

Why
GUYS
Need God

MIKE ERRE



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Contents

Introduction: Why There Are Books for Men 9

Part One—The Journey

- 1. In the Image 15
- 2. On Being Strong and Courageous 27

Part Two—In the Field

- 3. Naming the Animals 41
- 4. Toil and Thorns 55
- 5. Harps, Clouds, and Backhoes 67

Part Three—In the Bedroom

- 6. Naked and Unashamed 81
- 7. Not All Electric Shocks Are Bad 93
- 8. Victoria's Other Secret 105
- 9. Walking Down Another Street 119

Part Four—In the Arena

- 10. Band of Brothers and Sisters 133
- 11. Power and Control 145
- 12. The First and the Last 155
- 13. Fatherhood, Biological or Otherwise 167

Conclusion: Dissident Jesus 181

A Brief Word to Pastors 191

Notes 197

Bibliography 211

Part One

THE JOURNEY

IN THE IMAGE

I want to examine what “meaning of life” books typically overlook. They are right to tell us we are created for worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship, but they are wrong to stop there. Look at the list again. While it more or less covers our responsibilities as Christians, it says little about what it means to be human. Does our purpose for life consist entirely in these spiritual activities, or is there also some value in showing up for work, waxing our car, playing with our children, or taking a trip to the beach—just a few of the many things we do, not because we are Christian, but because we are human?

MICHAEL E. WITTMER

Is it me, or does the whole “what does it mean to be a man” conversation seem pretty strange? I don’t see a lot of books for women defining true femininity, but the shelves of bookstores are stocked with loads of guidance on how to be a man. Women just seem to know what it is to be a woman. From what I can see, most of their questions have to do with *Will people love and delight in me as the woman I am?* and not about what it means to be a woman in the first place.

Not true with fellas. Men have angst that books and retreats and conferences on masculinity tap into. We don't know what it means to be real men. The numbers of us raised in homes with no father, an absent father, a preoccupied and distant father, or an abusive father are pretty staggering. So that sets us up for failure right from the start.

To Be or Not to Be

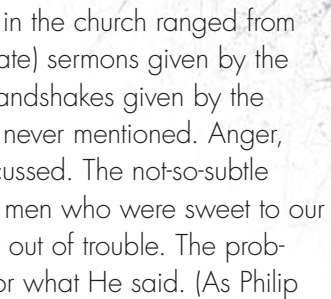
Into this vacuum of masculinity step many competing images and ideas. The world around us portrays manly men ranging from tough guys (John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis) to bad boys (Johnny Depp, Russell Crowe, Mel Gibson) to sweet, sensitive types (Hugh Grant) to class clowns (Ben Stiller, Will Ferrell). And then there are jocks (Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Cal Ripken), rock stars (Bono, Sting, Bruce Springsteen), and CEOs (Donald Trump, Bill Gates).

Not enough options? Need more choices? With all of those conflicting images, no wonder men have a tough time figuring out what it means to really be a man.

We need to differentiate between maleness and masculinity. Leon Podles offers this helpful insight:

Maleness and masculinity are not the same thing. We commonly recognize a distinction between facts of biology and masculine identity. Simply being an adult male is not enough; one must in addition be a man, which means more than simply having a male body...Sex is what the body is, that is, male or female. Gender is everything that is not limited to the body...maleness is a physical quality, masculinity a cultural and spiritual one, although one that is connected with the physical realities of being male.¹

The church throws its own male stereotypes into the ring—beginning with its characterization of Jesus, a nice, Mr. Rogers kind of guy. In our quest to keep Jesus divine, we have minimized the fact that He was a man.



The masculine images from my upbringing in the church ranged from the nice, polite (never offensive or passionate) sermons given by the nice, polite pastor, to the soft and warm handshakes given by the ushers who collected the money. Sex was never mentioned. Anger, ambition, and competition were never discussed. The not-so-subtle message was that Jesus made us into nice men who were sweet to our wives, read the Bible to our kids, and kept out of trouble. The problem was that this isn't what Jesus was like or what He said. (As Philip Yancey pointed out, nobody would crucify Mr. Rogers.)

I remember our youth pastor getting fired because he dared to take his suit off during the sermon (he was wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt underneath) to make the point that God isn't particularly impressed with our external appearance. But apparently, the church was, so the guy was let go. I grew up thinking that church (and therefore Jesus and the rest of Christianity) was boring and irrelevant, but it was a great place to make out with girls.

