

Embracing Godly Masculinity



What a fantastic try by Kyle Sinckler in the World Cup quarter-final against the Wallabies! - a game that made him famous. The next day he made some very revealing comments in a newspaper interview: *“It has been tough....I was born in a single-parent home. I was always looking for that male father figure. It was about how to be an actual man.”*

In “Chariots of Fire”, a classic film of 1981, the person chosen to play Eric Liddell was Ian Charleson, who was so taken with Liddell’s story that he spent some time reading the Bible in order to get into the part. Indeed, because he felt that the script didn’t accurately reflect Eric Liddell’s convictions, he persuaded the director that he could



introduce changes in it, for example for the evangelistic talk to working men after the Scotland-Ireland international meeting. In a newspaper interview a few years later Ian Charleson said something that I’ve never forgotten *“How I wish I was a real man”*, just like Kyle Sinckler’s comment.

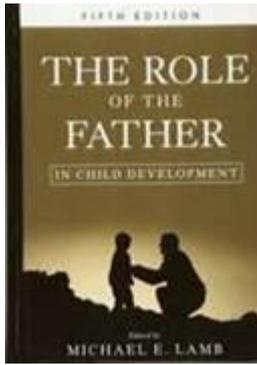


I am sure that the reason for my remembering Charleson’s frankness was that in those days I fully identified with this yearning. Even in my early forties, having been married for 20 years and with two teenage children, if ever I were referred to as a ‘man’ I used to feel weird and uncomfortable. It was as if I were stuck in limbo, somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, some sort of no man’s land - literally.

So what is a father’s role in encouraging his son’s masculinity? There are three crucial stages:

1. *Conception* Masculinity starts here by virtue of the father’s Y chromosome, which is all that Sinckler had.
2. *Childhood* We are all familiar with the essential role that the mother has of bonding with the infant. But the father has an increasing role in relating to the child, as we shall see. My father was good, and I have fond memories of him.
3. *Teenager* Here the father’s role is crucial in drawing the boy out of the feminine circle of the mother and introducing him to the man’s world, affirming and blessing his developing manhood as it flourishes. This dad is a good example: he and his son have gone off in the car on their own, hanging out and eating and playing together. Unfortunately my father died when I was 11, so that he wasn’t around as I entered this crucial period of adolescence. I am sure that this was why I got stuck, and it’s interesting that, compared with all my contemporaries, my puberty was delayed by two years.





If you can afford £76, this is a classic textbook: 'The Role of the Father in Child Development' on all aspects of the role of the father, edited by Cambridge professor Michael Lamb. It includes hundreds of peer-reviewed scientific literature in almost 700 pages. One chapter is devoted to masculinity and shows that in men where this is weak and unaffirmed there is one feature that is nearly always present; and it's nothing to do with how masculine the father is. No, the crucial factor is an inability of the father to relate to his son, known as the 'weak father' hypothesis. There are several common scenarios, such as a father who is:

- **gone:** single parent (as with Sinckler), or early death (as in my case) or divorce
- **absent *physically*:** workaholic; there is also a significant effect if the father is away in the armed forces or the son is sent to boarding school at an early age
- **absent *emotionally*:** which we'll return to shortly
- **other:** abusive (physically or emotionally), unpredictable, alcoholic

Sadly in Christian families - and church leaders are not immune - it is not uncommon for the father to be present *physically* but absent *emotionally*, unable to relate to and connect with his son or to enter into his world. As well as affecting the son's masculinity, it crucially also makes it difficult for the son later to relate to God as Father. So how do young men attempt to compensate for this lack of masculinity?

Why do you suppose that so many young professional men go to the gym? To get fit? This may be true for those who have a personal trainer, but what about the rest? This man has done what many others do: take regular testosterone equivalents, which encourage the six-pack look. Indeed, studies in many societies have found around 3-12% of schoolboys have used testosterone at least once. Yet these do nothing for cardiovascular fitness. I suggest that most of this is not so much to *be* fit as to *look* fit. In any case, does it really make these young men *feel* fit?



