

Check Your Manhood at the Church Door

Gary Yagel, Issue Number 22, December 2008

If the 21st-century church is to effectively make disciples of men, it must heed the call to be missional. It is obvious that a Western missionary who leads a Nigerian to Christ must not ask him to check his nationality at the door, put on Western dress, and sing Scottish hymns to worship God. Yet, there is evidence that suggests that we—the church in the West—ask men to check their masculinity at the door.

Consider, for example, the following lists of virtues. David Murrow, the author of *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, has asked hundreds of people, “Which set of values better characterizes Jesus Christ and his true followers?”

First Set

Competence
Power
Efficiency
Achievement
Skills
Proving oneself
Results
Accomplishment
Objects
Technology
Goal oriented
Self-sufficiency
Success Loving
Competition

Second Set

Love
Communication
Beauty
Relationships
Support
Help
Nurture
Feelings
Sharing
Relating
Harmony
Community
cooperation
Personal expression

More than 95 percent have chosen the second set. Murrow then reveals that he took these two lists of virtues from the book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, by John Gray. The second set includes the feminine values of Venus, while the first set includes the masculine values of Mars. Today's church is exalting predominantly feminine virtues; no wonder it is repelling men.

More than 90 percent of American men believe in God and five out of six call themselves Christians. But only two out of six attend church on a given Sunday. The average man believes in the reality of Jesus Christ but does not see enough value in church to be there. Almost every man in America has tried church, but two-thirds find it unworthy of two hours a week. In the words of a wise Texan, "Men don't go to church 'cuz they've been."

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey reports, "While the U.S. population is split fairly evenly between men and women, there are more women (61 percent) than men (39 percent) in the pews. The difference is found in every age category, so the fact that women live longer than men does not explain the gender difference in religious participation." Neither can it be argued that men are simply less religious than women. Male and female participation is roughly equal in Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In the Islamic world men are publicly and unashamedly religious—often more so than women. The church of the first century was a magnet to men. Jesus' strong leadership, blunt honesty, bold action, and fearless confrontation mesmerized men

Forming Missional Ministry for Men

A missional ministry plan to reach men begins with exegeting the male culture. John Gray's characteristics of Mars are a useful starting point. They are the values of today's American male: competence, power, efficiency, achievement, skill, proving oneself, results, accomplishment, objects, technology, goal oriented, self-sufficiency, success, competition. To that list, I would add a craving for sexual fulfillment. He is also working hard in pursuit of money because he knows it is the means to satisfy deeper longings—to be respected, to be in control, to enjoy the numerous pleasures money can buy.

The values of masculinity are further evident in one of the great symbols of American masculinity—the full-sized pick-up truck. Admittedly, this is a suburban and rural icon, not an urban one. It still, however, reveals much about the way men are wired. The Toyota Tundra is rugged, with heavy-duty suspension. In other words, it is up to any challenge. Men love challenges and toughness. They're driven by mission; they just need to know which mountain has to be climbed. Then there is control—if you have a full-sized pick-up, you own the road. Add four-wheel-drive capability and you have something every male loves, the independence to go anywhere. Even the seating of pick-up trucks suits men. There is room for one buddy or for the rest of your work crew. Your truck "ain't no minivan." Finally, your new Tundra or Dodge Ram gives you prestige, status among those you want it from the most—other men.

Men and the Church's Mission

Our Lord had a clear understanding of the *missio Dei*, and He drew men to Himself and into that mission like bees to honey. Is it possible that we are losing men because we have lost sight of our

mission? The mission of the church is to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). So, we must ask, “What is a disciple?” and, “What does Jesus tell us about how they are made?” Answering these questions biblically is critical if our ministry to men is to be missional.

Charles Dunahoo, in his excellent book, *Making Kingdom Disciples*, points out, “For Jesus, being a disciple involved much more than a few behavioral patterns. It required a complete reordering of one’s life around living in the kingdom, with Jesus as the King.” Christianity is not merely about private salvation but about the redemption of the cosmos through the coming of Christ’s kingdom. Jesus began His ministry with the words, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15-16). He linked His miracles to the advent of the kingdom. “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). He told His followers that their highest priority was to seek to bring about submission to Him and His precepts in every sphere of life. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Christ, the second Adam, has taken back the kingdom, which the first Adam lost to Satan, sin, and death. He defeated them at the cross. By redeeming man and His kingdom from this slavery and death, Christ has made all things new. He has ascended to the Father and been made head over all things for the church, His body. He has inaugurated the kingdom of God, and one day He will return to consummate that kingdom. In the meantime, His people are the firstfruits of the renewal of the cosmos; we are to show the world what it will one day look like when the fallen cosmos, including human culture, is fully redeemed.

Advancing the Kingdom

The loss of the biblical understanding of “disciple” has everything to do with the failure of today’s church to reach men. Men are hardwired for mission. They want to invest their lives in a great cause. Men are drawn to the chance to prove their loyalty and to a challenge that requires making personal sacrifices for a great cause. It is astounding how precisely God has hardwired the male heart to respond to the great cause of Christ’s kingdom. There is no greater mission than to be a part of God’s great redemption of the cosmos, being the firstfruits of the new creation, putting the values of the kingdom on display in our own lives, and invading every square inch of planet earth with the values and gospel of the kingdom of Christ. But we are failing to make that connection for men.

