the cross. In this way, the Christian is joined to the very death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For Luther, when the word of the cross is received in faith by the individual and the ‘story of the cross’ takes root in the life of the individual, the believer becomes a ‘theologian of the cross’ — not professional theologians or academic theologians who embrace scholarly pursuits and/or serve as pastors and teachers of theology, but ‘theologians of the cross’ who turn toward and lean in “to face the problems, joys, and

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<sup>54</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> In “Section 2—Daily Prayers” of his *Small Catechism*, Luther encourages the head of the household to lead the family in morning and evening prayer by first making the sign of the holy cross. For Luther, making the sign of the cross in this way recalls one’s Baptism when the individual Christian was first marked with the cross and reborn as a child of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. See *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 30–31.

sorrows of everyday life.”<sup>56</sup> They are ‘theologians of the cross’ who daily come clean about the seriousness of sin and their addiction to it.<sup>57</sup> They embrace the reality that there is no cure to be found within themselves.

The one captive to the ‘story of the cross’ does not resort then to optimistic appeals<sup>58</sup> to glory, strength, wisdom, or positive thinking because those things are part of the problem. The ‘theologian of the cross’ turns instead to confess the addiction to sin and to self and to extinguish desire for sin through the cross.<sup>59</sup> Such theologians learn to speak the truth about themselves: “I am an addict.” Which is to say, “I am a sinner.”<sup>60</sup>

The ‘theologian of the cross’ is then led by the Holy Spirit and under the cross to see “the trials, the sufferings, the pangs of conscience, the troubles—and joys—of daily life as God’s doing and do not try to *see through* them as mere accidental problems to be solved by metaphysical adjustment.”<sup>61</sup> Although the ‘theologian of the cross’ who lives by the ‘story of the cross’ may be tempted at times to resort to the ‘glory story’, it is a

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<sup>56</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 10. See also Richard Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*. Eyer, a hospital chaplain of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod for many years, writes this book as a reflection upon his years of ministering to those beset with illness and/or dying. The book is intended to help readers interpret life’s experiences of suffering in light of the cross (7).

<sup>57</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> As Forde points out, “The theology of the cross is the true and ultimate source of human optimism because it always presupposes the resurrection.” See *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 17–18.

<sup>59</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 17. For Forde, the cross is the ‘intervention’ and performs the ‘bottoming out,’ to continue the addiction analogy. This rhythm of confession and absolution is captured well in the ancient liturgical tradition of the ‘Service of Preparation’ at the beginning of a Worship Service. The worshippers gather and begin *first* with the invocation followed immediately by confession and absolution. Furthermore, the sign of the cross is often made by the liturgist at the speaking of the invocation. Rubrics are even given that encourage worshippers to make a sign of the cross upon themselves as a remembrance of their baptism. See, for instance, “Divine Service: Setting One” in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 151.

<sup>60</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 13.

struggle and a daily battle confronted first and foremost not by self-reliance or inner strength, but by the strength of God in Christ and through God's Word.

#### **4.5 Martin Luther's 'Theology of the Cross' and the Christian Life: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio and the Vita Passiva***

When speaking of the temptations, struggles, and sufferings of the Christian within a 'theology of the cross', Luther uses the German word, *Anfechtung*. For Luther, this term carries with it connotations of 'assault', 'temptation', and most especially, 'spiritual attack'.<sup>62</sup> From Luther's own existential experience, he has come to describe *Anfechtung* as a form of temptation which takes place through an assault upon believers in order to put them to the test. For Luther, death, the devil, the world, and Hell join forces in this kind of assault to reduce believers to doubt, despair, helplessness, and hopelessness.<sup>63</sup> The English words 'angst' and 'anxiety' are in some ways related to Luther's idea of *Anfechtung*. One might also describe the sufferings and weaknesses that Paul lists in 2 Corinthians 11:23–33 as instances of *Anfechtung*.

For Luther, *Anfechtung* is part of the spiritual life of the Christian. Taking *Anfechtung* into account, Luther then proposed a threefold pattern of spirituality that is informed by his 'theology of the cross'. This threefold pattern depicts the Christian life

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<sup>62</sup> McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 224.

<sup>63</sup> McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 225. Luther speaks this way in his meaning on the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer in the *Small Catechism*. He says, "God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are *attacked* by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory" (22, emphasis, mine).

as one of reception from God, through God's Word, and over and against a spirituality of self-promotion. It includes prayer (*oratio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and temptation (*tentatio*).<sup>64</sup> Because of the emphasis on receptivity of God's Word, this description of the spiritual life of the Christian is often called the *vita passiva*<sup>65</sup> (the passive/receptive life). This phrase emphasizes the work of *God* in the life of the Christian above all else. The phrase implies that God is the active subject and that the Christian is the object or receiver of God's action. The Christian life is also *passive* for Luther in the sense that it suffers or undergoes God's work and passively receives it.<sup>66</sup>

In Luther's spirituality of reception, God is at work in the Word of God and through the Holy Spirit. The threefold depiction of the spiritual life, *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*, describes the life of faith for the Christian that begins with prayer, concentrates on meditation or reflection on God's Word, and leads to spiritual attack or temptation through *Anfechtung*.<sup>67</sup> This spiritual attack then leads one back to prayer and reflection

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<sup>64</sup> John W. Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes A Theologian?", *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2002): 258. See also John W. Kleinig, "Luther on the Practice of Piety," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 48, no. 3 (2014): 172–85 and Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 189. Luther developed his receptive spirituality most comprehensively in his *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition* of his German writings.

