

Preface

I do have the modest ambition to make every Christian in America aware that as a Christian they have a problem with war.

—STANLEY HAUERWAS¹

Philosophy and theory are great. I like them both a lot. But the stories are the thing. Schema and paradigm are really nice, but the story is where the skin is in the game. I want to tell you some stories, but I will need a little theory, a little philosophy, a few schemas and paradigms, and a little cultural criticism to make the stories tell you the stories within the stories. Narrative theologians say that Christians are a “story-formed community,” so if stories are formative, then we have to attend to all the stories that form us, especially those stories that might be forming us prior to the story of Christ and that might hold us back from fuller participation in the story of Christ.

This book is about what it means to be manly, in particular what our stories about manliness are in relation to women, war, and faith. Some readers might think that what manliness is in relation to women is a different story than the story of being manly about war. I think I can convince you that these are not two stories, but the same story from different angles. I am a Christian man, and I write this book for Christians (anyone can read it, though). The problem is that this story, regardless of the angle from which you tell it, is a different story than the one told by the Gospels. That’s a problem, because many of us men, to one degree or another, are trying to live into both stories at the same time.

War and the male contempt for and oppression of women coexist across time. That contempt and oppression change form to fit other changes, but the facts of war, of male contempt for women, and male oppression

1. Hauerwas, “Going On,” para. 16.

of women are stubbornly transhistorical. They have common roots in hard-heartedness, conquest, and domination that penetrate deeply into the minds of men, all the way down to our infancies. Constructions of masculinity, over time, and influenced by war, have led men to hate (and fear!) something they call effeminacy. Effeminacy is not a curse *on* a man unless it is also a curse *against* women. War leads men to fear vulnerability, which we see as effeminate. And yet, as Christians, we might compare this mode of thought to “the way of the cross,” which is vulnerability even unto death.

War is about domination, and “manly” men extend that domination to women. As men, we learn to want women and fear them all at once. We want to love women, but love means allowing someone inside our boundaries, and this implies a kind of vulnerability. Love means recognizing and being recognized, being yours and still mine; but when fear of vulnerability sets aside mutuality between men and women, even sex comes to be associated with domination, the “sexual object” becoming an object of aggression and hostility, just as a military enemy is an object of aggression and hostility. War is about meeting “threats,” real or imagined, and women have long been described as threats to men, even by the church fathers—sexual threats, to be sure, but this is too similar to a soldier in his fortress or bunker, defending against an enemy, to ignore. War and stories of war provide the conceptual coordinates for men’s relations to others, especially to women.

Christian men, like Christian women, are called to live into a particular story that is dramatically different from the rest of “the world.” The story of a man conquering his enemies or conquering women—that is, the man-story that counts vulnerability as a vice—is not the story of Christ.

I am in a special position to tell these two incompatible stories, and some of the theorists, theologians, and philosophers I will cite are in unique positions to open up the stories within the stories. Together, we might explain why masculinity constructed as domination, in war and in relation to women, is really just one story . . . of manliness. I intend to make a case that *this very construction* has steered the church away from the story in the Gospels. I think I can show why we cannot separate war and the contempt for and subjugation of women, *why* this is the same story. Stick with me, and when you reach the end, you be the judge.



I was born in 1951. That was the year that the United States Army conducted its first infantry exercise for a nuclear war. I slept with a teddy bear. When I was three, my mother had me take tap lessons. I was a sensitive kid (my mother and father called it “tender-hearted”), and I cried when we had

to take the Christmas tree down. I was also raised on television and film that depicted men proving themselves *as men* by shooting people with guns and blowing things up with explosives. In so doing, they always redeemed a piece of the world. I dressed up as best I could like TV representations of the Lone Ranger, Swamp Fox, and the Gray Ghost and imagined I was a guerrilla soldier. My family was a hunting family, and I was allowed to use actual firearms by the time I was six. Some of my school curriculum had been designed by the John Birch Society, and my father kept a copy of a book by J. Edgar Hoover titled *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*.

To fight communism, I became a parachute infantryman in the United States Army. On my nineteenth birthday, I boarded an airplane that took me to what was then called the Republic of Vietnam.

Time passed. Things happened.

On my forty-third birthday, I was in my eighth active conflict area, Haiti. By then, I was, in the army's taxonomy, an 18-Zulu-5-Victor-Whiskey-8, which meant a Ranger-qualified Special Forces Operations and Intelligence Sergeant and a military freefall parachutist. I had taught at the Jungle Operations Training Center in Panama and at the United States Military Academy at West Point. I had performed missions under official cover in Latin America and participated in direct combat operations in East Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa. I had been a member of what was once called Delta Force. I had served in three Airborne Ranger units and two Special Forces Groups. I had "advised" foreign national military and security personnel who moonlighted as kidnappers and death squads. I had terrorized and brutalized people who were weak and poor. I had burned houses, killed poor farmers' livestock, and lied on command to family, journalists, and the public in whose name I "did my job." I had maimed people. I had exploited prostituted women, who exist on the periphery of every military activity. I had pursued women instrumentally for sex, and I had devalued women to the same extent that I worked to become the opposite of those expectations I held for women. I became for a time a divorced alcoholic who left a damage trail that included the suffering of my own daughter, a very young witness to this insanity.