Another common reaction in teenage boys is to fixate on others who seem to have what is lacking. For example, I wanted to be like a boy in the year ahead of me; he was rugged, good-looking, captain of rowing and head boy, and popular, none of which was true of me. Later on we'll look at other attempts that men make to bolster their identity.

So what *is* masculinity? I've produced a chart aimed to be a helpful way of unpacking this, which we will use later. This is part of it:

<i>how we know</i>	analysis, thinking, ideas, reason
<i>how we react</i>	action, movement, do, will
	promote, speak, overt
	outwards, initiate, challenge
<i>how we bring change</i>	shape, organise, overcome
	explore, construct, house
<i>how we relate</i>	events, discussion, collaboration
<i>in the church</i>	exhortation, truth outward growth, activity talking to God, studying the Bible dying to our fallen self

None of the attempts to compensate for poor masculinity that I've mentioned seems to work. Yet God can transform this 'hole in the soul', as happened to me when I was least expecting it thirty years ago. We belonged to a well known evangelical Anglican church in south-west London; in those days it wasn't particularly charismatic and had little understanding of healing of the heart. One Sunday at a standard morning service I was standing up in the second hymn when I felt a hand pressing quite firmly just above the small of my back, but when I looked there was no-one close to me. This pressure continued, and I felt as if I were straightening up, getting taller, becoming more solid and resilient. By the time the hymn had finished, everything was back to normal. Except that from that moment on I have felt completely secure as a man. I had always known that my name Andrew, popular on my father's side of the family, comes from the Greek word for 'courageous, strong, brave'; two weeks after this I happened to look it up in the dictionary again which revealed that the root meaning is also 'manly'. I remember laughing at how God had finally brought me into the true meaning of my name - how Biblical is that!

Talking of names, let us look at Adam, who appears throughout the Garden of Eden account in Genesis 2. In all translations the English word 'man' appears around 15 times in this chapter. But this is inaccurate; the standard word used throughout the Hebrew Bible for 'man' ('eesh') - each one of us here is an 'eesh' - doesn't appear until the very *end* of this chapter. So what is going on? The answer is that all the previous words mis-translated 'man' actually have a different meaning, subtle but important. The Hebrew word here is 'awdawm' (from which Adam gets his name, in the same way as Andrew = manly); its correct meaning, as is clear from the rest of the Hebrew scriptures, is 'human', 'human being', 'humankind'.



The clue is that although at the end of the previous chapter it says that ‘everything...was very good’, there is a caveat. When God inspected Eden (this Hebrew word means ‘delight’) he said that Adam being alone (literally ‘lonely’) was *not* good. His solution was to provide the human with a ‘suitable helper’, but again this NIV translation doesn’t do justice to the Hebrew. The word for helper (‘ezer’) does *not* imply a subsidiary role such as an aide, PA, batman. Almost every time ‘ezer’ is used it refers to *God* helping *us* as enabler, encourager, strengthener, advisor - hence ‘partner’ in NRSV. That is why Moses called his second son Eliezer (‘God is my help’). That is why Samuel marked victory over the Philistines by placing a monument called Ebenezer (‘stone of help’) saying ‘Thus far has the Lord helped us’. There is absolutely no idea here of Eve being in submission to Adam.



Even more interesting is the Hebrew word translated ‘suitable’. It literally means ‘facing, opposite’ and one Bible translation renders it as ‘corresponding to’. Jewish commentators have always understood it this way, with the idea of woman being *complementary* to man. The way that I find helpful to understand this is to think of Velcro. Here too the two halves are, like men and women, made of identical material, but are very different. It’s no good trying to join two identical pieces, but when you combine the two different halves, a really strong bond forms. God’s plan was that man and woman would form a Velcro partnership.