The church today must be gospel-centered in all that it does, including its ministry to men. However, we must be sure that the gospel we proclaim is the full gospel, not a truncated one. The gospel is not just the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom. Clearly the “gospel” or “good news” is centered in the arrival of the kingdom. “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said, ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15). Paul defines the gospel in Romans 1:17, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith.” Righteousness is from God. That is the gospel. But that righteousness from God is not just the personal, privatized righteousness of justification; God, in Christ is redeeming the cosmos from the reign of sin. He is reversing the curse, brought on by our race’s rebellion; He is making all things new. This gospel, the gospel of the kingdom, resonates in the masculine heart in a powerful way.

Discipling Through Deep Relationships

Our Lord's instruction about how to make disciples is a strategy that is exceptionally effective with men. It has two parts. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, 1) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and 2) teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Sacraments are outward, physical signs that point to inward spiritual realities. Baptism, in part, points to our connection to one another in the covenant community. Disciples are made, Jesus tells us, through connection with other members of the body of Christ. The greenhouse for spiritual growth is the body of Christ. Jesus called the original 12 disciples not only into a vertical relationship with Him, but into a horizontal relationship with each other.

The Master commands His followers: "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16), "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2), "consider how to stimulate each other to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24), and to "admonish one another" (Romans 15:14). These commands are not being obeyed by the majority of Christians in our culture because they cannot be obeyed in superficial relationships. As sons and daughters who have been spoon-fed the Enlightenment diet of individualism and self-reliance, most American Christians today have no serious connection with a brother or sister in Christ. Even those in couples' Bible studies are naïve about the depth of connection that takes place there. Men are simply not going to reveal their lives and share their spiritual struggles in front of some other guy's wife. They probably aren't even sharing them with their own wives. Self-reliance, independence, and resistance to being vulnerable cause the vast majority of today's American Christian men to be alone when it comes to fighting their spiritual battles.

When we think missionally, we realize that 21st-century America is sweeping men into a fast moving river of isolation. Studies show that 19 out of 20 men have no best friend inside the church, and male isolation is even worse among non-believers. Unless we help Christian men overcome their American male independence, and challenge them to become intentional about finding a few brothers for encouragement and accountability, their connection in the body will fall far short of what our Lord commands and what He teaches is necessary to grow as disciples.

Jesus reveals the second way disciples are made as He continues in Matthew 28:20, "and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Jesus indicates that disciples are made by teaching. Jesus qualified the kind of teaching—teaching that focuses on everyday obedience. The very word "disciple" (*mathetes*) means a "follower"—one who learns by watching the life of another. Jesus' band of brothers did life together. Growing into mature disciples comes only by connecting with others at the level of everyday life.

Men learn best by observing the lives of other men. Jesus' invitation, "Follow me," is masculine language. Men love to follow great men. But in today's church the invitation seems to be, "Come into this auditorium, sit for an hour, and I will give you a lecture." That has far less appeal to men—and the shortages in our pews are proving that fact. The solution is not trying to turn good preachers into disciplers; it is in establishing strong, lay-led men's discipleship ministries, which are designed to enable men to share their stories.

Telling Stories with the Gospel

In Tim Keller's paper "The Missional Church," he calls the missional church to "enter and re-tell the culture's stories with the gospel." To enter means knowing the culture's hopes, dreams, and fears. Let's consider the hopes, dreams, and fears of men—which represents one element of a ministry that is missional toward them.

Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton posted this advertisement in 1913: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success." More than 5,000 men applied for 26 slots. He knew the hardwiring of men.

Hollywood knows what men dream about, as a survey of guy movies makes clear. Men dream of accomplishing a great feat, doing it against overwhelming odds, defeating a powerful foe, winning a beautiful woman in the process, and then riding in the front chariot of the victory parade.

Above almost everything, men want to win. They yearn for respect. They fear failure, and are driven to succeed. They fear others finding out what is going on in their private world where they often feel inadequate and ashamed of their secret sins.

Into this masculine story, we must bring the transforming gospel of the kingdom. It is a real story where the perfect man, Jesus Christ, accomplishes a great feat (the redemption of the world) against overwhelming odds (all the power of Satan's forces arrayed against Him), defeating a powerful foe (the tyrants, Satan, sin, and death), winning a beautiful woman in the process (Christ's bride, the Church), and then riding in the front chariot in the victory parade (when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord).

We are called to follow Him in the redemption of this world, taking it back through His resurrection power, knowing that the kingdom only grows through sacrifice—a principle established by the sacrifice of Himself at the cross. Transformed by Christ, we are called to the noble task of laying down our lives for our wives, day in and day out. And we are called into a community, fighting shoulder to shoulder, encouraging each other, living out the same level of loyalty to one another and to the High King that Jonathan and David experienced together. That is what fulfilled masculinity looks like and it is a message the missional church must proclaim.

Gary Yagel is a former PCA church planter and now serves part time as the men's ministry coach for CE&P. He is the director of a men's resource ministry called Forging Bonds of Brotherhood (www.forgingbonds.org), serves on the speaking faculty of the Leadership Training Center at Man in the Mirror, and is enrolled in the D. Min. program of RTS Orlando.