I went to college and learned that men were responsible for a lot of the trouble the world was in. Some of my professors said it was chauvinistic to call God "Father" and to refuse to let women be pastors and speakers. They said men were war-mongering, womanizing, oppressive, and dominating. I felt as if I needed to apologize for being a man.

In my Christian campus groups, men were never called out to really be men. We were asked to "initiate" with women (meaning it was the guys' job to ask the "sisters" out) and to be responsible for DTR (what our little Christian circle called "defining the relationship"). We were told not to masturbate or look at porn, and to watch how far we went with girls. That was pretty much it.

So here was my situation: zero help from the world. Zero help from the church. Zero help from my friends. Zero help from girls. And a hole in my spirit that kept saying, *There is such a thing as true masculinity, and you don't have it.*

I remember sitting up late in my room as a college student listing out

all my masculine options: Should I be a jock? Or maybe play up the intellectual side? Should I be rebellious? Or really work on my “walk with Jesus”? And my decisions were almost entirely based on getting girls. Whatever they would want me to be, I would endeavor to be. I literally wrote this out at the time in my journal. I had no idea. I had no one to turn to for understanding or advice. Not knowing who I was (and was supposed to be), I let majority vote determine my actions. But I also knew that as things stood, I wasn’t cool enough, spiritual enough, talented enough, or good-looking enough on my own. What I really needed was to act like somebody else.

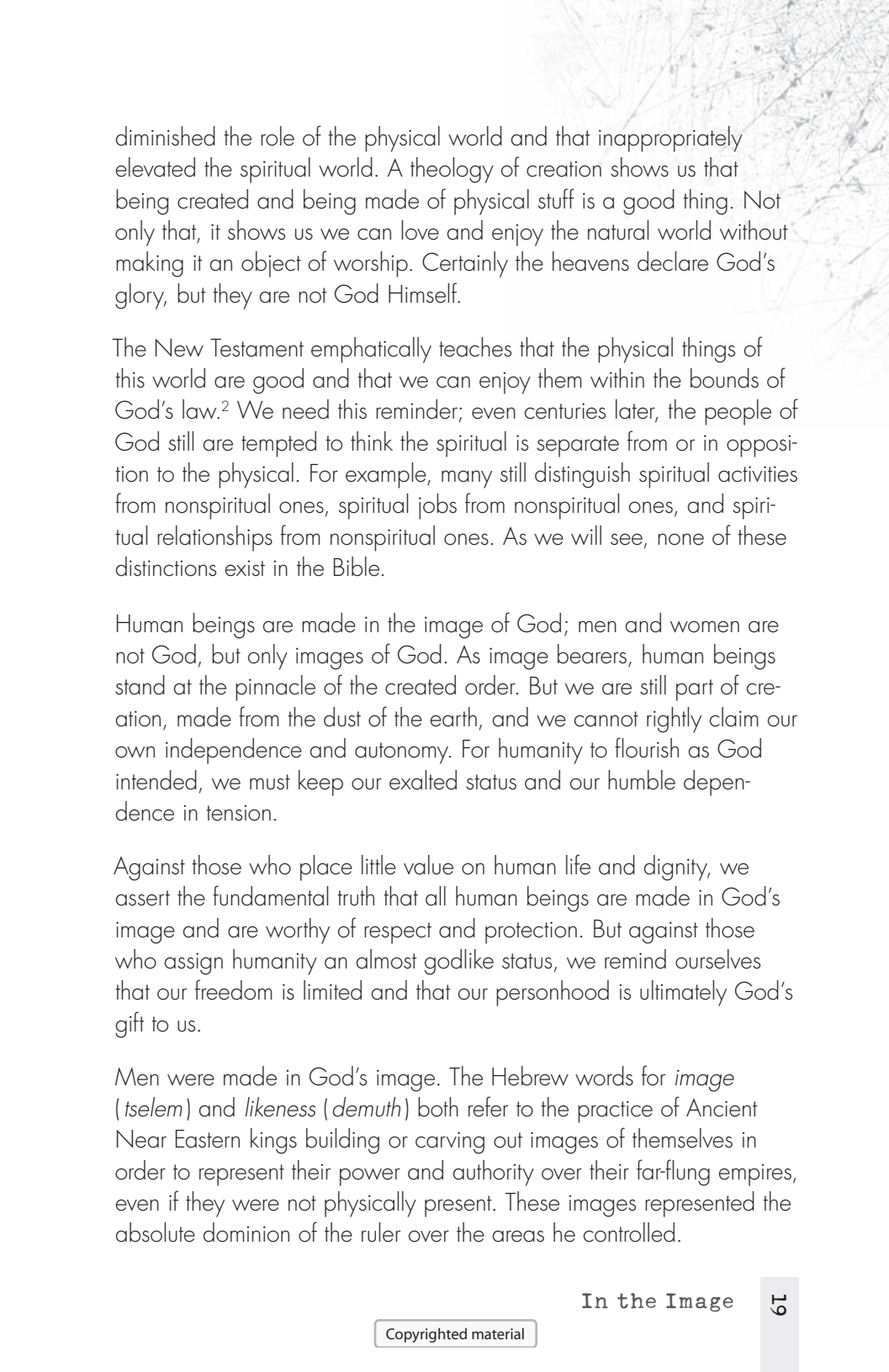
The point is this: If we go into the world or the church looking for images of what it means to be a man, we will come away confused. We hear one thing from the world, another from the church, and still another from the academy. We have a bewildering array of options. And if family, schools, movies, friendships, and churches won’t (and ultimately can’t) define masculinity for us, where can we find the answers we still need?