So what does woman offer such a union? Let us now complete the earlier table:

	<i>masculine</i>	<i>feminine</i>
<i>how we know</i>	analysis, thinking, ideas, reason	intuition, feelings
<i>how we react</i>	action, movement, do, will	reflection, stillness, wait
	promote, speak, overt	receive, listen, hidden
	outwards, initiate, challenge	internal, respond
<i>how we bring change</i>	shape, organise, overcome	meaning, civilise, value
	explore, construct, house	nest, domesticate, home
<i>how we relate</i>	events, discussion, collaboration	people, sharing, intimacy
<i>in the church</i>	exhortation, truth outward growth, activity talking to God, studying the Bible dying to our fallen self	encouragement, harmony inner personal depth, relationships listening to God, knowing Jesus affirming our true self

As an example (*see lower highlights on the chart*), throughout human history it is the man who has cleared the forest, broken up the boulders, levelled the ground, cut the timber and then constructed the house; although nowadays most of us merely put down the deposit! But the particular gifting of a woman is to turn that house into a home. The reason our previous place in South London sold for £15,000 more than its valuation was that, without spending a lot of money, Ruth had made it beautiful, appealing and wonderfully relaxing.

Again (*upper highlights*), there were many times when she and I needed to make a common decision about the kids, money, church, pastoral issues etc. But we each went about this in very different ways. I would use my analytical approach, going from a to b to c, etc, and afterwards would have been able to retrace my thought processes. Ruth, on the other hand, would come to the same conclusion (often quicker than me) without being able to explain to me or to even to herself (“I just know”) how she’d got there. Women’s intuition is powerful, and infuriating! It’s easy to minimise it, but husbands learn (often the hard way) that, if in doubt, listen to your wife.



So, God put Adam (the human) to sleep, and when he woke up and saw Eve he had two fascinating reactions. *Firstly*, he burst into poetry (the second time this happens in the creation story). *Secondly*, he immediately calls himself an ‘eesh’, the first time that this word ever appears, from when on it is routinely used in the Hebrew scriptures. In other words, *Adam didn’t become a real man until the feminine appeared*. This is why it is really important that a man who is at the moment single must actively seek and foster good relationships with women, as in a home group or being part of a practical team.

But there is even more. I now want to introduce you to a concept with which you may not be familiar and which at first sight may seem bizarre. It is that each human, man or woman, needs to have *both* masculine *and* feminine in balance; the technical term for this is ‘androgyny’. Some of you may be familiar with Carl Jung’s concept that each person has to have both ‘animus’ and ‘anima’, but in fact this goes back over 2,500 years to cultures such as Greek (Aristophanes), Indian (Upanishads) and Chinese (Yin/Yang in Taoism). But is it Biblical?

Let’s go back to day 6 of creation, when both animals and human beings were formed (which fits well with modern science). Man of course is fundamentally *different* from the animals because of being created in God’s image. Now the compiler temporarily switched to poetry - the language of the heart, now being the first time in the creation story - to say:

‘God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.’

But if you think about it, why on earth did he specify male and female as part of God’s image? He would certainly have known that the animals formed the same day were *also* male and female? And again, why not use the words for ‘man’ and ‘woman’? My answer is in Hebrew-English dictionaries: the words translated ‘male’ and ‘female’ are exactly the same as those for ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. So it is reasonable to translate the above as follows:

God created *humans* in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
masculine and *feminine* he created him.

Indeed, there is a biochemical equivalent to this. Each of us men has female hormones (oestrogen) in our bloodstream, at about 6% of the level in a non-pregnant young woman. Likewise, she has circulating testosterone, again at around 6% of that in us. The concept of androgyny is therefore both psychological, philosophical, theological and biological.

How does androgyny work? What I'd now like you to do is place your right hand on one knee, where you can feel the patella (kneecap). Now go down the front of the leg where you will easily feel the prominent large tibia (shin-bone). The main function of the tibia is to transfer the weight of the whole body to the ground through the ankle joint. If there is anything wrong with the tibia (infection, cancer, fracture) it is very hard to walk or even to stand up. So now, keep following the tibia down, and you will find that it turns inwards to form a big bony bump at the inside of the ankle, known in the trade as the medial malleolus. So the tibia forms a joint with the knee above and the ankle below.

Now move your hand around to the other side of the ankle - the outside - where there is an equally large bony bump. This is the lateral malleolus, but it is not part of the tibia. So, continuing to press, follow it upwards. It becomes small, hard to feel and soon disappears into the calf muscles. It is known as the fibula, and although it joins the tibia higher up, it does *not* form part of the knee joint. So what function does this bone have? Well, this too becomes clear where it is diseased; although it may be possible to walk, you will be unsteady and liable to keep falling over, and running is impossible. Its prime function is not to bear weight, but to provide balance. This of course immediately suggests the mantra of Theresa May - remember her? - "Strong and Stable".