<sup>65</sup> In contrast to the *vita activa* (the active life) and the *vita contemplativa* (the contemplative life) descriptions that were around at the time of Luther and handed down since at least the time of Aristotle. The *vita activa* emphasizes human action, practice, or performance. The *vita contemplativa* emphasizes theory, human contemplation, and reflection.

<sup>66</sup> Kleinig, "Luther on the Practice of Piety," 173. Kleinig points out that this life of faith for Luther receives its shape from its location in Christ: "For just as the Father gives the Spirit through the Son to those who meditate on God's Word, so by the Spirit the Son brings them to the Father as they pray with God's Word" (185).

<sup>67</sup> Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio," 258. Luther's 1530 "Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering" makes the connection between the Christian's suffering and Christ's suffering on the cross. Moreover, Luther makes a distinction in this sermon between the cross and suffering coming upon or finding the

on the Word of God. Temptations, sufferings, and spiritual attacks expose the Christian as fundamentally weak and lead that individual back to God in Christ for grace sufficient in their weakness.

Luther then sees temptation, suffering, weakness, and spiritual attacks or *Anfechtung* as an essential part of the spiritual life of the Christian. It is God's 'alien work' in which God is hidden in things that appear contrary to God.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, God remains present and uses such things to confront the self-sufficient and self-reliant. The Christian is drawn further out of oneself and deeper into Christ<sup>69</sup> where "God makes his strength clear in the weakness of those who trust in him."<sup>70</sup> In temptation or *Anfechtung* the Christian is drawn closer to God through Christ and the Word of God. Through suffering the Christian learns to seek help from God through God's Word<sup>71</sup> and in

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Christian and one choosing one's own cross and suffering. For Luther, the cross finds the Christian. The Christian does not need to seek the cross. See Martin Luther, "1530 Sermon on the Cross and Suffering at Coburg Castle," American Edition (AE) 51:197ff.

<sup>68</sup> See Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, 100–01. Kolb points to Luther's commentary on Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32 as evidence of Luther's emphasis on affliction being part of daily life for the Christian. Through this daily affliction God brings intervention "'under the appearance of opposites', making concrete God's promise to Paul that God was making his power perfect in the apostle's weakness, demonstrating the sufficiency of God's grace (2 Cor 12:9)."

<sup>69</sup> Kleinig, "Luther on the Practice of Piety," 181.

<sup>70</sup> Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, 101.

<sup>71</sup> Luther, "1530 Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering," 205. "This then is the true art, that in suffering and cross we should look to the Word and the comforting assurance, and trust them even as He said, 'In me you shall have peace, but in the world, tribulation'" (John 16:33).

prayer. The Christian becomes dependent upon God and God's all sufficient grace.<sup>72</sup> In Christ and in the Holy Spirit, the Christian comes to live a cruciform life.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, Luther is clear that the Christian's cross and suffering is an expression of Christ's cross and suffering. Christians find hope and comfort amid their suffering in the cross and suffering of Christ.<sup>74</sup> Luther also clarifies that cross and suffering are not something by which the Christian gains merit before God. It stands to reason, then, that the Christian's cross and suffering are not something to be chosen or sought out. Rather, the cross comes upon a person and the Christian is called to patiently bear and suffer it.<sup>75</sup>

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

Luther's 'theology of the cross' and his depiction of the Christian life as the *vita passiva* are seen clearly in the life of Paul and in his gospel of 'strength in weakness' in 2 Corinthians 10–13. From his 'thorn in the flesh'<sup>76</sup> to his catalog of sufferings,<sup>77</sup> Paul sees at work the strength of God in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. Even though these sufferings expose Paul's weakness and leave him vulnerable to attack by others, he still boasts in them. Just as Luther sees God and God's grace hidden in *Anfechtung*, so Paul

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<sup>72</sup> 2 Cor 12:9.

<sup>73</sup> So, Gorman's *cruciformity* concept that encapsulates St. Paul's narrative spirituality of the cross—an ongoing pattern of bearing the crosses of the Christian life while living in Christ and dying with him (48–49). He explores Paul's words about weakness and power within this narrative spirituality in Chapter 11, "Cruciform Power," 268–303. See also Luther, "1530 Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering," 198, 206. He says, "Though our suffering and cross should never be so exalted that we think we can be saved by it or earn the least merit through it, nevertheless we should suffer after Christ, that we may be conformed to him" (198).

<sup>74</sup> Luther, "1530 Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering," 201.

<sup>75</sup> Luther, "1530 Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering," 199.

