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Healing the Father-Wound: The Ultimate Men's Movement

*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.
(Malachi 4:5,6 NIV)*

Early in 1990, in a ground-breaking PBS special "A Gathering of Men," poet Robert Bly blasted through the gender-muddling of previous decades with a jarring truth. The average man today, he declared, has learned well from his mother to embrace his "soft feminine side" and become tender and receptive. But he hasn't learned to embrace his more deliberate "masculine side," because his father has been emotionally and often physically absent.

Without a father to secure him in his masculine identity, Bly declared, the man abdicates his destiny and looks to the woman, as Mom, to define his nature and purpose. Ultimately, therefore, he embraces a false femininity and becomes passive.

This epidemic "father-wound" has been the finest revelation from the secular men's movement of God's momentous work among men today. Tragically, the growing mainstream Christian men's movement has largely ignored it--even though, as the above text indicates, God has displayed its truth clearly in Scripture.

The Malachi text is the final passage in the Old Covenant. Significantly, its promise--and warning--frame the very doorway to the New Covenant, the threshold to the coming Messiah. It implies that the brokenness in this world between children and fathers reflects the brokenness between humanity and God. That is, restoring relationship with the Father is, in fact, the very focus of God's saving power in this world.

Thus, Jesus came to reconcile humanity to the Father (John 14:8-13). Nowhere in this world is the impetus for that reconciliation more keenly felt than in relationship with our earthly fathers.

The father-wound portrayed in the Malachi text is the difference between what Dad has given you and what Father God wants to give you. Thus, every man bears its sting.

No pain strikes more deeply into a man's heart than being abandoned emotionally and/or physically by Dad. No pain, therefore, more directly beckons the saving power of Father

God. That's why God's eschatological vision focuses directly on healing it--as in the Malachi text.

And that's why the Enemy of God is Hell-bent to make us deny not only the father-wound itself, but the Fatherhood of God.

I respectfully leave it to women to articulate what the father-wound and its curse means to a daughter. As a man, I know it's no mere theological or psychological construct. It's a crippling reality which--for starters--renders a man inadequate with the woman, distrusting of other men, nearsighted in his view of God, and therefore, divorced from his destiny.

The father calls forth the masculine in the son. Without this essential input from Dad, the boy can't later see himself as a man. Quickly, fearfully, the gap between the man's inadequacy and who he longs to become fills with shame. His spirit cries out for a father to save him.

Without other men to introduce him to the "Father from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth receives its true name" (Eph. 3:14 NIV footnote), his cry echoes in the darkness.

Enter The Father of Lies (John 8:44)--who promises to cover this deep shame in men today by urging us into a variety of compulsive/addictive behaviors, from drugs and pornography to workaholism and religious legalism.

The father-wound is a wound of absence. Therefore, it's harder to recognize than other wounds--and ultimately, more destructive.

"I'm still waiting for my father to talk to me about sex and success, money and marriage, religion and raising kids," as a Men's Health Magazine editor confessed after his father died. "The shame of it is, I don't know a man my age who doesn't feel like he's navigating his life without a map."¹

Several years ago, shortly before my son was born, I spoke to 350 fathers at a men's conference sponsored by a large, well-known church in Southern California. Confessing my fears of inadequacy as a dad, I asked the men this question: "When your first child was born, for how many of you did your father reach out to you with support, encouragement, or helpful advice?"

Only five hands went up.

Stunned, I decided to test this statistic as I spoke at other Christian men's conferences around the country. Everywhere, the proportion came out roughly the same: one or two out of a hundred.

At another men's retreat of 150 men, I asked, "When you were growing up, did your father ever talk to you helpfully about your sexuality?"

Two hands.

In my ten years of speaking to men across the country, these proportions haven't changed much.

Consider afresh the Malachi prophecy: Is it any wonder that as fathers and in our sexuality we men often mediate the prophetic curse of destruction? You can kill a living organism, such as a plant, in two ways. You can actively destroy it: Cut it down, smash it, beat it up.

But there's another way: Just leave it alone. Don't water it.

Either way, it dies.

Abandonment kills.

We men today are displacing the deadly impact of father-abandonment on the world around us, from abortions and sexually transmitted diseases to violence and woman-hating music lyrics.

Insofar as Christian men shrink from facing the father-wound, we abdicate to the world our sacred calling to proclaim the true Father of all. Hence, the secular men's movement.