Made in the Image

After college, I stumbled into the opening pages of the Bible and read the story I had often seen reenacted on the Sunday school flannel-graph board but had not yet fully understood:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27).

The poetry and rhythm of Genesis 1 culminate in this declaration of God to create humanity. As part of the material, physical creation, human beings are declared to be “very good.” It is a good thing to be creaturely—to be made of physical stuff. Yet for centuries after the coming of Jesus, the early church had to fight against teachings that



diminished the role of the physical world and that inappropriately elevated the spiritual world. A theology of creation shows us that being created and being made of physical stuff is a good thing. Not only that, it shows us we can love and enjoy the natural world without making it an object of worship. Certainly the heavens declare God's glory, but they are not God Himself.

The New Testament emphatically teaches that the physical things of this world are good and that we can enjoy them within the bounds of God's law.² We need this reminder; even centuries later, the people of God still are tempted to think the spiritual is separate from or in opposition to the physical. For example, many still distinguish spiritual activities from nonspiritual ones, spiritual jobs from nonspiritual ones, and spiritual relationships from nonspiritual ones. As we will see, none of these distinctions exist in the Bible.

Human beings are made in the image of God; men and women are not God, but only images of God. As image bearers, human beings stand at the pinnacle of the created order. But we are still part of creation, made from the dust of the earth, and we cannot rightly claim our own independence and autonomy. For humanity to flourish as God intended, we must keep our exalted status and our humble dependence in tension.

Against those who place little value on human life and dignity, we assert the fundamental truth that all human beings are made in God's image and are worthy of respect and protection. But against those who assign humanity an almost godlike status, we remind ourselves that our freedom is limited and that our personhood is ultimately God's gift to us.

Men were made in God's image. The Hebrew words for *image* (*tselem*) and *likeness* (*demuth*) both refer to the practice of Ancient Near Eastern kings building or carving out images of themselves in order to represent their power and authority over their far-flung empires, even if they were not physically present. These images represented the absolute dominion of the ruler over the areas he controlled.

In the same way, human beings were created to reflect central features about the nature of God. We represent Him to some degree. Men and women are not gods themselves, but they reflect something of His nature.

