

Is the Men's Movement Dead?

New, updated 20th Anniversary *Sons of the Father*

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Recently I stopped by a local sandwich deli and was surprised at the friendly enthusiasm of my young server. "How's your day been so far?" he asked with an engaging smile.

Hesitating, I decided to be honest. "Really good, actually," I offered. "I'm an author and just finished revising and updating a book."

"That's fantastic!" he exclaimed, offering me a high-five and turning to slather my tuna-on-wheat with mayo. "What's it about?"

"I write books for men," I said, encouraged. "Mostly about how we haven't had fathers to give us what we need to be men, and the shame that causes in us."

Abruptly, his brow furrowed as both smile and spreading knife paused. "Wow....," he sighed. "I know what you mean."

Beside him, a second young man laying tomatoes on a Sliced Turkey Special stopped and looked up at me. "I can get behind that," he murmured, nodding sadly. For a moment, he held my gaze, then caught himself and turned quickly back to his sandwich.

The sadness that strikes as I write this reassures me that my heart is still serviceable. Seeing these abandoned but well-mannered young men working so hard to help others enjoy their lunch still moves me. May it always be so.

Clearly, my ministry to men has struck a timeless, universal nerve. When I first began almost twenty-five years ago in my early forties, I naively imagined that surely, by the next decade, the new millennium would see men everywhere face our father-wound, go to Father God for healing, forgive and honor Dad, and press on after our created destiny.

Years of men's ministry around the world, however, have sobered my otherwise lofty ambitions. **From sandwich servers and lawyers to postal clerks and pastors, from Australia and South Africa to Boston and Los Angeles--men everywhere are still lugging our wounds around.**

And the world is still paying for it—long since I began my ministry. A President who never met his alcoholic father has sex in the White House with a congressional intern; the engineer son of a polygamous Saudi billionaire lost among his 51 siblings engineers the death of over 3000 people on 9/11; gender confusion and its deadly disease kills millions of unfathered men, prisons are bulging with abandoned sons—but I must stop, as sadly, the list defies not only this paragraph, but would comprise a veritable library of pathologies.

In fact, no honest man need resort to such blatant examples. I, for one, know from personal experience how a boy's longing for his daddy defines his manhood. I know the yawning chasm which the father-wound leaves in a boy's heart and the demons which leverage it. I know how we men fear our wound, displace it painfully onto women and children, and withdraw from manly destiny. And I know how often we Christian men hide from it behind performance-oriented religion on the Right and high-minded ideologies on the Left.

I know the crippling shame the father-wound instills in a boy and the overwhelming damage it inflicts later both in and through a man.

In fact, I know the Great Physician who heals it.

What I still don't know after decades of ministry, is whether Christian men will dare to defy its crippling shame and trust the Father of us all to overcome it. "But will the Son of Man find faith on earth when he comes?" as Jesus asked (Luke 18:8).

When a man doesn't get from his father what he needs for manhood, the vacuum in his masculine soul fills with shame. To men, that is, a wound feels weak and therefore, shameful. What's shameful, however, is not being wounded, but hiding from the doctor, becoming infected, and spreading your contagion.

Our problem as men today is not a lack of resources. It's simply that most of us don't want to be healed—at least, not as badly as we want to cover our shame.

We don't trust that Jesus covered our shame on the cross. We don't believe that Father God either cares or is powerful enough to save us from our brokenness, but only to punish us for its effects. And so we're scared to get real with both Him and each other. Indeed, when enough men bear that awful wound, it becomes normative; the One who comes to heal it gets crucified as an outlaw.

Apart from a few notable exceptions, therefore, I don't see many churches today with an intentional, ongoing, vital men's ministry. The message is clear: Christian men don't have needs. We're OK, thank you. We're not wounded—and if we are, our women are faithful enough and children obedient enough to suffer the consequences in silence.

The truth, of course, is that the father of Lies has blackmailed us with shame into denial. Today, almost 40% of American boys are not living with their fathers and up to 40% of US births are out-of-wedlock; the rate of pornography addiction and divorce is soaring not only among non-Believers, but among Christians as well. Yet recently I asked 50 Christian men how many had fathers who taught them about their sexuality and women? Not one hand went up. On another occasion, I asked 350 Christian dads how many had fathers who talked to them helpfully about being a father? Only five hands.

The evidence begs the question: Is the men's movement dead? Has the Father's heart to draw and restore us as His sons been lost amid our distrust of Him and each other? Have our pathetic efforts to hide behind correctness—whether political or religious—pre-empted a courageous faith and relationship with the true Father of us all?