<sup>76</sup> 2 Cor 12:7.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Cor 11:23–33.

takes comfort in the Lord's response to his 'messenger of Satan': "My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>78</sup> Even in weakness and suffering Paul knows that the power of Christ rests upon him. When all else is stripped away, Christ and his grace is still there for Paul.

Whereas Luther articulates his 'theology of the cross' in terms of *Anfechtung* and the *vita passiva*, in 2 Corinthians 10–13 Paul proclaims a 'theology of the cross' with his paradox of 'strength in weakness'. Regardless, when brought together both emphases offer a helpful corrective for misguided masculine, 'muscular' Christian pursuits of 'glory'. Particularly the contemporary American evangelical descriptions of 'muscular' Christianity tend to lead Christian men on inward journeys of self-discovery through heavy moral exhortation and prescriptive masculine understandings of the Christian life that may start at the cross but then often sidestep it or leave it behind along the way.

In these 'muscular' descriptions of the Christian life, suffering and struggle are obstacles to be overcome rather than integral components in the life of the Christian man. In the face of them, the Christian man is directed not to prayer, meditation on the Word of God, or to confession and absolution as much as he is encouraged to 'try harder' and to embrace a 'manly' character and identity consisting of strength, courage, and bravery. Worse yet, he might be called, based on his own manly character, to 'be a

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<sup>78</sup> 2 Cor 12:9.



man' and 'bear it'. Yet, such an exhortation is abstract and calls the Christian man to bear a load that is not called a cross and on the strength of himself rather than Christ.

The Christian man is then left looking to himself and his own resources in the face of the *Anfechtung* of life. Instead of the suffering, struggle, and spiritual attacks of life leading the Christian man outside of himself to prayer, study of the Word of God, and ultimately to Christ who suffered, died, was buried, raised, and has ascended on high for him, he looks within for 'strength in weakness'. 'Muscular' Christianity is thus another version of the *vita activa* and another chapter in the 'glory story.'

This self-reliant approach puts the Christian man on a pendulum that swings from pride to despair.<sup>79</sup> In moments where his own resources seem sufficient, he might draw further within himself in pride. When he has 'bottomed out' and has come to the end of himself, he might draw further within himself in despair. If a version of 'muscular' Christianity attempts to make sense of a Christian man's sufferings, struggles, and *Anfechtung* in a way that does not point him in his darkest moments outside of himself to his identity in Christ crucified in weakness and raised by the power of God, then there is nothing truly 'muscular' about it. In the end, such a 'theology of glory' is the surest sign of weakness.

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<sup>79</sup> Wolfmueller, *Has American Christianity Failed?*

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis began with a perceived crisis in American Christian churches as it relates to men's ministry and the inability of congregations to effectively engage men in parish life and in the Christian practices of church attendance, prayer, Scripture study, and religious education groups. In recent surveys conducted by Barna Group and Pew Research Center, results indicate that "women are the backbone of the Christian congregations in America."<sup>1</sup>

From Billy Sunday in the early twentieth century to John Eldredge in the early twenty-first century, there has been a warning cry among some American Christian leaders that the church is being feminized and that men are bored. Among contemporary efforts within American evangelicalism to reverse this perceived trend are the 'muscular' Christian ministries of Promise Keepers, John Eldredge, and Mark Driscoll. Though differing in style and emphasis, all three of these late twentieth to early twenty-first century American evangelical 'muscular' Christian approaches aim to evangelize, equip, and 'defeminize' men with a specific masculine, 'muscular' brand of Christianity that has become highly influential even in mainline churches.<sup>2</sup> In different ways, they lead Christian men to find their identity in their masculinity.

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Research Online, "Women are the Backbone of Christian Congregations in America" and Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 7. She specifically mentions Promise Keeper rallies and John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart* as part of an evangelical consumer culture that has made "deep inroads into mainline Christianity."

The theological implications of this contemporary 'muscular' Christianity have been explored in this project. It has been argued that evangelical 'muscular' Christian leaders often unintentionally direct men, particularly American Christian men, further into themselves through heavy moral exhortation to embark on a triumphal journey of self-discovery and self-reliance to find hope, meaning, purpose, and strength. On the contrary, one sees that the Bible presents a different kind of 'muscular' Christianity.

The Bible shows us a kind of Christianity where the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10–13 can rejoice in his suffering and see his 'thorn in the flesh' and 'messenger of Satan'<sup>3</sup> as an instrument God has used to help him disavow his self-reliance, embrace his human weakness, and ultimately proclaim, "When I am weak, then I am strong."<sup>4</sup> That is, Paul presents a 'muscular' Christianity rooted in a 'theology of the cross' and based on Christ who was "crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God."<sup>5</sup> Baptized into Christ Jesus and joined by faith to his crucifixion and resurrection, the Christian then lives by the power of God alone.<sup>6</sup> The Christian man finds his complete identity in Christ, rather than in a masculine, 'muscular' character. Together, Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' and Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross' offer a much-needed corrective to distorted American evangelical 'muscular' Christian messages.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 12:7.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor 12:10.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 13:4a.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor 13:4b.