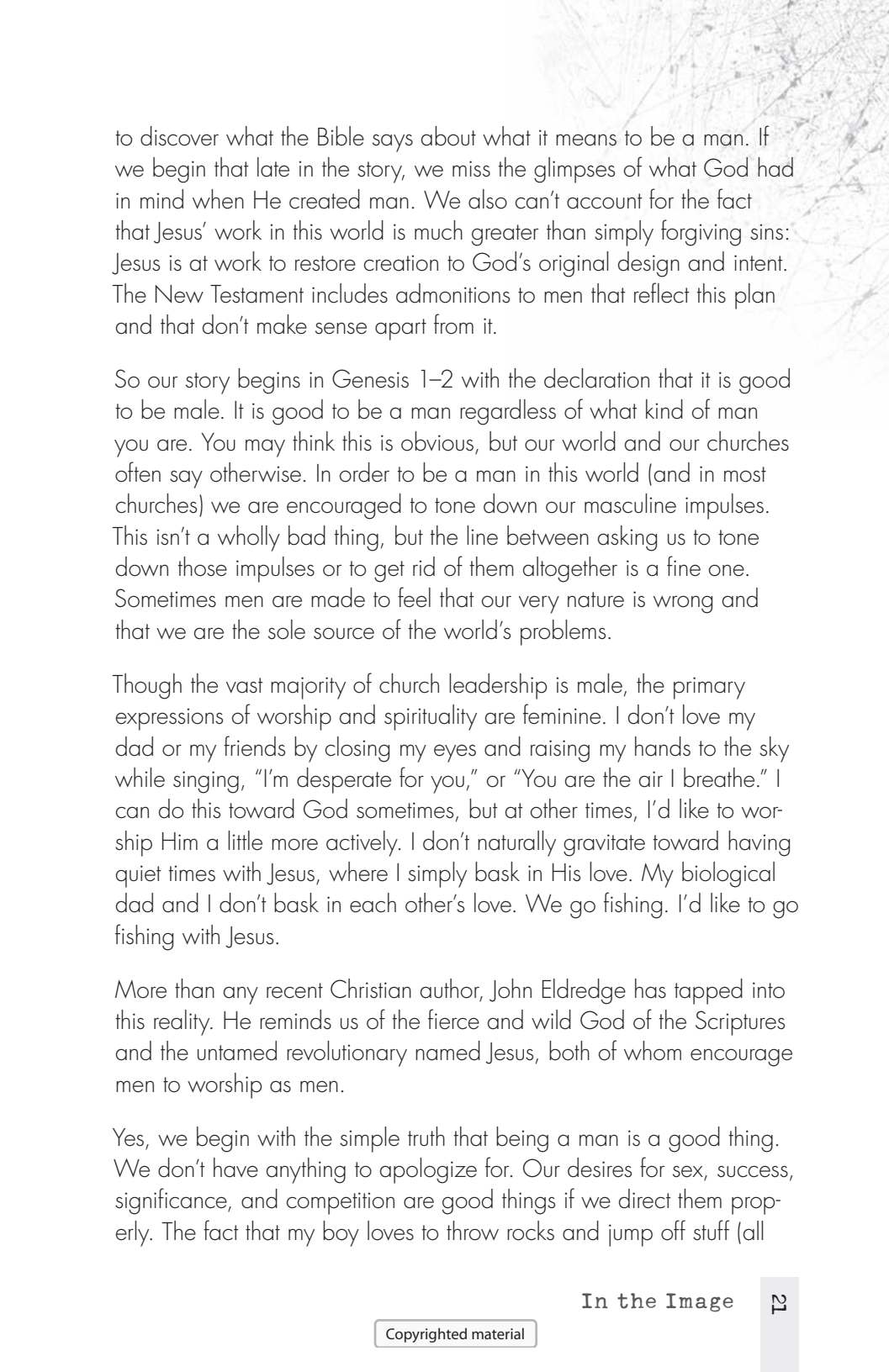
Notice too that God placed His glory in the image of the man and woman together.³ Both are needed to fully reflect what God is like. This is often overlooked. The Bible seems to begin with absolute unity and equality while still allowing for difference and distinction.

By examining the opening pages of Genesis, we begin to get an idea of what it means to be masculine. We see expressions of community, sexuality, work and vocation, and spirituality, all within the first two chapters.

But the main point of this chapter is that all other images of masculinity will fail us. None of us will be sufficient to carry the weight of life in this world as a man and as a disciple of Jesus unless we start here first. God begins by saying that masculinity (and femininity, but that is a different book) is part of God's good creation.

Starting in Genesis 1, God teaches us something important: God loves what He has made. He delights, rejoices, and revels in it.⁴ To be a part of God's creation is a wonderful thing, and human beings stand at the top of it all. Every other living thing in Genesis 1 is made "according to its [own] kind." Only human beings are made as an expression of God's kind—that is, in His image. The literary structure of Genesis 1 changes at the creation of humanity. Instead of a divine command, "Let there be man and woman," we read about God's creative process and the material He used to create man and woman. These stylistic changes are to show us that human beings have a special place in creation and that they are uniquely able to relate to God and to each other.⁵

Most Christian discussions of gender start in Genesis 3 with the fall of Adam and Eve. This is a tragic mistake. Yes, masculinity has been marred and the image of God tarnished in us by the entrance of sin and death into the world. But we can't start in Genesis 3 if we want



to discover what the Bible says about what it means to be a man. If we begin that late in the story, we miss the glimpses of what God had in mind when He created man. We also can't account for the fact that Jesus' work in this world is much greater than simply forgiving sins: Jesus is at work to restore creation to God's original design and intent. The New Testament includes admonitions to men that reflect this plan and that don't make sense apart from it.

