

byFaith

Building Great Men: Our Most Urgent Priority

BY PETE ALWINSON

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Illustration by Nash Weerasekera

In his book, “Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It,” Richard Reeves, a senior fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institute, and leader of the Boys and Men Project, “lays bare the crisis of men and boys.” **Reeves’ findings include the following:**

- Men are struggling in the classroom. American girls are 14 percentage points more likely to be “school ready” than boys at age five.

- *Men are also struggling physically. Men account for nearly three out of every four “deaths of despair” — suicide and drug overdoses.*
- *Boys are much more hindered by challenging environments than girls. Girls in poor neighborhoods and unstable families may be able to climb their way out. Boys are less likely to do so.*
- *Policies and programs designed to promote social mobility often work for women, but not men.*

In interviews, Reeves talked with men about why women were leaping ahead. The men told him that women are just more motivated, work harder, and plan better. The New York Times columnist David Brooks, in comments about Reeves’ work, noted, “Yet this is not a matter of individual responsibility. There is something in modern culture that is producing an aspiration gap.

“Ambition doesn’t just happen,” Brooks observed, “it must be fired. The culture is still searching for a modern masculine ideal. It is not instilling in many boys the nurturing and emotional skills that are so desperately important today.”

The article below offers PCA Pastor Pete Alwinson’s thoughts on the crisis. Alwinson is the founding pastor of Willow Creek Church (PCA) outside Orlando, Florida, and served as its senior pastor for 26 years. He was one of the first speakers on the Man in the Mirror faculty, is the author of “Like Father, Like Son: How Knowing God as Father Changes Men,” and is now founder and speaker of FORGE, a citywide ministry to men in the greater Orlando area.

Let’s begin in an odd place: with two quotes from lesbian feminist Camille Paglia:

“The way we treat men in America is how a culture commits suicide.”

“A woman simply is, but a man must become.”

Most thoughtful Americans, including Christians, recognize that the question facing our nation, much of the world, and the church, is not, “Are men in crisis?” but as one article was recently titled, “Why are men in crisis?” A three-inch stack of printed articles on my desk and nearly 300 books on my shelves attest to the reality of the problem. You, your church, and your community see the effects of it every day.

Understanding the “Why”

The answer to the state of men in America is simple to grasp, but not easy to resolve. In fact, Christians already know the answer: The attack on mankind began in the Garden of Eden, of course, but so did the unrelenting Satanic assault on the first male, Adam, and on all men who have since followed.

Our theological convictions and biblical polity emphasize that men should lead and lead well.

Appointed as the head of the human race and called to lead by God, for God’s glory, and humanity’s good, Adam’s first major leadership challenge was a cataclysmic, history-derailing failure. Larry Crabb’s “The Silence of Adam” helps us see the impact, even now. Since the Garden, Satan’s strategy has been both simple and profound: take down the men, and you take down women, children, churches, and culture. A culture never gets beyond the quality level of its men. The same is true for the church.

Still, it is inarguably clear from the Bible that **men have been entrusted to lead and love well. This is God's plan**, not ours, and Satan knows it. Hence, he and his counterfeit warriors oppose it every day. And they tend to start with the family.

I've known thousands of men whose life story is much like mine. The product of a divorced home at a young age, I was a boy undeveloped in even the rudiments of manhood, but I was desperately longing to know what it meant to be a man. **Most men, I've found, even those who grew up in intact families, report that they were not trained by their dads, even Christian dads.**

The man crisis today is simply the result of the age-old assault on men (and thus on everyone else). It seems we are post-everything today: post-Christian, post-family, post-men, post-fathers, post-gender, post-healthy men and women. The cultural shifts have hit a tipping point; we're now a nation barely existing on the fumes of the Judeo-Christian ethic. The crushing weight of modern paganism is killing us. The causes for the manhood crises are simple to grasp but a challenge to resolve.

What Are We, the Church, To Do?

It has been my privilege to be a PCA pastor for more than 30 years, and to **now serve a ministry to men from a cross-section of churches in the Orlando area.** Of course, our church sought to have the very best ministries to men and women, but as senior pastor, **I focused on discipling and developing men as men — as leaders, worker-providers, and warrior-ambassadors of the gospel of Jesus Christ.** I was advancing Christ's Kingdom and helping women and children in the best way I could, by developing Christians to live differently in a broken world.