You can see where I'm going with this. A man's primary strength (the tibia) of masculinity needs to be balanced by the secondary, yet essential, fibula of the feminine. Conversely a woman's primary strength is her feminine, but stabilised by the secondary masculine. A woman lacking the masculine is passive, dippy, all over the place; I expect you know one or two like that. But supposing a man doesn't have the balancing feminine? The effects of this are predictable from the chart: such a man will find it very hard to rest, wait, meditate, reflect. He will prefer to talk rather than listen, and in particular will find it difficult to listen to God. Also, the unbalanced masculine can be constructive yet damaging, more macho than manly. A classic example of this is Martin Luther whose masculine made him able to push through and challenge in a profoundly effective way that has reshaped Western Christianity; however, his lack of the true feminine (evidenced in his attitude to his wife and his teaching about women) made him so aggressive and confrontational that he often fell out with those who started off as his strongest supporters. So for a man to be a real man he not only needs to be able to relate properly to woman, but also to integrate with his feminine.

This is how it was with Adam and Eve in the Garden. My Ruth had an inspired way of illustrating this. Imagine a triangle: at its base we have man and woman facing each other, but primarily looking up to God at its apex. It is from *God* that they received their life, their affirmation, their meaning and their identity, from which security they can then face and relate to each other healthily, enhancing and blessing each other. Now everything in creation was indeed "very good".



But then it all went pear-shaped at the Fall, where man and woman deliberately chose to cut themselves off from the source of their life, value, meaning and identity, bringing them under God's judgement. We tend to think that Genesis 3 is about God's condemnation, but have you noticed that it is only the serpent that he curses, not the two humans? He doesn't need to, because what His judgement now describes are the inevitable consequences of their disobedience, what is bound to go wrong if you choose to ignore the Maker's instructions and are cut off from God at the triangle's apex. In fact this is the third time that we have poetry in the creation story, reflecting God's broken heart which is also mentioned later in Genesis. Some of the consequences are obstetric and ecological, but there are two particularly tragic ones that God explains to Eve.

Firstly, He says "Your desire will be for your husband" which of course can't mean a healthy desire. Instead, from now on woman will bend *into* the man, seeking her identity from him. Have you ever wondered why women in very abusive or even violent relationships find it so hard to leave when it has been obvious to everyone else for months or even years how destructive things are? It is because their identity is so tied up with their partner's that, if they leave, they are tearing themselves apart and lose a lot of the basis of their being. A recent Times article stated "Women report co-dependency even after separation" and quotes a Member of Parliament (Rosie Duffield) who experienced so-called 'coercive control': "I slip back into those feelings of loss of the man I once loved". This is also why when a man is found to be an abuser, a thief, a drug addict or other sort of criminal, his wife so often stands by him, and can't believe that he is evil; it is not an exaggeration to say that she is hooked into him.



Secondly, God says to her "He will rule over you" because now man controls and dominates woman, treating her as less than. Sadly the church has often spiritualised this into a doctrine of submission, which was not how it originally was or finally will be. Paul's teaching on this is in the context of *mutual* submission, the husband being commanded to love his wife "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her", taking us back to the Garden as it was originally. Now the relationship looks different; here while the woman is bending *into* the man, he is bending *over* her.



So where does the man now seek to gain his identity? Unlike the woman, not from his spouse. This is the poster advertising a 1996 film. Here again we see Eva bending into Juan Peron, hooked into him. But what about him? He is looking elsewhere for his identity: in his case power. For others it may be work status, or money, or athletic prowess, or sexual conquests or, particularly in a place like Oxford, academic credentials. And there is a particular trap for believers: getting our identity and value from our ministry in the church, which should instead flow from being valued by the Father above. As before, none of these actually solves the problem: "How I wish I was a real man".

So how can this change? Simply, we need to reconnect with God at the apex of the triangle to get our meaning and life, our identity from him. Then we can relate to woman properly, and become integrated with our feminine. As in my experience, this initial healing can be quick and profound. But how can we build on this when we may never have had a healthy model to

convey this to us? The wonderful answer for us believers is that Jesus himself is the perfect example of godly masculinity. So now we are going to have a group exercise.