So where do we go from here? What sort of application does St. Paul's theme of 'strength in weakness' have in the pastoral ministry and parish life? In what ways can pastor and people embrace St. Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' within Luther's 'theology of the cross' to correct distorted views of what it means to be a 'muscular' Christian? In what ways can Paul and Luther offer helpful insights and correctives in the arena of men's ministry? How can men's Christian ministry initiatives in local congregations and communities draw men into the church and into a life in Christ in a way that speaks to a masculine identity that men perceive to be missing in the church but also points them to their full identity in Christ and the grace of God? In what ways can men's ministry efforts address the vocational responsibilities of men in the church, the home, and the rest of civil life while also making certain that God's grace in Christ and the cross of Christ are inextricably linked to such efforts? How is St. Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' counter-cultural with respect to images of masculinity? In what ways does it challenge those images by redefining our understanding of strength and other attributes often associated with a masculine identity? And how might the message that confesses humanity's weakness and God's sustaining power and strength be true gospel for men whose bodies and souls are crushed by cultural demands and expectations?

There are at least four fruitful fields where we can explore these questions and where a 'strength in weakness' and 'theology of the cross' emphasis has a precedent

within the history of the Christian church that can inform men's ministry programs. Given such precedents, a renewed focus in the four areas of pastoral care, hymnody, liturgy, and sacred visual art will be beneficial.

### **5.1 'Strength in Weakness' and Pastoral Care for Souls**

There has been a trend in recent years to speak of pastoral ministry in therapeutic and even managerial terms.<sup>7</sup> What has been deemphasized is the classical, ancient model of pastoral care as a *habitus* "for the cure of souls."<sup>8</sup> In the Lutheran tradition there is a history of understanding the pastoral ministry within this classical model. For instance, Luther often used the word *Seelsorger* (curate of souls) for 'pastor'.<sup>9</sup>

In preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and the worship life of a congregation, there has been a tendency to view the pastor in therapeutic terms as one who might coach parishioners through tough times, offer self-help and good living advice, provide psychotherapy, and help them 'get out of a rut' and become happy and self-fulfilled again.

On the other hand, the role of pastor might be seen primarily in managerial terms. In this view, the pastor might function as CEO or administrator to handle the

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<sup>7</sup> Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 60, 66.

<sup>8</sup> See Beeley, *Leading God's People*, 54–76. See also Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 17–20. By defining pastoral work within the classical model as *habitus*, Senkbeil refers to "the disposition of the pastor's soul by which he acquires the skills of a spiritual physician, to discern accurately and then sensitively treat the ailments of Christ's sheep and lambs" (*The Care of Souls*, 60).

<sup>9</sup> Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 63. See also Norbert H. Mueller and George Krause, eds., *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1990), 15 and John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* Second Edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), 1–2.

business of the church. Residual effort, energy and attention might then be given toward pastoral care for parishioners.

The problem with these models of the pastoral ministry is that, in Luther's language, they tend toward a 'theology of glory'. That is, these models leave parishioners and congregations looking to worldly measures of success or to self-reliant means of care in ways that soften and even ignore the deep problem of sin within the human soul. When the real problem is minimized or ignored then insufficient solutions are sought and the cross in the daily life of congregation and congregant is sidestepped or downplayed. Self-help and business techniques threaten to take the place of the gospel of Christ crucified and raised as the only source of forgiveness, life, hope, and salvation. This can leave the soul of the Christian and congregation still in desperate need of care and cure.

The ancient 'cure of souls' model of pastoral ministry and pastoral care brings the spiritual care of the human being to the forefront. As a result, this ancient model offers a suitable framework for ministry considering Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness'<sup>10</sup> as informed by Luther's 'theology of the cross'. The 'cure of souls' model

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<sup>10</sup> In *Leading with a Limp: Turning Your Struggles into Strengths* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Publishing, 2006), Dan B. Allender looks at the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king to speak of three corresponding leader types. He then encourages leaders to "lead with a limp" and make Jesus known to others by acknowledging and embracing weaknesses and serving from a place of brokenness and suffering within each of these three leader types. He says, "So we must acknowledge and embrace our weaknesses, for good can come out of them. As a broken king, for example, I paradoxically promise a new reign of righteousness. As a broken priest, I invite the heart to long for the coming day of

encourages the pastor first to see the parishioner as a doctor would a patient.<sup>11</sup> Thus, listening is key so that the pastor can give a proper diagnosis, speak God's Word, and speak the realities of sin and grace, specifically to individuals in their situations.

When the pastor has in mind the deep problem of human sin within each person and is primarily concerned about the individual, that pastor is in a better position to point suffering parishioners to true 'strength in weakness' that lies not in self-help, a technique, or another strategy, but in the Lord Jesus who first suffered for those individuals on Calvary and now suffers with them<sup>12</sup> in their sin and moment of vulnerability, inadequacy, inability, and insufficiency. One might then ponder how a more intentional 'care of souls' emphasis combined with a 'strength in weakness' and 'theology of the cross' approach can enhance a pastor's ministry to men who are prone toward self-help and self-reliance as strategies to avoid feelings of dependance, helplessness, vulnerability, inadequacy, inability, and insufficiency?

