

"A Jesus for Real Men - What the New Masculinity Movement Gets Right and Wrong"

By Brandon O'Brien

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"The stallions hang out in bars; the geldings hang out in church." This observation from David Murrow strikes a little close to home for someone like me. I always thrived in my congregation but was never certain I fit the mold of masculinity I saw modeled around me. So as much as I resent Murrow's sentiment, it nevertheless rings true: In many churches, a certain type of man is conspicuously absent.

The disparity in men's and women's attendance in American churches has made men the target of specialized ministry over the last two decades. Promise Keepers kicked off the men's movement in 1990 by challenging stadiums full of men and boys to fulfill their duties to God and their families. Today a growing body of literature is leveling its sights on the church, suggesting that men are uninvolved in church life because the church doesn't encourage authentic masculine participation.

The first writer to popularize this concern was John Eldredge, who, in his three-million-selling *Wild at Heart* (Thomas Nelson, 2001), lamented that the masculine spirit was at risk because "most men believe God put them on the earth to be good boys." The church's tendency to promote discipleship as merely becoming "nice guys" keeps men from embodying their God-given maleness.

Wild at Heart sowed seeds that have sprouted as a new "masculinity movement" aimed to get men into church by changing the church's atmosphere. David Murrow, author of *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Thomas Nelson, 2004), founded the group Church for Men because, while the local congregation is "perfectly designed to reach women and older folks"—with its emphasis on comfort, nurture, and relationships—it "offers little to stir the masculine heart, so men find it dull and irrelevant."

Inspired by Murrow, comedian Brad Stine began GodMen, a ministry that provides space in which "men can be men; raw and uninhibited; completely free to express themselves in the uniquely male way that only men understand." In a 2002 GodMen meeting, this experience included videos of karate fights, car chases, and songs like "Grow a Pair!" whose lyrics read:

We've been beaten down
Feminized by the culture crowd
No more nice guy, timid and ashamed ...
Grab a sword, don't be scared
Be a man, grow a pair!

It's *not* sung to the tune of "In the Garden."

The message of Church for Men and GodMen is resonating with ministers of all stripes. Following Murrow's advice, Don Wilson, pastor of Christ's Church of the Valley in Peoria, Arizona, has geared his entire ministry toward reaching young men. And while his ministry is

not to men in particular, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Seattle's Mars Hill Church, nevertheless desires greater testosterone in contemporary Christianity. In Driscoll's opinion, the church has produced "a bunch of nice, soft, tender, chickified church boys. ... Sixty percent of Christians are chicks," he explains, "and the forty percent that are dudes are still sort of chicks."

The aspect of church that men find least appealing is its conception of Jesus. Driscoll put this bluntly in his sermon "Death by Love" at the 2006 Resurgence theology conference (available at TheResurgence.com). According to Driscoll, "real men" avoid the church because it projects a "Richard Simmons, hippie, queer Christ" that "is no one to live for [and] is no one to die for." Driscoll explains, "Jesus was not a long-haired ... effeminate-looking dude"; rather, he had "callused hands and big biceps." This is the sort of Christ men are drawn to—what Driscoll calls "Ultimate Fighting Jesus."

Paul Coughlin, author of *No More Christian Nice Guy* (Bethany House, 2005), agrees: The problem with the wimpy Jesus of the popular imagination is that "a meek and mild Jesus eventually is a bore. He doesn't inspire us."

I respect what these authors are trying to accomplish. They recognize that the Jesus of the Bible—unlike the Jesus of much contemporary Christian art and music—was not afraid to denounce, challenge, and offend. After all, he called the Pharisees vipers and Peter the Devil. Thus, the greatest contribution of the movement is that it identifies ways the American church has reduced Christian discipleship to minding one's manners. Murrow is right; much of a typical experience in church is "sweet and sentimental, nurturing and *nice*." For these writers, *nice* is an expletive that summarizes the church's digression from radical discipleship to simple moralizing. In short, the movement reminds us of what Jesus and Paul insisted: The gospel is an offense and discipleship is an invitation to the cross.

Re-masculinating Jesus

The movement's method of reclaiming the radical nature of the gospel, however, poses a genuine threat to Christian discipleship. These authors see the church's fixation on morality as part and parcel of the church's feminization, and they suggest that the solution is to inject the church with a heavy dose of testosterone. In other words, allowing women to create Jesus in their image has emasculated him; thus, regaining a biblical image of Christ is as simple as re-masculinating him.

The masculinity movement's solution assumes that Jesus came to model genuine masculinity. The authors don't say so explicitly, but their rhetoric assumes manly instincts are inherently godly. In *Wild at Heart* Eldredge claims, "We are never told to kill the true man within us, never told to get rid of those deep desires for battle and adventure and beauty." The GodMen repeat the theme: "None of our maleness is toned down because we believe ... that we are fearfully and wonderfully made." These statements imply that when the church adopts the supposedly male psyche, it fulfills its purpose, but when it conforms to the supposedly female psyche, it becomes aberrant.

Murrow tries to avoid this conclusion by insisting that the church is healthiest when it looks like a marble cake, with masculinity and femininity present in equal parts. But what he gives with

one hand, he takes away with the other. He says that women believe the purpose of Christianity is to find "a happy relationship with a wonderful man"—Jesus—whereas men recognize God's call to "save the world against impossible odds." Moreover, he claims to have history on his side. While the church was masculine, it fulfilled its purpose. But in the 19th century, women "began remaking the church in their image" (and they continue to do so), which moved the church off course.

