

Voices: Recovering from (so-called) biblical manhood

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The past few years have seen a spate of books and other works criticizing “biblical manhood and womanhood.” Prominent Christian women such as Aimee Byrd, Kristin Kobes Du Mez and now Beth Allison Barr have written important works challenging what many see as a pseudo-biblical culture of harmful gender roles in recent American evangelicalism.

One of the most important highlights of this recent challenge to so-called “biblical manhood and womanhood” has been the way it harms women in the church. Indeed, countless women have come forward with stories of how they’ve suffered under pseudo-biblical, patriarchal ideology.

But voices like Byrd, Du Mez and Barr have pointed out something else: These gender roles harm men, too. Here, I tell my own story of the emotional and spiritual harm I’ve endured. In no way do I wish to minimize or de-center the suffering of women; I simply wish to share my own experience as an act of support for and solidarity with my sisters in Christ.

Bullying, sports and “warriors”

I was a junior in college at a Southern Baptist school, a few weeks into the semester and talking to my mom on the phone. I was telling her about how some guys in my dorm had invited me to participate in a small-group study of John Eldredge’s book *Wild at Heart*. I’ll never forget what my mom said: “Oh. Your father and I hate that book.”

Given the book’s popularity, I was taken aback. My mom explained I had been bullied severely by other boys at my Christian elementary school, and

when my parents had approached the other boys' parents about their bullying, the parents cited *Wild at Heart* to excuse their sons' aggressive, domineering and sometimes even violent behavior.

Wild at Heart is an important piece in the tapestry of "biblical manhood" that idealizes this "warrior-hunter-athlete" paragon of masculinity. The biblical ideal of Christlike humility and weakness is shoved aside in favor of a rough-and-tumble macho tough guy. In her book *Jesus and John Wayne*, Kristin Kobes Du Mez surveys how John Wayne has supplanted Christ as a paragon of "biblical masculinity" in much of American evangelical culture.

While I'm physically fit, I've never enjoyed playing sports and never have been especially athletic. I also never have been much of a fighter. This, combined with bullying, would have been enough to fuel my intense insecurity during elementary, middle and high school. But I also had to wrestle with feeling like I had fallen short of God's design for men.

Can men and women really be friends?

So-called "biblical manhood" also severely impeded my ability to form healthy relationships with girls and women over the years. "Boys play with boys, and girls play with girls," so the logic goes. And by the time you reach the age when you can form more mature relationships, there's a new barrier in place: sex.

The typical line goes something like this: "Men are visually stimulated and have a much greater desire for sex than women. Therefore, women must take extra precautions to avoid causing men to stumble, and men constantly must guard against giving into their constant desire for sex. Any kind of intimacy between men and women is a potential gateway to sexual sin."

Women are held to an unfair higher standard in which they are responsible

for policing both their own sexual desires and those of men. Men, on the other hand, are conditioned to believe we are dynamos of sexual lust primed to go off at the slightest provocation. The solution is distance. Keep up constant boundaries. Even if you're courting (*not* dating), don't even kiss until your wedding day!

It wasn't until I started forming strong friendships with my female peers in my late high school and early college years that I realized how ridiculous this was. One of my female best friends and I frequently bemoaned others' assumptions that we were involved romantically.

"Biblical manhood" has baptized the false assumption that romantic attraction and sexual desire are endemic to virtually every male-female relationship outside the biological family.

My parents and sisters, thank God, helped me understand this error. They encouraged my friendships with young women and never reinforced the idea I risked sexual sin by being close with teenage girls. But my family was fighting a severe uphill battle.

The sexualization of male friendship

The most damaging element of "biblical manhood," however, was the way it caused me to question my own sexuality. From the time I was 17 until about the time I was 21, I seriously wondered if I might be gay or bisexual. I eventually realized I am not, but it has taken me a few more years to understand why I ever questioned my sexuality in the first place.

During my late teens and early 20s, I began to enjoy increasingly deep friendships with other young men. These friendships were marked by emotional vulnerability and open affection. Hugs, arms around each other's shoulders, and unironic statements of, "I love you, man," typified my closest male friendships during these years.

But I had spent almost all my life up to that point being conditioned to believe such behavior and language are “gay.” Crying with other men is gay. Showing physical affection to other men is gay. A man saying, “I love you,” to another man is gay. And being gay is one of the worst sins you ever could commit. Or so I was told.

My experience is not representative of the LGBTQ community at large, but I wonder how many young men have questioned their sexuality and/or gender identity for similar reasons as me. And how many of those young men have fallen into depression, self-loathing and suicide as a result?

I believe there is such a thing as biblical manhood and womanhood. But it is not to be found in the harmful stereotypes and gender roles I learned in church growing up.

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