By first being attentive to the individual and taking seriously the human condition as well as God's remedy in the cross, the pastor can offer hope and comfort in Christ that leaves the Christian, especially the Christian man, looking *outward* to God—

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redemption. And as a broken prophet, my fumbling proclamation of truth sets my organization on an endless journey of asking, seeking, and knocking. God redeems our brokenness" (199).

<sup>11</sup> Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 60–114 and Beeley, *Leading God's People*, 54–76.

<sup>12</sup> So, Allender, *Leading with a Limp*, 199. "God redeems our brokenness . . . We can expect nothing more or less from ourselves and our leaders than to know Jesus better through their brokenness as well as our own. We must demand of ourselves and our leaders to limp and fall forward into the strong arms of grace."

not *inward* to self. The pastor is better equipped to speak honestly of sufferings, hardships, weaknesses, spiritual attacks, and struggles with sin as places, times, and moments where God is still present to offer Christ as gift and pour out an abundance of grace. The pastor is better equipped to suggest that, rather than try to ‘get over’ or ‘get past’ a time of suffering, hardship, weakness, spiritual attack, or struggle, the individual pray for contentment in Christ *in the midst* of such things, for strength in Christ to bear such things, and for vision to see that God is using such things to conform them to the image of Christ. The pastor is in a better position to help that individual see that God is forming them through the Holy Spirit as a ‘theologian of the cross’.

Men’s ministries in American Christian churches could benefit from this message as conversations about men’s vocational responsibilities as husbands and fathers (among other callings and stations in life) are balanced by a theology that proclaims God’s strength and sustaining power in Christ for men who still fall short and who are beset by their own weakness, inadequacy, inability, and insufficiency. Two resources within my own church body (the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod) that helpfully strike this balance are the men’s devotional booklet by David Schmitt, *Man of God, Strong to Serve*<sup>13</sup> and the Men’s Network initiative from Lutheran Hour Ministries.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David Schmitt, *Man of God, Strong to Serve*. The devotional is a good example of one that speaks to men and is grounded in Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ and St. Paul’s gospel of ‘strength in weakness’.

<sup>14</sup> “Men’s Network” at <https://www.lhm.org/men/>.



## **5.2 ‘Strength in Weakness’ and the Church’s Liturgy and Hymnody**

### **5.2.1 The Church’s Liturgy**

There is great precedent for the presence of a gospel of ‘strength in weakness’ accompanied by a ‘theology of the cross’ in the context of Christian Worship. In the historic liturgy of the Christian church, the worshipper comes in the name of the triune God in a position of weakness. That is, the worshipper begins in God’s triune name confessing sin, as a sinner in need of God’s mercy. Following the invocation, confession and absolution takes place.<sup>15</sup> This is part of the ‘Service of Preparation’ prior to the ‘Service of the Word’ and the ‘Service of the Sacrament’.

In certain traditions, the emphasis on ‘strength in weakness’ and a ‘theology of the cross’ continues as worshipers are encouraged to gather at the invocation by making the sign of the cross and remembering their baptism into Christ.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, prior to the act of corporate confession there is often a time for silent reflection on God’s Word and for self-examination.<sup>17</sup> In the ancient liturgy the worshiper concludes the ‘Service of Preparation’ equipped with the strength of God through absolution and the pronouncement of forgiveness in Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 151. Lutherans have traditionally understood the Sunday morning, corporate worship service of the church as ‘Divine Service’. That is, the emphasis is upon God as subject and actor who serves the worshipper with eternal gifts. The worshiper then comes with open hands as one who receives what God gives (viii–ix). There are five ‘Divine Service’ settings in *Lutheran Service Book*. Each one begins with a ‘Service of Preparation’ that includes the invocation, confession, and absolution.

<sup>16</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 151.

<sup>17</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 151.

The theme of ‘strength in weakness’ is also present as the worshiper chants or speaks the ‘Kyrie’ in response to the liturgist. The congregants are in a posture of ‘weakness’ or ‘dependency’ as they pray to God ‘in peace’ and ‘for peace’ in different ways.<sup>18</sup>

In the ancient liturgy this ‘strength in weakness’ gospel accompanied by a ‘theology of the cross’ continues throughout the Service. The worshiper is in a vulnerable posture of receiving God’s eternal gifts in Christ. As Luther would say, the Christian is a beggar, receiving what God gives.<sup>19</sup> And in the ancient liturgy, the climactic gift that God gives in a worship service is the Eucharist.<sup>20</sup> The gift of the Lord’s Supper is inherently connected to a concept of ‘strength in weakness’ and a ‘theology of the cross’. The communicant literally feeds on what God gives and so admits that therein lies what is most desperately needed.

This connection with the ‘theology of the cross’ is strengthened through the chanting or speaking of the ‘Proper Preface’ and the ‘Agnus Dei’.<sup>21</sup> In the ‘Proper Preface’ the communicant thanks God for the boundless love shown to sinners in need of God’s grace and mercy: “You sent your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into our flesh and laid on Him our sin, giving Him into death that we might not die eternally. Because

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<sup>18</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 152–53.

