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# From Boy to Man—the Marks of Manhood, Part One

*When does a boy become a man? That interesting question was recently posed to me, and it raises some of the most important issues facing Christians today. While the world seems increasingly confused about matters as basic as what it means to be male and female, Christians are called to frame our arguments in distinctively biblical terms.*

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All around us, cultural developments and media messages communicate a fog of confusion over questions of gender. In reality, these issues lie right along the fault lines of today's culture war and its most controversial points of debate. For many years, this society has been experimenting with the most fundamental realities of human existence. The essence of what it means to be male or female has been routinely discounted by a society infatuated with unlimited self-expression and assertions of personal autonomy.

Women are now joined by men, who complain that traditional expectations about gender roles are oppressive, limiting, and intolerant. An entire generation of young women is trying to find a way to genuine womanhood against the tidal force of ideological feminism. Similarly, boys and young men are desperately looking for models of manhood and answers to their urgent questions of male identity, male responsibility, and male roles.

Christians understand that God created human beings as male and female—for His glory and for our good. The differences between the sexes are not matters of evolutionary accident, but are clear indications of God's sublime and perfect design for human happiness. As followers of Christ, we understand that it is our responsibility to embrace, affirm, and fulfill the roles and responsibilities God has given us.

In the context of this confusion, boys are especially vulnerable. The feminization of society, mixed with confusing cultural signals, has led many boys and young men to be uncertain and unaware of their masculinity and proper role. In a desperate search for a secure male identity, some are attracted to gross distortions. Some embrace a brutalized and arrogant posture while others retreat into insecure manhood, never understanding a man's responsibility to lead.

We now face the phenomenon of perpetual boyhood on the part of many males. Refusing to grow up, these young men function as boys well into their twenties—some even into their thirties and beyond. An extended male adolescence marks the lifestyles, expectations, and behavior of far too many young males, whose masculine identity is embraced awkwardly, if at all.

When does a boy become a man? The answer to this must go far beyond biology and chronological age. As defined in the Bible, manhood is a functional reality, demonstrated in a man's fulfillment of responsibility and leadership. With this in mind, let me suggest thirteen marks of biblical manhood. The achievement of these vital qualities marks the emergence of a man who will demonstrate true biblical masculinity.

1. **Spiritual maturity sufficient to lead a wife and children.** The Bible is clear about a man's responsibility to exercise spiritual maturity and spiritual leadership. Of course, this spiritual maturity takes time to develop, and it is a gift of the Holy Spirit working within the life of the believer. The disciplines of the Christian life, including prayer and serious Bible study, are among the means God uses to mold a boy into a man and to bring spiritual maturity into the life of one

who is charged to lead a wife and family. This spiritual leadership is central to the Christian vision of marriage and family life. A man's spiritual leadership is not a matter of dictatorial power, but of firm and credible spiritual leadership and influence. A man must be ready to lead his wife and his children in a way that will honor God, demonstrate godliness, inculcate Christian character, and lead his family to desire Christ and to seek God's glory. Spiritual maturity is a mark of true Christian manhood, and a spiritually immature man is, in at least this crucial sense, spiritually just a boy.

**2. Personal maturity sufficient to be a responsible husband and father.** Christians often speak of raising boys to be men. In the face of today's cultural onslaught, this is an important goal. However, it is just not enough. Biblical manhood is always defined in terms of functions, roles, and responsibilities. True masculinity is not a matter of exhibiting supposedly masculine characteristics devoid of the context of responsibility. In the Bible, a man is called to fulfill his role as husband and father. Unless granted the gift of celibacy for gospel service, the Christian boy is to aim for marriage and fatherhood. This is assuredly a counter-cultural assertion, but the role of husband and father is central to manhood. Boys must be raised to see themselves as future husbands and fathers. They must be taught what to look for in a godly wife and how to fulfill all of the responsibilities that Scripture invests in a husband and father. Marriage is unparalleled in its effect on men, as it channels their energies and directs their responsibilities to the devoted covenant of marriage and the grace-filled civilization of the family. Boys must be taught what it means to be a husband, how to respect and honor marriage, and how to earn the respect and confidence of a wife. Similarly, boys must be taught about the responsibilities of fatherhood. Christians must reverse generations of inattention by speaking directly and clearly to boys about their future responsibilities, including the care, training, education, protection, and discipline of children. They must aspire to be the kind of man a Christian woman would gladly marry and children will trust, respect, and obey.