I had taken human life.

For all this, I was held in the highest esteem by my fellow citizens of the United States, especially by other men. What I did in the military is still called "service," and people still thank me for it even though they have no clue what I actually did or what I was actually like.

“Amazing grace,” goes the familiar hymn, “how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” A fitting word to be etched under my name on a grave marker: *Wretch*.

And yet on Easter Day in 2008, at the age of fifty-six, I was baptized. I’ve been thinking about this book ever since, so if anyone asks me how long it took to write this book, one true answer is “around six years, the first five of them going over these issues again and again in my mind.” An even truer answer would be “since around 2001.” And the truest of all is “sixty-three years.”

In a very real way my engagement with feminism led me into the church, and war led me to feminism. There are probably few people who narrate their conversion to Christianity that way. It’s been a pretty peculiar life, from teddy bears and tap lessons to kicking the shit out of poor people in other countries.² It was feminist thought that gave me some real insight into how that happened. Feminists confronted me with the subject of power and privilege, specifically how power is gendered, and how privilege attaches to gender. Feminists taught me that my power as a male provides me the privilege to pretend that I have no power as a male.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks and the national frenzy to go to war, I was obliged as an opponent of that war to articulate my opposition in the framework of a criticism of militarism—on which I was seen as an “expert” because of the length and diversity of my military experience. I found, on reflection, that no account of militarism or my own engagement with it was possible without an account of my own lifetime struggle to prove my masculinity. Yet I found that people who were antiwar seldom addressed the topic of gender. In fact, they often used the same gendered conceits as the prowar people. I remember the criticism leveled at President Bush and Vice President Cheney for being “chickenhawks,” a term used to describe men who promoted war without having actually been soldiers. My “anti-war” comrades were saying that these men lacked the “masculine” chops to promote war, because they hadn’t earned the right through combat. The only people I found who were critical of this were those who were studying war as a *gendered* phenomenon. So if I wanted to get to the bottom of

2. Don’t let my “bad language” be a stumbling block. I will use words in this book that are not usually associated with Christian writing but that are part of our culture’s vernacular speech. Honestly, they are part of my vernacular speech, too. I grew up among profane people and was in the army for a long time. I am not sure how to connect what I have to say about culture and Christianity by tiptoeing around language. We are constituted in so many ways by language. What I describe about war will be far more obscene than a few “bad words.”

militarism, I had to study gender as a division of power; and that led me into the arms of feminism.

Studying feminism is not easy for men because all our unexamined privilege is exposed in the process. Our little hideaways are exposed. Our blind spots are revealed. Not only did feminism disabuse me of some of my blind spots when I was professing secular leftism after the army—a response to my shame and rage about the military—but feminism exposed me to (what for me were) fresh philosophical insights. I was confronted with challenges to some of my foundational beliefs, like “objectivity” and the fallacy that truth can be ascertained apart from one’s standpoint and apart from power. When these ideas were no longer tenable, thanks to feminists who were convincing in their criticism, my own prejudice against faith—based on *objectivism*³—was undermined, and I became open to hearing what “religious” people had to say.

I decided to look into Christianity for a while, thinking it was something I ought to know more about. At some point while I was gazing into the Jordan River, a Jew from ancient Nazareth with rough hands and a loving heart reached up and pulled me in. For the first time in my life, death did not have the last word. That’s a pretty big deal for anyone. For me, it meant everything I’d thought I’d known about being a man had changed, because as a man my life had always been determined by death; I had always operated on the assumption that death had the last word. Had I not been prepared by feminism and its insights into my life (and sins) as a man—had feminism not prepared me to relinquish the control that I’d needed to be “a man”—might have rejected the vulnerability that Jesus demands before I ever got to the good parts. God does indeed work in mysterious ways.

The man that I was when I was kicking the shit out of poor people abroad was not about vulnerability, about loving anyone, much less an enemy. I was never quite arrogant enough to call myself an atheist, but I was an agnostic without any special questions. Manhood, martial manhood, a death cult, I’ve come to see, was my religion.



Stanley Hauerwas bought my lunch for me one day at Duke University in 2008, having never seen me before in his life, and he said, “You need to write your memoirs.” He was writing his at the time, and he’s very interested in repentant soldiers, so it was a reasonable thing for him to say to me. But I

3. The philosophical conviction that “reality” exists independent of the mind and can be ascertained as such—not to be confused with capitalized Objectivism, the crackpot philosophy of the Ayn Rand cult.

haven't written a memoir; I've written this book. I hope that, if he reads it at some point, I will have come close enough with this sometimes autobiographical book to make him smile.