Apart from Father God, secular men can respond only out of their own human-centered vision. In the seventies, leaders of what was called the "first men's movement," sought to support feminist concerns. In reality, this was not a men's movement at all, but a boys' movement--that is, unfathered men still abdicating their own agenda to the Woman/Mom.

Bly unmasked this deception in portraying the "soft male":

They're not interested in harming the earth or starting wars or working for corporations....but something's wrong. Many of these men are unhappy; there's not much energy in them. They are life-preserving, but not exactly life-giving. And why is it you often see these men with strong women who positively radiate energy?...The male was able to say, "I can feel your pain and I consider your life as important as mine, and I will take care of you and comfort you." But he could not say what he wanted and stick by it; that was a different matter.²

"We wanted men to get sensitive," as a woman friend of mine lamented, herself an accomplished professional, "but we didn't want them to get passive."

The "second men's movement" which Bly spearheaded thereby exposed a generation of men as boys who overbonded with Mom and withdrew from manly responsibility because Dad was not present to engage and call forth their masculinity.

In the absence of Christian voices, the secular leaders have awakened us to the deadly effects of the father-wound in men today. Their drumming in the woods has announced the first-stage agenda for healing: the man must mourn his father, differentiate from his mother, and bond to the company of men.

Indeed, Bly and his counterparts are intelligent enough to know that the awful vacuum in men's unfathered souls must be filled with something authentic, lest we destroy ourselves and women. Since none of us has that "something" to give, it must come from someplace besides men.

"What good does it do to get together with other men?" as one man asked who had been "talked into" attending one of my conferences by his friends. "I mean, if we're all so broken and needy, how can we get something together that none of us has to give?"

This man is close to the Kingdom. He's asking the right questions.

Broken, we men can't heal ourselves (Romans 7:18). Yet in order to bear authentic masculinity, that "something" we need can't come from women. We've tried that, and it doesn't work.

This impasse spells the end of the secular men's movement. Yet it's precisely the moment God has designed to reveal Himself as Father, and to prepare men for our true destiny as His sons.

Here, at last, in the full and terrifying face of our helplessness, stirs the cry which beckons the ultimate men's movement: "Who, then, will save us from this body that's taking us to death?"(Romans 7:24).

In fact, we need super-natural input. Clearly, the next move of healing in and among men requires spiritual power. That's what the drums and the chanting of the secular movement promise. But because these men are not surrendered to Jesus, they cannot know the true Father--and ultimately can deliver only the counterfeit (John 1:12-13, Luke 10:16).

Here lies the great danger for the men's movement, the fork in the road at which Christian men must begin to take the lead.

The leaders of the secular men's movement know that authentic masculinity requires a spiritual life-view. For witness to healing presence and power, they look not to God's acts in human history, but to pagan myths and fairy tales--which can reveal the heart of a man, but not the character of the Father who created him.

The wound of father-absence can be acknowledged by simple human honesty and stayed by grieving. But it can be healed unto fulfilling your destiny only by father-presence--which no human power can provide. Only Jesus, therefore, can heal the father-wound, because only He can overcome our sin-nature and restore relationship with the true and present Father of us all(John 14:6-14).

Only the dignity of sonship can overcome the shame of abandonment (Romans 8:14-16, Ps. 27:10).

Overwhelmed by the father-wound and its shame, the men of the world can carry the sword of truth no further. In fact, in 1994--just four years after Bly's breakthrough insights--a feature article in Esquire magazine declared that the men's movement is dead. "In retrospect," it declared, the movement simply did not "stick" because the self-disclosure and "nakedness of it all" caused too much "embarrassment" in men.³

Our task as Christian men is finally at hand: neither to worship manhood, as the religiously correct, nor to curse it, as the politically correct, but to redeem it--that is, to restore manhood to its true and ordained vitality, as only those who know the Creator can. Indeed, men committed to this task will discover that the celebrated "liberal vs. conservative" religious split is a sham, a diversion to cover the shame of fatherlessness in both camps.

Men who haven't taken their shame to Jesus won't dare recognize this momentous battle for truth, because they haven't received the Father's resurrection power to win it. Instead, they'll hide their wounds, often behind a performance-oriented religious facade.

They'll exhort men to keep the "ten principles of godly manhood," the "five standards of biblical masculinity." They'll focus on doing good because they're afraid to be real.

A men's movement that doesn't begin emptied and surrendered at the cross can only become ingrown, and ultimately capitulate to false spirituality--thus beckoning the old spirits of male idolatry, from misogyny to militarism.