The New Age secular movement, with its pagan mythologies and drums in the woods, helped highlight the problem years ago, but without Jesus eventually could only become ingrown. The Christian movement, dismissed outright by oldline liberals as sexist, passed by default to conservatives, whose exhortation to impossible godly principles, performance standards, and accountability only increased the shame that keeps us from performing.

Where shame and denial are the norm, the one bearing grace and truth tends to get crucified. A myopic, polarized Church effectively closed Jesus out of the men's movement—and, like too many fathers, once again abandoned men. (see John 1:14).

Men of the world caught on first. As early as 1994, *Esquire* men's magazine (5/94) declared that the men's movement was over. "In retrospect," the writer declared matter-of-factly, the movement simply did not "stick" because the self-disclosure and "nakedness of it all" caused "embarrassment" in men.

Certainly, a mutant men's movement animated by our human efforts must be surrendered to God and die in order to be cleansed and set apart for His purposes. Christians call this refining process "sanctification." It proceeds through crucifixion, to keep us from adulterating God's work with the natural impulse to cover our shame with our own works.

Could that be what God's doing in this season? If so, it's time to join Him by confessing that we don't need a men's movement.

We need the Father's movement among men.

Insofar as the movement men long for today is initiated, guided, and empowered not by men but by the Father of all men, it is in fact Jesus (see John 14:7). Clearly, any movement that dares identifies so wholly with Jesus will draw men away from their own work to the work of the Father—and thereby, must challenge the old "man's doing" of religion sufficiently to reveal God's doing.

Thus, the cross.

What kills God's movement among men is what killed Jesus, namely, the self-saving, performance-oriented Pharisee in us all.

What alone can restore and revitalize the Father's movement among men is the death of the men's movement, surrendered to Him.

Thus, the scandal of the secular movement: not that it embraced demonic New Age spiritualities, but that in fact, it challenged shame-based religion when men in the Church lacked the manly faith to do so.

The failure of Christian men to face the growing worldwide epidemic of father-abandonment has allowed the father of Lies to play us men today like a piano, from violence and addictions to self-righteousness and passivity. Still, if I only railed against this defining work of the enemy, I would lose sight of Father God's defining work in Jesus. Indeed, unless anger is rooted in compassion, it must eventually cause as much destruction as the evil it attacks (see 1 Samuel 11:1-6).

It's hard. After twenty five years on the frontier of men's ministry, it's increasingly painful for me to see a world of wounded men—many of whom have gone to church for years--denying their wound and blind to the Healer among us. I wonder: could my pain bear witness to Father God's own sadness for His sons—even His longing to reveal not only our wounds but His outstretched arm in Jesus?

In any case, bearing this pain determines me the more fiercely to see it healed. Toward that end, I've now revised and updated a new 20th anniversary edition of my book *Sons of the Father: Healing the Father-Wound in Men Today*. So many, many men wandering broken and lost while the mighty hand of the Healer beckons freely, compels me to restore this book to life.

As *Esquire* implied, our healing today as men requires a deliberate “nakedness,” even as the patient must lie humble and open before the surgeon (see Hebrews 4:12-13). Such humility and trust is not easily assumed by a man wounded as a boy. But since when has the journey to manhood been easy?

In fact, every father with a belly button is a sinful human being—just ask my son. Getting hurt by Dad comes with the package of life in this fallen world. If you don't deal with it, it'll deal with you—and through you, even destructively. “I will turn the hearts of the sons to the fathers and the hearts of the fathers to the sons,” as God promised at the close of the Hebrew covenant—and then warned, “Otherwise, I would smite the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5,6).

Contrary to the fulminations of my hippie days, overcoming the curse of fatherlessness is not about changing your father. It's about changing you. Honoring your father, as the Commandment, is therefore not about whitewashing his sin, but about letting Father God deliver you from its effects. Nor is your healing about making Dad pay, but rather, realizing that Jesus already paid, that through the cross the Father of us all not only forgave our sins, but empowered us to forgive Dad for his.

In that freedom lies the pathway to your true Father's heart, and thereby, to true manhood.

Jesus has been waiting 2000 years for men to let Him heal our wound. Today, as I turn the corner toward 70, I don't want another man to waste his life suffering it and displacing it onto others. I don't want to visit another sandwich shop—or church, for that matter--and find men serving others while longing hopelessly for a father to serve them (see John 13:8).

The essence of fathering, it's been said, lies in planting seeds that someone else will harvest. Twenty years from now, I want to be publishing an updated 2031 edition of *Sons of the Father*. I want to be writing another Newsletter--celebrating men's courage worldwide to get real with Father God and each other, to press on after our destiny with every resource He provides.

That's what this new 2011 edition is about—namely, calling a lost generation of men back to the Trailhead, and thereby, resurrecting God's movement among men.

The men's movement is dead.

Long live the Father's heart for His sons!

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