**3. Economic maturity sufficient to hold an adult job and handle money.** Advertisers and marketers know where to aim their messages—directly at adolescent boys and young men. This particular segment of the population is inordinately attracted to material goods, popular entertainment, sporting events, and other consumer options. The portrait of young manhood made popular in the media and presented as normal through entertainment is characterized by economic carelessness, self-centeredness, and laziness. A real man knows how to hold a job, handle money with responsibility, and take care of the needs of his wife and family. A failure to develop economic maturity means that young men often float from job to job, and take years to “find themselves” in terms of career and vocation. Once again, an extended adolescence marks a huge segment of today's young male population. A boy must be taught how to work, how to save, to invest, and to spend money with care. He must be taught to respect labor, and to feel the satisfaction that comes from a job well done, and a dollar honestly earned. Too many boys are coddled and entertained, demonstrating a laziness that will be highly detrimental to their future prospects as husband and father. Slothfulness, laziness, and economic carelessness are marks of immaturity. A real man knows how to earn, manage, and respect money. A Christian man understands the danger that comes from the love of money, and fulfills his responsibility as a Christian steward.

**4. Physical maturity sufficient to work and protect a family.** Unless afflicted by injury or illness, a boy should develop the physical maturity that, by stature and strength, marks recognizable manhood. Of course, men come in many sizes and demonstrate different levels of physical strength, but common to all men is a maturity, through which a man demonstrates his masculinity by movement, confidence, and strength. A man must be ready to put his physical strength on the line to protect his wife and children and to fulfill his God-assigned tasks. A boy must be taught to channel his developing strength and emerging size into a self-consciousness of responsibility, recognizing that adult strength is to be combined with adult responsibility and true maturity.

**5. Sexual maturity sufficient to marry and fulfill God's purposes.** As a boy develops into a man, he becomes aware of the sexual powers God has put within him. In an age saturated with distorted sexuality, bombarded with sexual stimulation, and confused by unbridled sexual passion, boys must be taught to discipline their sexual energies into anticipation of marriage. Even as the society celebrates sex in every form and at every age, the true Christian man practices sexual integrity, avoiding pornography, fornication, all forms of sexual promiscuity, and corruption. He understands the danger of lust, but rejoices in the sexual capacity and reproductive power God has put within him, committing himself to find a wife, and to earn her love, trust, and admiration—and eventually to win her hand in marriage. Boys must be taught to respect this incredible gift, and to protect this gift until, within the context of holy marriage, they are able to fulfill this gift, love their wives, and look to God's gift of children. Male sexuality separated from the context and integrity of marriage is an explosive and dangerous reality. The boy must understand, even as he travels through the road of puberty and an awakened sexuality, that he is accountable to God for his stewardship of this great gift.

**6. Moral maturity sufficient to lead as an example of righteousness.** Stereotypical behavior on the part of young

males is, in the main, marked by recklessness, irresponsibility, and worse. As a boy grows into manhood, he must develop moral maturity as he aspires to righteousness, learning to think like a Christian, act like a Christian, and show others how to do the same. The Christian man is to be an example to others, teaching by both precept and example. Of course, this requires the exercise of responsible moral reasoning. Boys will not learn this on their own, but must be taught. True moral education begins with a clear understanding of moral standards, but must move to the higher level of moral reasoning by which a young man learns how biblical principles are translated into godly living and how the moral challenges of his day must be met with the truths revealed in God's inerrant and infallible word.

Biblical manhood does not develop in a vacuum. A boy's most important teacher is his dad, and one of a father's chief responsibilities is to instruct and inspire his son into true manhood.

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