

Meaningful Male Friendship in a Disconnected Age

The epidemic of moral failure among men in the church today is directly tied to our lack of healthy relationships.

Despite the proliferation of iPhones, Blackberries, e-mail and social networking Web sites—not to mention Starbucks locations—many Christian men, if they are honest, will tell you they are lonely. They may Twitter several times a day to co-workers; they may have occasional golf buddies; they may even grab coffee with colleagues from time to time. But so many men who attend church regularly are friendless.

This was made real to me last weekend when I spoke to a group of men at a large charismatic church in Rochester, N.Y. I was talking about three different types of relationships we need: (1) “Pauls,” who serve as spiritual fathers; (2) “Barnabases,” peer-level encouragers who support and challenge us; and (3) “Timothys,” younger men we inspire and mentor.

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I asked the guys in Rochester to write down the names of the men in their lives who fall into each category. When the session was over, one man went home to his wife and announced that he couldn't write down one name in any of the categories. He had no meaningful relationships. Other men I spoke to that night admitted that they don't have mentors and have never been transparent with a male friend about personal problems.

Men are disconnected. And we wonder why the American church is dysfunctional?

Secular psychologists can tell you why men struggle to build

close relationships with each other. But we rarely address this issue in the church—and as a result many men who love God live in painful isolation. I've identified the three biggest barriers to healthy male bonding:

#1. Macho stereotypes. The macho myth says a real man is a rugged individualist: strongly independent, emotionally detached, covered in body armor without visible weaknesses. The macho myth tells boys they must never cry—even when they are in pain—and that when they become adults they cannot be intimate with their wives or tender with their children. The macho myth says they must maintain dictatorial power and control in relationships, even if abuse is necessary.

Yet when we look at Scripture we see that Jesus Christ radically challenged the macho culture promoted by the religious leaders of His day. The Pharisees looked down on women, stayed aloof from children, and celebrated their own importance while refusing to touch the needy. Jesus, on the flip side, empowered marginalized women, held babies in His arms, touched lepers and told a parable about a father who embraced and kissed his wayward son. Jesus destroyed the macho myth by demonstrating that the strongest masculinity is gentle and approachable.

#2. Fear of homosexuality. In my travels I've noticed that men in other countries feel perfectly free to be affectionate. Men in Africa hold hands; in Latin countries they kiss each other on the neck. Sociologists say male affection was once more common in this country—but it waned around the same time awareness of homosexuality increased. Nowadays, many straight men are afraid to offer a consoling embrace to a friend lest it be viewed as a sexual advance.

That's tragic for many reasons, mostly because all human beings need affection to thrive. There are men today in their 60s and 70s who still crave the affection their emotionally-

repressed fathers never gave them. So they live in shells and suffer in silence.

Many guys turn to homosexuality as a substitute for the healthy, non-sexual male affection they should have received. (Then the devil is all too eager to convince them they were “born that way.”) The church could offer genuine healing to guys who struggle with sexual identity issues, but it will require us to offer fatherly or brotherly affection without fear.

#3. The competition trap. Let’s face it: Guys are so insecure and so work-oriented that we rate each other and ourselves solely on performance. Whether on the fourth-grade playground or in the corporate boardroom, we are so obsessed with the game that we can’t let any other guy get ahead. We have to win, so every other male becomes an obstacle to our goal.

Male pride is the single biggest reason we can’t get close to our brothers. It’s the reason a Christian guy with a porn addiction can’t be honest enough to call a friend and share his ugly secret. It’s the reason some pastors can’t admit their marriages are suffering. It’s the reason successful businessmen end up drinking on weekends instead of finding a support group. A big, fat ego stands in the way.

Jesus showed us how to deal with male pride. Right before He went to the cross He gathered His male followers together for the Passover, stripped off His clothes and put on a slave’s towel. Then He proceeded to wash His disciples’ smelly, dusty feet. When He finished the job He told His men they should treat each other the same way.

The current epidemic of moral failure among men in the church today is directly tied to our lack of healthy, honest relationships. The only way to reverse the trend is to reintroduce men to the servant Savior—who was so humble that he took off His macho armor and became vulnerable.

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