In my view, the PCA ought to be known for the way it intentionally and thoroughly develops men. Our theological convictions and biblical polity emphasize that men should lead and lead well. Teaching them, training them, mentoring them — these seem like the logical next steps that our pastors and elders should focus on. **Sadly, the PCA is not well known for its work with men beyond the intellectual grasp of our core theology. It doesn't seem to be a strong priority in our seminaries or most of our local churches, either. But it should be and can be.**

An Actionable Plan

Every pastor and elder of every PCA church should commit to the ongoing development of our men. It has taken generations to get to where we are now, and it will take generations to fully recover.

We must, then, think in terms of building great men as God defines greatness and casting that vision to them. **Men want to be discipled by other godly men.** They respond to being wanted in the life of the church. They're moved by a vision that is bigger than themselves, bigger than life. **That's what Jesus did: He took ordinary men and energized them by grace and the power of God to change the world.** That's what energizes men today. This isn't about "manning up" or gutting the biblical concept of manhood. It's about showing them how the gospel has changed their core identity forever; how they're the deeply beloved and redeemed sons of the Most High God who are increasingly motivated to become all that God intends them to be.

Teaching men to be men should be a top-five priority of every senior pastor. And no pastor should delegate the responsibility to some other man or ministry. This isn't a program, it's a systematic process that is woven throughout the life of the church, including preaching. We can speak to men even as we preach, even as we speak to women and youth, leveraging our pulpit time to glorify God and develop both sexes in biblical manhood and womanhood (Titus 2:1-10).

the intellectual life that equips them for teaching and preaching the Bible.

Many pastors report to me that they have never been discipled as men, nor did they study the subject in seminary. They are more comfortable talking with women in the church. Some pastors have admitted that they are afraid of men. Others are afraid that “men’s ministry” may become a “church within a church.” But so long as the pastor is the point man, men’s ministry will not become a “church within a church,” but a core ministry to the entire church.

Men appreciate a pastor who works with them. It tells them they’re worth more than just their money. What’s more, when the pastor helps men work through core issues, he becomes a spiritual father to them. These men soon become allies in the work of the church, knowing that they and their pastor are bound by mutual love.

Our next step, then, is to build a curriculum that focuses on five major areas: identity, purpose, character, confidence, and legacy.

Identity answers the question: **Who am I?** In Christ, men are the beloved and redeemed sons of the Most High God. That is our core identity, which will never change in time or eternity. An alarmingly high number of men in our churches don’t think that way. If asked “Who are you?” many would say, “I’m an accountant,” or a teacher or a contractor. That is confusing identity with purpose.

Some might say, “I’m a Christian,” or a creature or a new creature in Christ. Others would answer, “I’m a father or husband.” Those are better for sure, but too many men, while they know that God loves them and that they’re His sons in Christ, have never felt it deep down; they’ve never been energized by God’s grace and love.

We must help men understand their earthly father experience and unpack how it has affected their relationship with God.

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Purpose answers the question: **Why am I here?** God tells us we’re on this planet “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” As men, we do that by carrying out the three roles and responsibilities God has given us in His Word: We are leaders, worker-providers, and warrior-ambassadors of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When men in Christ grasp the difference between identity and purpose, their perspective changes. They see that they’re to lead, work, and advance the gospel out of their identity as beloved sons, and out of that strong, unconditional position that God’s grace provides.

Character answers the question: **How do I live?** If we are teaching men the character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit properly, we will be teaching them how to be great men as God defines greatness. Throughout the day, then, regardless of what they face, men’s lives will be conformed to the character of Christ and to the Bible’s teaching.

Confidence answers the question: **Will I succeed?** No man wakes up in the morning and says, “Today is a great day to fail.” Men struggle with ego and insecurity, often at the same time and in the same situations. Confidence comes with discipleship and manhood training. When a man knows who he is, why he’s on the planet, and how he’s supposed to live, he becomes more confident — in Christ — and thus in his own skin.

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thereby leave a godly legacy.

The PCA should become the church that develops its men. It's complicated. And it's an all-encompassing task — one that glorifies and honors our Savior, even as it advances His kingdom.

Pete Alwinson is the author of “Like Father, Like Son: How Knowing God as Father Changes Men.” He is also founder of Forge, a city-wide ministry to men in Orlando, Florida.