<sup>19</sup> Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, 297. In a mix of Latin and German, it is reported that Luther said, “Hoc est verum. Wir sind alle Bettler” (This is true. We are all beggars.) on his death bed.

<sup>20</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 160.

<sup>21</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 161, 163.

he is now risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity, all who believe in him will overcome sin and death and will rise again to new life."<sup>22</sup> The person and work of Jesus Christ is clearly the center of worship in this climactic sacramental celebration.

In the 'Agnus Dei' the communicant speaks to Christ: "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us."<sup>23</sup> The worshipper once again looks to God for mercy in a position of need and dependence. This is the posture of the worshipper immediately preceding the reception of the Lord's Supper.

The whole narrative of the liturgy is centered in a Pauline gospel of 'strength in weakness' and so is consistent with Luther's 'theology of the cross'. As a result, communicant worshipers leave the service confident and secure in what God has done for them in Christ and not what they now must do for God to earn favor or show faithfulness. This frees and empowers worshippers to be who they have been recreated to be in Christ by freely showing Christian love and service in Christ's name. Participants in the worship service are sent forth to serve in their vocations having received in faith the eternal gifts of the gospel, confident in their identity in Christ. Rather than looking *inward* to embark upon some sort of religious journey, they leave praying, "We implore you of your mercy that you would strengthen us through the same [salutary gift of the Sacrament] in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one

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<sup>22</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 208.

<sup>23</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 163.

another; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”<sup>24</sup>

If it is true that Christian men are bored in American Christian churches, perhaps part of the reason is because they do not know why they are doing what they are doing. Perhaps they do not really understand what is going on in a worship service and the reasons for embracing the traditions of the church as expressed in the ancient liturgy. What an opportunity then for churches to teach the meaning of the ancient liturgy in a way that engages the imagination and shows how the whole worship service tells a story of God’s grace in Jesus for the broken, the weak, and the vulnerable. What an opportunity for the church to connect the parts of the liturgy to the concrete realities and struggles of the Christian man. Rather than merely exhort men to ‘be men’, own up to their vocational responsibilities, and embrace a certain image of masculinity, here is an opportunity for congregations to present a ‘muscular’ Christianity through the ancient liturgical tradition and show them true strength for the journey.

### **5.2.2 The Church’s Hymnody**

St. Paul’s theme of ‘strength in weakness’ and a ‘theology of the cross’ are also evidenced in the hymnody of the Christian church.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to an overemphasis on the celebratory and the triumphalistic, as can often be the case in contemporary

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<sup>24</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 166.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to hymnody and congregational singing, one might also think of other sacred music selections such as Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion* and Part II of George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*.

Christian music,<sup>26</sup> the theme of ‘God’s strength in human weakness’ can be seen in the church’s hymnody throughout the centuries. Even in the much loved hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” the singer admits that “Jesus knows our ev’ry weakness” and then resolves to “take it to the Lord in prayer.”<sup>27</sup> The hymn also encourages the worshiper to ask, “Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?”<sup>28</sup> In response, the singer concludes, “Precious Savior, still our refuge— Take it to the Lord in prayer.”<sup>29</sup>

In another much-loved hymn, “Jesus loves Me!”, the hymnwriter speaks of little ones that belong to the Lord and concludes, “They are weak, but he is strong.”<sup>30</sup> In “Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer”, we sing, “Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but Thou art mighty; Hold me with Thy pow’rful hand.”<sup>31</sup>

In the Christmas hymn, “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” the hymnwriter has the singer consider how Jesus knows and identifies with human weakness as he writes,

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<sup>26</sup> See Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22–4. Writing as an evangelical, Rah believes that the American Church, especially American evangelicals, avoid lament and the reality of suffering and pain. He cites ‘white flight’ to safer suburban areas as one cause. He believes that this socio-historical pattern of escaping suffering and pain has given way to a “triumphalistic theology of celebration and privilege rooted in a praise-only narrative” characterized by the “absence of lament and the underlying narrative of suffering that informs lament” (24). To prove his point, he cites Christian Copyright Licensing International’s (CCLI) top one hundred songs in 2012. Only five of the songs would qualify as lament, while most of the songs reflect praise-only themes (22).

<sup>27</sup> “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 770:2.

<sup>28</sup> “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 770:3.

<sup>29</sup> “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 770:3.

<sup>30</sup> “Jesus Loves Me!” *Lutheran Service Book*, 588:1.

<sup>31</sup> “Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 918:1.