Driscoll comes closest to imagining Jesus as the model of maleness when he argues that "latte-sipping Cabriolet drivers" do not represent biblical masculinity, because "real men"—like Jesus, Paul, and John the Baptist—are "dudes: heterosexual, win-a-fight, punch-you-in-the-nose dudes." In other words, because Jesus is not a "limp-wristed, dress-wearing hippie," the men created in his image are not sissified church boys; they are aggressive, assertive, and nonverbal.

I'm not sure where a man like me fits when the only categories for masculinity are "metrosexual" and "Ultimate Fighting champion." Like Jesus, I've worked as a carpenter, and I've sweated in a lumber mill. But I don't gauge my masculinity by the girth of my neck, and I'd rather not sweat for a living. I'm happiest when I'm reading and writing. I like lattes.

Besides offering an extremely narrow view of masculinity, this framework totally excludes women from real discipleship. To begin with, it blames them for neutering the gospel. Left in their hands, the church became nice and affirming and lost its vision to reach the world. Perhaps worse, if Christ is the model of masculinity, then women can't imitate him. They can pursue him as the lover of their souls. They can imitate his devotion to the Father in their relationships with their husbands. But they can't become like him in any essential way.

Jesus, Fully Human

Fortunately for women and men alike, the Bible never speaks of Christians as reformed men and women, but as altogether new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). The Fall has done more damage to the human heart than the masculinity movement seems willing to admit. For instance, a man's natural inclinations may prompt him to be "Boss, Bold, Brash, Bully, and Blunt," as one of GodMen's sayings suggests. But most of these are qualities of the old self that are destroyed when one is transformed into the image of Christ. A man's urge for battle—with fist or pen—may well be natural, but that doesn't automatically make it godly. In other words, conversion does not sanctify our instincts; rather, it demands that we submit all our instincts to the lordship of Christ and crucify the sinful ones, what Paul calls "the flesh" (Eph. 2).

Most importantly, Scripture gives no indication that Jesus came to earth to model masculinity. He is the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15). As such, he is not simply the perfect male; he is the perfect human being. Through his obedience to the Father, Christ exhibited the qualities that should characterize all believers, both male and female.

Jesus' triumphal entry is commonly considered evidence of his essential maleness. It seems reasonable: Angered by the blasphemy of the temple officials, Jesus topples tables and whips moneychangers in a demonstration of righteous aggression. But the story must be understood in the context of Luke's entire gospel. Earlier in Luke (13:34), Jesus describes his love for

Jerusalem in maternal terms; he has longed to gather Israel to himself "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." Anticipating his final entrance into Jerusalem, he says that he will visit Jerusalem's house (the temple) when the people proclaim, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" As he approaches the city in Luke 19, he *weeps* at their stubbornness. Only then does he chase the merchants from the temple. In other words, the temple cleansing was premeditated—not a manly burst of anger, but a passionate and symbolic display of God's judgment.

My point is this: If Adam and Eve illustrate the essential differences between men and women, Christ highlights their essential unity. All believers are called to imitate Christ by exhibiting the same qualities; Paul makes no distinction between masculine and feminine fruits of the Spirit. In fact, the evidence of the Spirit's work looks very different from the qualities the masculinity movement suggests typify a "real" man. Instead of "brash, offensive" (Stine), "self-reliant, competitive" (Murrow), "punch-you-in-the-nose dudes" (Driscoll), Paul says that those who are filled with the Holy Spirit will be loving, patient, peaceful, kind, and gentle.

The masculinity movement would have us emulate the glorified Jesus—the one who will return on horseback and brandish the sword of judgment. That is certainly the Jesus we worship. But it is not the Jesus we are commanded to imitate. The only times Jesus appears in Scripture as a warrior are in his pre-incarnate debuts in the Old Testament and post-resurrection glory. Our model of behavior, then, is the suffering Son, not the glorified one. Humanity in the image of Christ is not aggressive and combative; it is humble and poor (Phil. 2:5). We are most like Christ not when we win a fight, but when we suffer for righteousness' sake (Eph. 5:1-2; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14).

Arguing for common characteristics between men and women is not to argue for *identical roles*. I don't intend to downplay the significant differences between the genders or the distinct challenges in discipleship that men and women each face. I mean that if courage is Christlike, then men and women should both develop courage, even if the ways in which they display it may differ. In other words, we should mistrust any interpretation of Scripture that simply confirms our instincts. If it is more natural for a man to be aggressive and a woman to be passive, then a genuine encounter with Christ should challenge a man to become gentle (Gal. 5:23) and a woman to become bold (2 Tim. 1:7). The challenge of discipleship is extended equally to both men and women.

True Strength

Indeed, Jesus was not afraid to offend and rebuke. He was not kind at the expense of the truth. But those qualities are not masculine as such; they are godly. Imposing qualities we consider masculine on an image of Jesus we consider feminine does not solve the problem. It only gives us a new problem—another culturally shaped Jesus, only masculine this time.

The way to recover the biblical image of Jesus is to submit ourselves to the Scriptures and let them discipline our preconceptions. In the process, we must remember that the purpose of discipleship is not primarily to become fulfilled men or women, but rather to be transformed into the image of Christ. In the end, the biblical image of Jesus presents a far more radical role model

than Jesus the dude. Jesus was gritty, honest, and fearless. Yet his strength was not displayed in his willingness to punch evildoers in the mouth, but in his suffering at the hands of the wicked for their good. Where such strength is found—whether in a man or a woman, a latte-sipping sissy or a muscled mason—there is godly strength.

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