On your table you will find a sheet that is folded in two (*appended*). Now turn it up so that on top is the chart we saw earlier. Below this is a short Bible passage about Jesus cleansing the Temple, from which of course comes St Aldate's church strapline 'a house of prayer for all nations'. This was the last time that Jesus went up to Jerusalem, in order to confront the religious authorities, announce himself publicly, and accept capital punishment. What I'd like each of you to do is read the familiar passage and then ask yourself two questions.



The *first* is to consider how, in all honesty, you would have responded to what you saw, and see where it may differ from Jesus' response. As you discuss this amongst yourselves, there are likely to be several reactions.

Now *secondly*, look at the passage again and mark on the chart anything which fits with what Jesus did, also for discussion. Between you, you have probably marked a few of these.

Now it gets particularly interesting. The account you have looked at is essentially the same in Matthew, Luke and John. But did you know that Mark fleshes this out much more? Open up the sheet so that you can, lower down, read his version, with an extra introductory paragraph. This states that Jesus, on reaching the Temple and seeing what was going on (as he must have done on previous visits), nevertheless decided to go home and return the next day. This raises the intriguing question: what went on between the two paragraphs? Irritatingly (this happens so often in the Bible) we are kept in the dark. But we can legitimately ask God's Spirit to awaken and enlarge our imagination for clues and ideas, as with Ignatian meditation. Why did Jesus go home? What did he do that evening? Did he discuss this with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, his followers? Between you there will be a variety of ideas. I personally believe that when Jesus went back to Bethany he spent time mulling over what he had seen and what he should now do about it, and that this was yet another occasion when he got up early in the morning to pray.

Now go back to the chart at the top, and see what further things you can highlight. Not only will you have marked off more items, but some are now on the feminine side of the chart.

Here's a suggestion about how to develop this after today. How about putting on hold whatever Bible reading plan you have for the next few weeks? Instead, go through each of the gospels to reflect on every single time something appears about Jesus as an adult: teaching, healing, relating, challenging etc. Again, you can think *firstly* about how you might actually have handled that situation, and then *secondly* continue to mark up the chart in front of you. Not only will you find more and more of it fills up, but you will also gain an increasingly deep and broad and wide connection with Jesus the real man. In the trade we call this 're-symbolising the heart'; as we feast on such pictures they become incorporated into our hearts, our souls, our imaginations. We may not notice the difference for some time, but it is likely that those close to us will.

As we close, let me pray:

Father, thank You that I am not just a child, but also a son of God.

Father, thank You that I am not only a son, but also a man of God.

Father, thank You that I am not only a man of God, but also a prince in Your royal courts.

	<i>masculine</i>	<i>feminine</i>
<i>how we know</i>	analysis, reason	intuition, feelings
<i>how we react</i>	action, the will, do	reflection, stillness, wait
	challenge, speak, overt	receive, listen, hidden
	outwards, initiate	internal, respond
<i>how we bring change</i>	shape, organise, overcome	meaning, civilise, value
	explore, construct, house	nest, domesticate, home
<i>how we relate</i>	events, discussion	people, intimacy
<i>in the church</i>	exhortation, truth outward growth, activity talking to God, studying the Bible dying to our fallen self	encouragement, harmony inner depth, relationships listening to God, knowing Jesus affirming our true self

Jesus made his entrance into Jerusalem.... He went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He quoted this text: ‘My house was designated a house of prayer; you have made it a hangout for thieves’. *Matt 21:10-14 (MSG), also Luke 19 & John 2*

fold

He entered Jerusalem, then entered the Temple. He looked around, taking it all in. But by now it was late, so he went back to Bethany with the Twelve.

The next day they arrived at Jerusalem. Immediately on entering the Temple Jesus started throwing out everyone who had set up shop there, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of the bankers and the stalls of the pigeon merchants. And then he taught them, quoting this text: ‘My house was designated a house of prayer for the nations; you’ve turned it into a hangout for thieves’. *Mark 11:11-18 (MSG)*

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