“O Savior, child of Mary, who felt our human woe; O Savior, King of glory, who dost our weakness know.”<sup>32</sup> Finally, Luther’s own hymn based on Psalm 46, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” directs the singer toward the strength and might of God in the face of temptation, death, and the power of the devil. Regarding the devil and his temptations, Luther writes, “No strength of ours can match his might. We would be lost, rejected. But now a champion comes to fight, whom God Himself elected. You ask who this may be? The Lord of hosts is He, Christ Jesus, mighty Lord, God’s only Son, adored. He holds the field victorious.”<sup>33</sup>

In many of the church’s hymns throughout the centuries, St. Paul’s ‘strength in weakness’ gospel is evident. There is also present a ‘theology of the cross’ that acknowledges the reality of sin and death, human weakness, suffering, and struggle. The singer is directed to God in Christ as the ‘muscular’ One who makes God’s power known for salvation even in ways that are hidden in weakness and suffering. With such an emphasis, the suffering, pain, hardships, and temptations of the Christian life are acknowledged and addressed. In the face of such things the hearer and singer finds strength and hope in Christ for the journey.

Again, there is an opportunity through the hymnody of the church to teach men the Christian Faith clothed in God’s ‘strength in weakness’ and adorned with a robust ‘theology of the cross’. Through the hymnody of the church it is even possible to have a

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<sup>32</sup> “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 359:4.

<sup>33</sup> “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 657:2.

discussion about a man's God-given responsibilities and duties, ordering those obligations rightly within his identity first and foremost as one bought by the blood of Christ and bearing the cross of Christ daily in vocational service. With many rich allusions and quotations of Scripture evident in Christian hymnody, there is also an opportunity to lead Christian men further into the study of God Word as the basis for these discussions, rather than further into themselves through self-help tips and cultural images and expectations of masculinity. By singing the hymnody of the church that is rich in 'strength in weakness' tones and 'theology of the cross' rhythms, men come to internalize a message that offers true help, hope, and strength for Christian service. Through many of the ancient hymns of the church Christian men will find a message that identifies with the real struggles and sufferings that they encounter.

### **5.3 'Strength in Weakness' and Sacred Visual Art**

Another area of application for St. Paul's gospel of 'strength in weakness' accompanied by Luther's 'theology of the cross' concerns visual depictions of Jesus and the crucifixion. A simple google search can unearth images of the 'buff' and 'muscular' Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper,<sup>34</sup> showing off a tattoo,<sup>35</sup> and even breaking the

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<sup>34</sup> See the "Muscular Jesus" Facebook page and images at <https://www.facebook.com/Muscular-Jesus-101676721542040/>.

<sup>35</sup> Tanith Carey, "A Very Muscular Brand of Christianity: Why Jesus has Undergone a Macho Makeover," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/aug/26/jesus-macho-makeover>. Accessed 9-8-2020.

horizontal beam of the cross with both arms as he hangs upon it.<sup>36</sup> Such images celebrate a triumphant Jesus without the cross and, therefore, without the resurrection. Even when Jesus is depicted on the cross, the emphasis on the muscular tends to distract and misguide. Even worse, images of Jesus breaking the cross send a message that the cross of Christ is not necessary. Such 'muscular' images are contrary to the very words of Jesus regarding the necessity of the cross<sup>37</sup> and run counter to St. Paul's theology, specifically his gospel of 'strength in weakness'.

Throughout Christian history, one finds visual images of Jesus and the crucifixion that are consistent with an emphasis on 'strength in weakness' and a 'theology of the cross'. One famous image is Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*.<sup>38</sup> When closed, this triptych altarpiece depicts the scene of the crucifixion. In this view, Christ is in the center with others gathered around, John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of our Lord, included. In the section below the crucifixion scene, Christ has died and is being prepared for burial. In neither image of Jesus is there any attempt to hide the shame, frailty, and weakness of his crucifixion, suffering, and death.

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<sup>36</sup> "Muscle Jesus Christ," redbubble, <https://www.redbubble.com/i/poster/Muscle-Jesus-Christ-by-xxkenohxx/38918961.LVTDI>.

<sup>37</sup> Matt 16:21.

<sup>38</sup> Matthias Grunewald, "The Isenheim Altarpiece" (1512–1516), *Art and the Bible*, <https://www.artbible.info/art/isenheim-altar.html>. Accessed 9-9-2020.



The *Isenheim Altarpiece* portrays Jesus in a way consistent with St. Paul's words: "For he was crucified in weakness."<sup>39</sup> Such a depiction allows the viewer to come to terms not only with Christ's crucifixion, suffering, and death, but also with the prospect of bearing one's own cross.<sup>40</sup> The raw and realistic way that Grünewald portrays Jesus' crucifixion and death also leaves the viewer looking forward in hope and anticipation to the other half of St. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 13:4: "But he lives by the power of God."<sup>41</sup>

Other works of art consistent with St. Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel and Luther's 'theology of the cross' are the Reformation era Lutheran artist Lucas Cranach's *Crucifixion of Christ*<sup>42</sup> and *Law and Grace*.<sup>43</sup> In *Crucifixion of Christ* Cranach portrays the crucifixion scene with Christ crucified in the middle of the two criminals while bystanders look on from below. Cranach depicts Christ as frail, exposed, vulnerable and rather weak. He is covered in blood and inundated with wounds from scourging. This depiction is in stark contrast to the two criminals who hang on their respective crosses looking rather healthy and able bodied, if not for their fate. In visual form Cranach

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<sup>39</sup> 2 Cor 13:4a.

