

Commentary: The ‘biblical manhood’ industry is a scam

February 19, 2024

(RNS)—That’s what I posted on X a few days ago, and it’s still going viral.

By the way, the “biblical womanhood” industry is also a scam. But the situation that prompted my post—[the firing of Aaron Ivey](#) from his position as worship pastor at a Texas church over indecent texts with men—was yet another case of predatory sexual behavior by a pastor selling the message of “biblical manhood.”

Note: I didn’t say “biblical manhood”—how that is defined is an open question, hence the quotation marks—is a scam. I said the *industry* around it is a scam.

By industry, I am referring to a definition like this one in the [Cambridge Dictionary](#): “something that is produced or is available in large quantities and makes a lot of money.”

Defining ‘scam’

Of course, not everything that’s produced or available in large quantities and makes a lot of money is a scam. So, why would I say the particular industry around “biblical manhood”—as well as “biblical womanhood”—is a scam?

First, because, as noted above, what constitutes “biblical manhood/womanhood” is not only not clearly defined, but its definition is highly contested. The term originated, after all, in order to make a boundary, strike a mark and create a brand as a reactionary move amid the

culture wars.

Furthermore, the tropes most commonly invoked within the discourse around “biblical manhood” distort—or even misrepresent—what the Bible teaches about virtue and character for men as well as women.

David wasn’t a warrior wearing armor. He was a shepherd with a slingshot guided by the Lord. Samson’s strength came not from bench presses and leg lifts, but from the Spirit of the Lord.

Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 16:13 to “act like men” [means](#) in the original Greek to be courageous, and it applies equally to men and women, just as all of the qualities of Christlike character do.

Second, just as women’s fashion magazines exist by creating needs and desires women wouldn’t have otherwise and then offering the “solutions” to these manufactured needs, Christian publications also can operate on similar capitalistic and consumeristic principles.

Certain topics—those that get at our core identities and callings, in particular—are more prone to manipulation. This vulnerability derives from basic human nature, but when a spiritual or religious layer is added on top of those basic human needs, the potential for exploitation rises considerably.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes around manhood and womanhood are rooted in both nature and culture. Like all stereotypes, they emerge out of something truthful. But the calling of the Christian transcends culture. The church is the last place where cultural stereotypes should be upheld as biblical truth.

The worship leader who doesn’t like football shouldn’t feel out of place in the church because of that. The sales manager who is a godly husband,

father and Bible teacher shouldn't feel less manly because he doesn't enjoy the outdoors. The IT guy who does most of the cooking is just as masculine as the one who doesn't.

Steve Bezner, pastor of Houston Northwest Church, shared these examples with me in a recent conversation. He said once he saw machismo was being confused with spiritual maturity, it changed the way he taught and ministered to men in his congregation.

Rather than relying on the warrior as a metaphor for manhood, Bezner said, he extols the character of Christ in all its complexity and finds the men in his church doing better as a result.

Defining 'industry'

Certainly, the line between offering a creative work or product and becoming an industry can be fine. Lessons and sermons on character and godliness in all our roles are good and necessary. I think in particular of someone teaching principles of manhood to prison inmates or the fatherless and, in doing so, changing lives in important ways.

Moreover, the people who speak, write and teach these things certainly are worthy of their pay. The fact something costs something doesn't make it an industry.

But messages that gather into a storm of books, conferences, videos, courses, workbooks, workshops, websites, podcasts and statements are inarguably an industry. Furthermore, when the industry is fronted by celebrities and personalities—often the sock puppets of bigger names behind the curtain—the message risks being lost behind the messenger.

And when the people behind the industry don't live up to or even believe the message themselves, then it's a scam. Even if the message is true. Like

all machines, industries can eat people alive. And such machines distort or destroy the gospel message itself.

The industry cycle

In my recent book *The Evangelical Imagination*, I devote an entire chapter to the notion of “improvement,” showing how this early modern concept contributed to the rise of the self-help movement in the 19th century and has spilled over into Christian thinking and practice today. Many of the publications centered on “biblical manhood” and “biblical womanhood” are just a continuation of this Victorian—and secular—movement.

Indeed, as Daniel Vaca shows in *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America*, over the course of the 20th century, the publishing industry created a “commercial religion”—one in which publishers and booksellers create consumers’ desires, along with the authors and celebrities constructed to fill those needs. What follows is a vicious cycle that cultivates the demand that perpetuates the supply.

Thus arose the “[evangelical industrial complex](#),” a term coined by Skye Jethani in 2012. The phrase alludes to a similar one made famous by President Dwight Eisenhower in his 1961 speech warning of the unintended consequences of America’s unrestrained expansion of the military and its self-perpetuating arms industry: the military industrial complex.

Both the military industrial complex and the current-day evangelical version are driven by systemic economic forces, Jethani explains. In the case of the evangelical industrial complex, the driving economic power is the Christian publishing industry.

And the unintended consequence in this case is the endless proliferation of images of manhood—and womanhood—that ever expand an appetite they

cannot satisfy, yet lead further and further away from the one and only One who can.

Karen Swallow Prior was research professor of English and Christianity and Culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and is the author of several books. The views expressed are those of the author.