

Manliness for Every Husband



by EDWARD T. WELCH

What does it mean to be a Christian man? Inside the Christian community, the trend continues to lean in the direction of the rugged, decisive spiritual leader. Outside the Christian community, masculinity remains in disarray. If you put ideologies aside and listen, what do you hear? Most men assimilate two expectations: be independent and show minimal displays of emotion, with the notable exception of anger.¹

My goal is to step into these waters with a narrow focus. I want to consider the role of husbands. As in everything I do, I bring myself to this. I have observed masculine traditions and I instinctively live out some version of them. These, of course, can skew my interpretation of Scripture. So, I will try to be alert to what has shaped me.

My father was a godly man who would have liked to fit a more masculine profile but would never achieve it. He was rejected from World War II military service because of polio. He never spoke about his father who was, at best, a non-presence, and his mother's anxieties became his own. He was awkward in relationships, and I have good reason to believe that sexuality was not a straightforward matter for him. In all this, what

1. Peggy Orenstein, "The Miseducation of the American Boy," *The Atlantic* 325:1 (January/February 2020): 62–74.

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stood out to me, and still does, was his desire to love and please God. He was a very good man.

Being male *was* straightforward for me because I more naturally fit the cultural profile. I liked sports, had an interest in females, and was able to adapt more easily to different social contexts. Maleness, however, did not become a category of interest until my midtwenties when I met the woman I married. As I scanned some of the Christian literature, it was the role of head-leader-initiator that caught my attention. Call me dense and hopeless on the matter, but I never quite figured it out. “Forward ho,” “follow me,” and “don’t worry, I will be the decider” were my perceptions of strength and headship, and they didn’t fit with who I was. It appeared I was both an unmanly man and an underdeveloped husband.

What does it mean to be a Christian man?

I include this background for two reasons. First, to identify the history I bring to the discussion, and second, to speak as one who is not a natural leader. Does Scripture prescribe this version of manliness for husbands? Is it one of the non-negotiables of the role? In what is ahead, I will follow a less worn path to well-known Scripture. I will stop at several relevant and representative passages to see what they bring to the subject. My goal is not to be comprehensive. Rather, I will draw out themes that seem clear—even central—yet can be overlooked.

Since all meaningful roads begin in Genesis 1, I will start there and consider the creation account of male and female. Then I will gather the two official male roles from the Old Testament—the royal and priestly roles—with the expectation that echoes of these roles will persist in the New Testament role of pastor, and then in the role of husband.

Kings, Priests, and a God Who Invites

The story of creation sets the tone for what follows, so we begin our study of the Old Testament in Genesis 1. What does creation suggest about who God is and how he reveals himself? Our purpose is to notice what forms authority and power take in the very beginning. *One* possibility is that God is taking a strong stand against the chaos and disorder that is earth, so declarative words are the order of the day. His brief

imperatives will be obeyed. A *better* possibility notices God's repeated use of the phrase "Let there be...". These words fall short of an edict and are closer to an invitation, an invitation to partner in the process of creating.

God partners and invites. God's invitation seems unmistakable when he speaks to the waters. "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together" (Gen 1:9). Then he invites the earth to bring forth vegetation and the animals to bring forth "according to their kinds." Gentleness is the order of the day. Creation is invited to participate *with* God in his creative work. When he creates Adam and Eve, God is over them yet he invites them into a partnership. He walks with them. Then the gentleness of his kingdom moves through Scripture. The apostle Paul wrote, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and *gentleness*" (Eph 4:1–2). This contrasts with the violence that can be found in every human heart. We all have ways to exert power over others, but that power is intended to be kept in check by the restraints of humility and gentleness.

The mood of Genesis 1 is an invitation to participate with God. Fellowship and partnership appear in the beginning. If this theme carries through Scripture, it would mean that husbands approach marriage as "we are in this together." They invite their wives to participate with them in God's work, so as to function as an interdependent team.

Kings have compassion. The closing theme in Genesis 1 is that male and female are created in God's image. While creation was invited to "bring forth...according to their kinds" (v.24), God, the King, would bring forth a male and female according to *his* kind, in his likeness and image. When the Israelites first heard this they had been slaves in Egypt for generations, and so had one thought in mind: Pharaoh. He was the only one considered to be the image of a god. Now the people saw that being made in the image of God meant they all had royal status.

God calls mankind to unmistakably royal tasks: to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth (1:28). The passage assumes that, while both male and female bear the privileges and responsibility of royalty, the male would take a kingly role. The male heir was the one who typically ascended to the throne. Adam was both male and firstborn, which

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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