<sup>40</sup> Matt 16:21–28. It is no coincidence that in these verses Jesus foretells his own suffering and death immediately preceding his exhortation that the disciples take up their own cross.

<sup>41</sup> 2 Cor 13:4b.

<sup>42</sup> Lucas Cranach, *Crucifixion of Christ* (1501), *Cranach Digital Archive*, [http://lucascranach.org/AT\\_KHM\\_GG6905](http://lucascranach.org/AT_KHM_GG6905). Accessed 9-9-2020.

<sup>43</sup> Lucas Cranach, *Law and Grace* (1529), *Cranach Digital Archive*, [http://lucascranach.org/CZ\\_NGP\\_O10732](http://lucascranach.org/CZ_NGP_O10732). Accessed 9-9-2020.

shows Christ crucified in weakness and suggests God's power hidden in the suffering and pain of the cross.

Moreover, in *Law and Grace* Cranach visually represents the Christian narrative from the Fall to redemption. The consequences of sin and death because of the Fall are illustrated through a naked Adam and Eve, a dead corpse, and a nude man seated on a tree trunk in the foreground. The focus of the painting is the scene of the nude figure with two witnesses around him pointing to an image of Christ crucified in the upper right section of the painting. From there, the viewer's eyes are drawn to the lower right corner of the painting and the scene of the resurrection. The viewer of *Law and Grace* clearly sees the reality of sin and death but is not left looking inward to the self for the answers. Rather, the eyes of the viewer are drawn to Christ crucified and risen. Christ is clearly the viewer's hope in the face of the grim consequences of the Fall. And so, in visual form, Cranach instructs us all.

Through a recovery of Christ-centered and cross-centered visual art consistent with St. Paul's 'strength in weakness' gospel and Luther's 'theology of the cross', distorted versions of 'muscular' Christianity can be corrected. Furthermore, an alternative 'muscular' Christianity can be proclaimed that is an accurate representation of how the Bible speaks and equips individuals, especially Christian men, to live all of life under the cross in a way that brings true peace, joy, and hope. Macho images of Jesus instituting the Lord's supper, showing off a tattoo, and breaking the horizontal

beams of the cross with his buff arms, although amusing, distort and mislead. Sacred visual art that minimizes, makes light of, or ignores the weakness and suffering of Christ can also present a false and misleading picture of life and service in Christ. What is more helpful for the Christian man is sacred visual art depicting that the Christ who endured the very real weakness, suffering, and pain of the cross and was raised in victory by the power of God, is the same Christ who offers himself in love and strength to sinners in their darkest days of weakness, vulnerability, pain, and suffering.

#### ***5.4 'When I am Weak, then I am Strong'***

By embracing 'strength in weakness' and a 'theology of the cross' found within the traditions of the Christian church, one is in a better position to proclaim a 'muscular' Christianity that can truly reach men with the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ and give them sufficient hope, help, and grace for the journey. This approach leaves room for a discussion about virtue, vocational service, and images and expectations of masculinity while also grounding such conversations in one's identity in Christ, who suffered in weakness, was raised by the power of God, and now joins himself and his cross to the Christian man. One is in a better position to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that gives men hope amid suffering, vulnerability, and weakness, even doing so by means of pastoral care, in liturgical word, through hymnic form, and with visual art. Such an emphasis might even lead to a reconsideration of 'muscular' Christianity within

American evangelicalism that has more room for embracing lament and expressing vulnerability through admission of one's own inadequacy, inability, and insufficiency.

True 'muscular' Christianity is found only in our Lord who was crucified in weakness and raised by the power of God—the Lord to whose crucifixion and resurrection we are united in baptismal union by the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> In Christ and in the Spirit, the Christian man endures suffering, temptation, and weakness in a way that does not leave him resisting it, covering it up, or sulking in despair. Rather, the true 'muscular' Christian man can confront these things head on because he sees God at work in suffering, temptation, and weakness. Through the Holy Spirit he can see in faith God working to strip him of his own self-reliance and draw him close. He sees in such things an opportunity to boast not in himself, but in God.

And so, a group of young Christian fathers and husbands representing various congregations and denominations within a given community are getting together at a coffee shop on a weekly basis to discuss books about being a better Christian man and to watch videos about being a better husband and father. And in the middle of the discussion one participant catches glimpse of another sighing deeply while looking down at the floor. The sound of his sigh, the slump of his shoulders, and the gaze of his eyes are suggestive of a great burden and responsibility he feels all too inadequate to carry. And rather than add to the load, he simply says to the young man, "I will boast all

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<sup>44</sup> Rom 6:1–4 and Gal 3:27.

the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> 2 Cor 12:9b–10.

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## **Biography**

Rev. Joshua Christopher LaFevé was born and raised in Lansing, MI and currently serves as pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church (LCMS) in the village of Leland, MI, on Lake Michigan. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from Concordia University, Ann Arbor (2005). He graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis with a Master of Divinity (2010) and a Master of Sacred Theology (2017). He has also served as a parish pastor in southern California. He and his wife, Talitha, have three children.