I also hope that this book—which will say harsh, discomfiting things about sex, war, and manhood—will open a door for other Christian men to take, as the twelve-steppers say, a “fearless moral inventory” of themselves in light of those things that we can learn when we see them from other standpoints. The suffering of women that our feminist sisters have brought to our attention can, in this way, be understood as a gift, and not as a threat, as the suffering of the beaten Jew on the road to Jericho was a gift to the Samaritan who was given the opportunity to love by *choosing* the beaten man as his neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). The gift that feminism gives is the opportunity to love by *choosing* our sisters, in themselves and in their suffering, and in so doing to prolong the Incarnation. After all, the story of the Samaritan and his choice was told by the One who emptied himself of divine prerogative and suffered the ultimate humiliation of the cross (Phil 2:5–8). The least we can do, as men, is renounce our male prerogative.

In a story from the seventh chapter of Luke's Gospel (7:36–50), Jesus is a dinner guest at the home of Simon the Pharisee. A woman, who has fallen out of social favor in the eyes of the Pharisee and his male cohort, enters the house and begins what must have been a very discomfiting display of affection. Simon has not extended the usual courtesy of washing the dust from Jesus' feet before the meal, and this unnamed woman performs the service by crying tears upon Jesus' feet and wiping them away with her hair. She washes his feet with her own body. In the usual telling of the story, we hear Jesus rebuke Simon for his failure of courtesy, and we pass over Jesus' opening question as if it were merely an attention-getter: “Do you see this woman?”

Hit the pause button. This is a real question. Do you *see* this woman? This is the question I will be asking readers throughout the book.



When I was in El Salvador in the 1980s, I watched a beggar with no legs making his way through Zona Rosa—a well-to-do commercial district in San Salvador lined with chic shops and restaurants that the vast majority of Salvadorans could never afford. The well-dressed young *ricos* walked right past the legless beggar with not even a tic in their conversations. I suddenly realized that, for all practical purposes, this man was invisible. He was *there*, flesh and blood advancing down the sidewalk on wooden blocks held in his hands, past the abjections of spat-out gum, wind-blown trash, cigarette

butts, and dog shit; and this striking image was abracadabra-ed into non-existence by a cultural sleight of mind that cloaked their *rico* power in the same move that made him invisible.



In the film *Dirty Pretty Things*, undocumented foreigners are living underground in London. Unexpectedly entangled in the trade in human transplant organs, a Nigerian fugitive named Okway is asked during the third act by a wealthy English organ purchaser, who *were* he and his two women companions (one an English prostitute and another a sexually exploited Turkish hotel cleaner). Okway replies sardonically, “We are the people you don’t see. We drive your cabs, and clean your rooms, and suck your cocks.” It is a film about social invisibility in a society driven by the opposite of Christ’s compassion.

Regarding compassion, Walter Brueggemann has written that “compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.”⁴ People who are unseen in war are hurt, by war itself *and* by not being seen. Women are being *hurt* by not being seen. These are moral bottom lines no matter how many layers of derivative rationalization are used to conceal them. The hurt is to be taken seriously.

When I imagine Simon and his other guests before the embarrassing display of tearful foot-washing, I see them avert their faces as they attempt to rebuke Jesus for the company he is keeping. Until the woman entered this house, she was invisible, and they want her to be invisible again. Yet Jesus responds first not with his own rebuke for their failure of courtesy, but with a simple and profoundly damning question: Do you *see* this woman?

This is a remarkable, yet too often unremarked, thing about almost two millennia of history and scholarship within and without the church. Women, as subjects, as persons in their own right, are mainly invisible. I will argue that, for Christians, feminism confronts us not with an ideology but with the more tangible and urgent issue of standpoint. The gift that feminism has given us is not a new set of rules but an enhanced capacity for men to know what it is like to stand in a woman’s place, to know more about what it is like to be a woman, to *see* women. Feminism pulls our recalcitrant hands away from our eyes and insists that we *see* women—real, enfolded, breathing, hungering, thinking, feeling, loving women who are imprisoned

4. Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 88.

within the structures of male power, structures both visible and invisible. Feminism calls on us to *recognize* real women beyond our concupiscent imaginations and outside the vast symbolic universe of that male power. As a body of work by and for women, feminism has taken the first step by standing where *women* stand to look at a world that men command; and the view is astonishingly different.

If I am unconvincing in my other arguments here, I would ask readers, especially men, henceforth to do at least one thing, and that is to take into account the standpoints of women-as-women, and to look at the question of sex-and-power as a part of every form of discernment. I don't believe, based on my own journey through the heart of a very aggressive and highly esteemed form of masculinity, that we can do this without first removing some beams from our own eyes. The first step has to be asking ourselves, before we ask any other question, how does this or that situation or this or that question relate to my ideas about being a man? These ideas exert a powerful influence over every other question, over every area of our lives; and yet, what we often consider to be normal, gender-free, turns out upon close and honest examination to be determined by our standpoints as men, as the people who have a collective power in the world at the expense of other people who are women.

Nothing is gender-neutral. If our intuition is that something is gender-neutral, I'll wager that this "neutrality" is based on making what is "male" the normative sun around which everything else must turn. In an especially terrible way, that "maleness" that poses as neutrality has been shaped by man's great obscenity, war, which Mussolini called the male equivalent of childbirth.