The average man today longs to feel secure in his manhood. But he's afraid to face his sin-nature which sabotages that security, because he's already overwhelmed by shame from having been abandoned by Dad.

When the True abdicates, the False plunders.

Betrayed by relationship, he takes refuge in technique and grasps after control. Desperate for manhood, angry for not getting from Dad what he needed to secure it, he becomes vulnerable to a host of worldly--and even religious--counterfeits which promise to silence the voice of shame, restore his control, and render him a "real man" at last.

If, on the other hand, a man cries out to Jesus and presses through his pain to the truth, he can confess, "I need a father. But I'm tired of trying to get life from Dad. Lord, show me my Dad as you see him." One man I know prayed like that, and saw a vision of a little boy on crutches.

A man that real will discover that Dad had been abandoned himself by his own father, and therefore was simply unable to confirm manhood in his son. He sees that Dad is not the enemy, but a fellow victim.

A boy cries from his father's wounds; Dad hurts you, and you cry. A man cries for his father's wounds, as an intercessor. This leads him into compassion for Dad, and by grace, forgiveness--and at last, freedom from the generational cycle of destruction to walk in his own true destiny.

The man who doesn't trust Jesus to bear his shame, however, tries to cover it himself with religion--that is, to compensate for lack of relationship with both Dad and Father God by "doing the right thing." He extols the sanitized, civilian question of manhood, "How do I do it?" It's too fearful to let the abandoned boy ask the true, Kingdom warrior question--like the Apostle--"Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death? (Romans 7:24)"

We're not ignorant.

We're dying.

Yet most Christian teaching for men today simply tells us what we should do, the terrible consequences for not doing it, and maybe even the wonderful benefits of doing it.

It's basic, Old Covenant teaching--an appropriate and necessary reminder of God's standard to an unprincipled, pagan society. As such, it's altogether right and necessary--but, like Moses without Jesus, eternally deficient (John 1:17).

Christianity is not, as "conservatives" insist, a moral code. Nor is it, as "liberals" insist, an ideology.

Christianity is a relationship with the living Father God.

The growing wave of men confessing their sin before God might well be seen as "the third men's movement." I thank God for it.

Yet even as we have filled stadiums to promise higher standards of behavior, we must press on to appropriate the fullness of what Jesus died to give men, namely, sonship. Herein lies the ultimate men's movement, beckoned by this central New Covenant truth: Jesus did not come to tell us what to do, but rather, to show us Who does it (Romans 7:21-25; see also Ezekiel 36:24-28, Philippians 2:13, Romans 12:1,2, Ephes. 3:21).

This authentic movement of God in men is prompted not by the shame which makes us strive to do right, but by the grace which allows us to be real. It's sustained not by trying to measure up, but only by confessing that we can't. It proceeds not from a determination to do the right thing, but from a longing to know the true Father (Gal. 5:1-6; Romans 7:18).

A real man is a man who's real. Only real men can lead us into this New Covenant manhood--men who have dared face the shame of their own powerlessness, and surrendered it to Jesus for Him alone to bear.

The Gospel "tells us...what is of paramount importance," as writer and radio personality Garrison Keillor declared--namely, "To lead an honest life. To be able to walk anywhere to without fear, without self-consciousness, and without worry that your lies will be discovered."⁴

Today, we men need leaders who aren't afraid that their lies will be discovered. Not those who exhort us to obey, but who invite us to trust. Not those who command us to do right, but who free us by their own vulnerability to be real. Not those who warn us to be strong, but who promise the Father's strength.

Real manhood is not achieved by striving fearfully after standards of masculinity or principles of manhood--no matter how biblical, godly, or Christ-like.

It's called forth by the Father. (John 1:12,13; 17:25,26).

This ultimate men's movement is today stirring, even trembling in the hearts of men. But it has yet to break forth from the churches, largely because we haven't dared to discover that self-discipline is a fruit of the Spirit--not a natural product of our own effort, but a supernatural consequence of surrender to the Father (Gal. 5:22).

As Paul proclaimed,

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received a Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15 NIV).

May we be so real.

NOTE: This article appeared in Fuller Theological Seminary Magazine (3/98).

Footnotes:

1. Joe Kita, "Our Fathers," Men's Health, Jun 1995, p. 86.
2. "The Meaning of Being Male," L.A. Weekly, Aug 5-11, 1983, p. 17.
3. Harry Stein, "The Post-Sensitive Man is Coming," Esquire, May 1994, p 5-6.
4. Wittenburg Door, 12/85, p. 18.