

Three Models of Manhood: In Search of Real Men

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Model 1: Mark 5:3-5

“...No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones”.

Model 2: Matthew 3:4

“John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey”.

Model 3: Matthew 18-19

“...Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ..., he had in mind to divorce her quietly”.

Searching for Models

Where shall young boys and girls go to find and experience positive and constructive role models of men and manhood? Where do boys learn about masculinity? Indeed, where do men learn about manhood? Do they imitate the shenanigans of the male celebrity figure? Should they look up to the drug-dependent but ‘cool’ and ‘successful’ gangster? Must they dream of jobs as gun-totting marine soldiers ravaging some glamourized war zone in some far-away land inhabited by inferior or evil humans? Should the young mimic the manner, voice, style of the filthy rich male (tel)evangelist? In this Bible study I propose a medley of three Biblical passages as sites in which we may explore constructive models of manhood. But the Bible seldom provide us with ready made models, complete maps written to scale and answers invoking no further questions. Indeed, Biblical models of anything, can only emerge in dialogue, contestation, prayer and grappling. Simplistic, hasty and slavish adoption of stories about apparently successful men in the Bible as examples of model manhood may prove to be dangerous and counter-productive. As the medley of passages chosen for this study will show, there are some male examples not meant for imitation - even in the Bible. Some of the stories of apparently successful or unsuccessful men in the Bible are complex - yielding no easy answers - and therefore needing to be read both prayerfully and critically. Three models of manhood, derived from our readings are proposed below, namely, a) man of tombs, b) man but not main, and c) real man.

Model One: Man of Tombs

It is neither accidental nor insignificant that the sick character with which Mark 5 opens is a man. Only a man could be like this! The five noteworthy things about this man are that he: a) was too strong physically, b) felt no pain, c) felt nothing, d) lived among the tombs, e) did not want to change or be changed. He had what many men dream of, unlimited, indestructible physical strength. He probably looked like the muscular athletic type who are the envy of all men and women. When he cut himself he felt no pain and probably cried out as a show of raw and brute force rather than pain. It seems that he had lost all sense of touch both physically and emotionally. The neighbours he chose and with whom he ‘lived’ were literally dead and buried - he lived ‘night and day among the

tombs'. Ironically he rushes towards Jesus to ask not for healing, but for the *status quo* to be maintained, i.e. to be left unchanged in that state of unfeeling. The picture of manhood that emerges out of this man is a familiar and widespread one: brute strength, inability to feel, absolute lack of capacity for neighbourliness, fear of change and on friendly terms with death. This is a model of manhood that is not to be imitated! The man of tombs is man turned death-wards.

Model Two: Man but not Main

John the Baptist has seldom been seen as a model man. Because his major and self-professed role is that of herald and 'road preparer'; he has often been regarded as being NOT the 'real thing' but as a metaphor pointing to the real man Jesus, who was to come. But I want to suggest that it is precisely his role as 'road preparer' that makes him a model man worth exploring. The traits to highlight about him are among others, a) a simple life-style - dressing in camel's hair and having locusts for supper, b) setting himself apart for God's work, c) knowing his mandate and the limits of his mission, d) accepting and thriving on a supportive rather than a lead role. From John the Baptist we learn that it is not necessary to be rich, loaded and glamorous in order to be a man. It is not what you have, but what you are, that makes you a man. Men are often deluded about their mandate, power and mission - often giving themselves 'ownership' and undue power over things and people belonging only to God - including their own destiny, wives and children. In John the Baptist we see a man who understands his mandate and its limits; his abilities and his inabilities. He admits that while he has skill to baptise with water, he is clueless about the fireworks of Holy Spirit baptism that is to come with Jesus Christ. Here is a man who thrives and prides himself in NOT being the 'main man'. Here is a supporting actor who loves both his supportive role and the main actor. 'While I decrease He must increase', John the Baptist said of Jesus. And yet the impact of his mission was such that some mistook him for Jesus and Herod needed only a small excuse to kill the man brutally. John the Baptist was man but not main. It is possible to be man but not main and still have an impact.

Model Three: Real Man

For man contemporary Christian men, Joseph is a somewhat embarrassing footnote in the story of the birth of Jesus - a character over whom we do not linger long. In contemporary American English, Joseph is the quintessential 'jerk', the proverbial 'nerd' and the ultimate 'loser'. The woman to whom he is engaged is found to be 'with child' and he is NOT the father. This is the most devastating news a real, intelligent, normal and full-bloodied man can receive. Right? Wrong! Sure, Joseph was upset for 'he had in mind to divorce her secretly'. However, he did not explode into a rage. On the contrary, he still sought to protect the integrity of his would-be bride. In the end he still marries her. What is wrong with this man?

Though it is seldom ever admitted openly, Joseph must have loved this woman. Never mind what the angels said to him about the pregnancy, Joseph was simply smitten with Mary. Mary meant more to him than just a vessel through which he was going to reproduce and perpetuate himself. She was to him more than a site on which he would

‘express’ and ‘exercise’ his ‘manhood’. What was wrong with this man?

This is what was ‘wrong’ with this man. He loved. Joseph loved Mary. The nativity is a grossly abridged love story far superior to Shakespear’s tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. Here is a man who loved a woman and married her not *because* she bore his child; not because she could bear him a child; but he married her *in spite* of the fact that the child she bore was not his. At the birth of the child, Joseph was the one and only amateur midwife! Later he played a key role in protecting both the child and the mother from harm and danger - fleeing to Egypt with them. Joseph redefines both manhood and fatherhood in fundamental ways. He teaches us that it is manly to fall hopelessly and vulnerably in love. Manhood is NOT the biological ability to make women pregnant. Manhood is the ability to love. Similarly, fatherhood is much more than biology. It is the willingness to go to great lengths to take responsibility for the welfare of children under our care and the women we profess to love. Joseph was a real man.

Discussion Questions

1. Sketch some of the dominant images, notions, ideas and models manhood in your community. What are their sources and what are their effects?
2. Explore the five characteristics of ‘man of the tombs’ metaphor in relation to prevalent manhood beliefs and practices in your community and in the world today.
3. Using Joseph and John the Baptist as examples, explore alternative notions of manhood for our world today.