So our story begins in Genesis 1–2 with the declaration that it is good to be male. It is good to be a man regardless of what kind of man you are. You may think this is obvious, but our world and our churches often say otherwise. In order to be a man in this world (and in most churches) we are encouraged to tone down our masculine impulses. This isn't a wholly bad thing, but the line between asking us to tone down those impulses or to get rid of them altogether is a fine one. Sometimes men are made to feel that our very nature is wrong and that we are the sole source of the world's problems.

Though the vast majority of church leadership is male, the primary expressions of worship and spirituality are feminine. I don't love my dad or my friends by closing my eyes and raising my hands to the sky while singing, "I'm desperate for you," or "You are the air I breathe." I can do this toward God sometimes, but at other times, I'd like to worship Him a little more actively. I don't naturally gravitate toward having quiet times with Jesus, where I simply bask in His love. My biological dad and I don't bask in each other's love. We go fishing. I'd like to go fishing with Jesus.

More than any recent Christian author, John Eldredge has tapped into this reality. He reminds us of the fierce and wild God of the Scriptures and the untamed revolutionary named Jesus, both of whom encourage men to worship as men.

Yes, we begin with the simple truth that being a man is a good thing. We don't have anything to apologize for. Our desires for sex, success, significance, and competition are good things if we direct them properly. The fact that my boy loves to throw rocks and jump off stuff (all

while attempting to do great bodily harm to his dad) is a good thing. Yes, we are sinful and tarnished. But the fall has not pushed out all the goodness of God's creation.⁶

We acknowledge all the hurt and pain that men have caused in the past: the oppression of women and minorities, the chauvinism disguised as Christian theology, and our absence from our homes and families (regardless of whether we were physically there). At the same time, we affirm that masculinity itself is not the issue. Rather, masculinity that is functioning outside of God's intent is behind these things.

We begin by reminding ourselves that our maleness and our masculinity are good things! We begin by expressing gratitude for how God has made and designed us. We begin, not by looking to Hollywood, or Washington DC, or even our own families for an image of what it means to be masculine. We begin by placing ourselves back when the universe was new and unblemished, when God revealed His design for men in the way He created Adam and in what He called Adam to do.

Men and God

What follows from this is that there is such a thing as a masculine spirituality—a way that men distinctively approach and worship God that is different from feminine spirituality.

Perhaps the term [masculine spirituality] sounds new, strange or even wrong or unnecessary. Why would we bother speaking of a spirituality that is especially masculine or male? Is there anything to be learned here? Don't we all come to God the same way? I am convinced that there are different paths because men and women pay attention to different things. Moviemakers know that, book publishers know that, advertisers know that, salespersons know that, almost everybody knows that except the clergy. Fortunately, it is strongly validated in universal sacred stories, legends and myths, which are invariably written for men or women, and different patterns are found in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, too.⁷

Distinctively masculine ways of relating to God do exist. This should not surprise us, for the equality we see in Genesis 1–2 does not equate to sameness between the sexes. If God merely wanted companionship for Adam, He Himself could have provided it. If He had wanted fraternity, He would have created another man. Instead, He made a woman—equality with a difference and distinction, psychologically and biologically.

For women and men to be equal does not imply that they must be identical. This, of course, parallels the most fundamental of Christian ideas about God: that God is triune. God is three persons who live simultaneously and equally as one essence. We clearly see equality within the nature of God, yet we also see differences in functions and roles.⁸

As we will explore in more detail, to be a man is to relate to God in certain ways—ways that are no better or worse than the ways women relate to God. Part of our gender confusion, however, has led us to compare masculine and feminine spiritualities and to make judgments between them. The scriptural distinctions between male and female are grounded in these early chapters in Genesis. They were not intended to allow one sex to claim superiority over the other. Both men and women are image bearers, both have intrinsic dignity and worth, and both play unique parts in God’s world. Only our modern reactions against role distinctions prevent us from seeing that men and women have different kinds of honor.

G.K. Chesterton wrote a short poem entitled “Comparisons” that describes our problem:

If I set the sun beside the moon,
And if I set the land beside the sea,
And if I set the town beside the country,
And if I set the man beside the woman,
I suppose some fool would talk about one being better.⁹

To present a masculine spirituality is not to discount a feminine spirituality. It simply seeks to give men permission to worship and live in the

ways God intended. That permission is sorely lacking in the world and the church, but it is urgently needed.

David Murrow presents a compelling case for a masculine spirituality in *Why Men Hate Going to Church*. His comments are worth quoting at length:

Today's church does not mesmerize men; it repels them. Just 35 percent of the men in the United States say they attend church weekly. In Europe, male participation rates are much worse, in the neighborhood of 5 percent. This hardly sounds like a male-dominated, patriarchal institution to me...Today's church has developed a culture that is driving men away. Almost every man in America has tried church, but two-thirds find it unworthy of a couple of hours once a week.

When men need spiritual sustenance, they go to the wilderness, the workplace, the garage, or the corner bar. They watch their heroes in the stadium or on the racetrack. They plunge into a novel or sneak off to a movie. Church is one of the last places men look for God...

The answer is not a male-dominated church. The answer is a balanced approach: teaching practices, and opportunities that allow for both masculine and feminine expressions in the church...I am not calling men back to the church. Instead, I am calling the church back to men...Few churches model men's values: risk and reward, accomplishment, heroic sacrifice, action and adventure...He finds church dull for the same reason he finds chick flicks dull: neither one reflects his masculine heart...[Men] have no desire to fall in love with a wonderful man, even one named Jesus...

Like most men, he does not possess the natural gifts that make a good churchgoer. He's not very expressive, verbal, or sensitive. He's not a very good teacher or singer. He's uncomfortable praying aloud or holding hands with strangers.¹⁰

Murrow points to a study that concludes, "While the US population is

split fairly evenly between men and women, there are more women (61%) than men (39%) in the pews. The difference is found in every age category.”

The point, again, is to find balance and permission for men and women to approach God in the ways most natural to His design. In reacting to the abuses and falsehoods of male-dominated 1950s-style Christianity, we have overcorrected. The best way to honor the dignity and value of women is for men to be real, authentic men.

The blurring of gender distinctions has come at great cost. The generations following us are not more free or at peace because of our revamped definitions of men and women. We see greater confusion, not less. We do not know what it means to be masculine. If increased occurrences of abuse, immorality, divorce, homosexuality, and suicide are reliable indicators, then for all of our political correctness and gender discussion, we are not better off.

Instead of diminishing gender distinctions, the Bible insists on them. Adam and Eve were created differently and were designed to be complementary to each other. In a sense, each was designed to complete (that is, to cover the weaknesses) of the other. In the New Testament, Paul gives different instructions to men and women, husbands and wives. Regardless of how we understand those instructions today, we cannot consistently believe that the Scriptures show no difference between men and women and their roles in society.¹¹ They are equal, but that doesn't mean they are the same. Differentiated roles were corrupted by humanity's fall into sin, not created by it.

Stu Weber makes this point well: “Gender is primarily an issue of *theology*. And theology is the most foundational of all sciences. Gender is at the heart of creation. Gender is tied to the image of God. Gender is central to the glory of God.”¹²

This goes against the prevailing attitudes of our politically correct, nonoffensive, modern sensibilities. But we must follow this path for the good of the many men, both within the church and outside of it, who

desperately are looking for some way to understand what it means to be masculine.

For example, women don't go around insulting each other by saying, "You're such a man." They don't encourage each other in hardship with the challenge to be a woman. But men do this kind of thing all the time. Be a man, don't be a baby, don't be a mama's boy, take your skirt off. These insults make a serious point: We may not know what a man is, but we all know what a man isn't. One of the worst insults a guy can receive is to be told that he is playing like a girl.

So we spend most of our lives proving to ourselves that we are men. We make money, chase status symbols, conquer projects and beautiful women, or withdraw from competition altogether. But underlying all these pursuits is the quest to prove ourselves. We can't help it.

The point is simply this: Maleness and femaleness extend beyond the body and into the soul.¹³ The differences of our reproductive organs represent differences in how we function in the world and how we relate to each other and to God. Being a man isn't a bad thing. And we should encourage the full range of masculine spiritual expression in the quest to become more like Jesus.

We will look at this masculine spirituality in three areas: in the field (issues of work and business), in the bedroom (issues of sexuality), and in the arena (issues of relationship). In each area, we'll examine the Bible's teachings through the following grid:

- Creation: What can we learn from Genesis 1–2 about what God intended for men?
- The fall: What do the curses and judgments of Genesis 3 tell us about how God's design has been tarnished in men?
- Redemption: How do the teachings of Jesus and Paul help us as Christ followers and men to live in a fallen world in ways that please God?