

Marks of Manhood

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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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. It's critical that men 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 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. 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.

7. Ethical maturity sufficient to make responsible decisions.

To be a man is to make decisions. One of the most fundamental tasks of leadership is decision-making. The indecisiveness of so many contemporary males is evidence of a stunted manhood. Of course, a man does not rush to a decision without thought, consideration or care, but a man does put himself on the line in making a decision — and making it stick. This requires an extension of moral responsibility into mature ethical decision-making that brings glory to God, is faithful to God's word and is open to moral scrutiny. A real man knows how to make a decision and live with its consequences — even if that means

that he must later acknowledge that he has learned by making a bad decision, and then by making the appropriate correction.

8. Worldview maturity sufficient to understand what is really important.

An inversion of values marks our postmodern age, and the predicament of modern manhood is made all the more perplexing by the fact that many men lack the capacity of consistent worldview thinking. For the Christian, this is doubly tragic, for our Christian discipleship must be demonstrated in the development of a Christian mind. The Christian man must understand how to interpret and evaluate issues across the spectrum of politics, economics, morality, entertainment, education and a seemingly endless list of other fields. The absence of consistent biblical worldview thinking is a key mark of spiritual immaturity. A boy must learn how to translate Christian truth into genuine Christian thinking. He must learn how to defend biblical truth before his peers and in the public square, and he must acquire the ability to extend Christian thinking, based on biblical principles, to every arena of life.

9. Relational maturity sufficient to understand and respect others.

Psychologists now talk of "emotional intelligence," or EQ, as a major factor in personal development. While the world has given much attention to IQ, EQ is just as important. Individuals who lack the ability to relate to others are destined to fail at some of life's most significant challenges and will not fulfill some of their most important responsibilities and roles. By nature, many boys are inwardly directed. While girls learn how to read emotional signals and connect, many boys lack the capacity to do so, and seemingly fail to understand the absence of these skills. While a man is to demonstrate emotional strength, constancy and steadfastness, he must be able to relate to his wife, his children, his peers, his colleagues and a host of others in a way that demonstrates respect, understanding and appropriate empathy. This will not be learned by playing video games and by entering into the privatized world experienced by many male adolescents.

10. Social maturity sufficient to make a contribution to society.

While the arena of the home is an essential and inescapable focus of a man's responsibility, he is also called out of the home into the workplace and the larger world as a witness, and as one who will make a contribution to the common good. God has created human beings as social creatures, and even though our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, we must also fulfill our citizenship on earth. A boy must learn to fulfill a political responsibility as a citizen, and a moral responsibility as a member of a human community. The Christian man bears a civilizational responsibility, and boys must be taught to see themselves as shapers of the society even as the church is identified by our Lord as both salt and light. Similarly, a Christian man must learn how to relate to unbelievers, both as witness and as fellow citizens of an earthly kingdom.

11. Verbal maturity sufficient to communicate and articulate as a man.

A man must be able to speak, to be understood and to communicate in a way that will honor God and convey God's truth to others. Beyond the context of conversation, a boy must learn how to speak before

larger groups, overcoming the natural intimidation and fear that comes from looking at a crowd, opening one's mouth, and projecting words. Though not all men will become public speakers, every man should have the ability to take his ground, frame his words, and make his case when truth is under fire and when belief and conviction must be translated into argument.

12. Character maturity sufficient to demonstrate courage under fire.

The literature of manhood is replete with stories of courage, bravery and audacity. At least, that's the way it used to be. Now, with manhood both minimalized and marginalized by cultural elites, ideological subversion and media confusion, we must recapture a commitment to courage that is translated into the real-life challenges faced by the Christian man. At times, this quality of courage is demonstrated when a man risks his own life in defense of others, especially his wife and children, but also anyone who is in need of rescue. More often, this courage is demonstrated in taking a stand under hostile fire, refusing to succumb to the temptation of silence and standing as a model and example to others, who will then be encouraged to stand their own ground. In these days, biblical manhood requires great courage. The prevailing ideologies and worldviews of this age are inherently hostile to Christian truth and are corrosive to Christian faithfulness. It takes great courage for a boy to commit himself to sexual purity and for a man to devote himself unreservedly to his wife. It takes great courage to say no to what this culture insists are the rightful pleasures and delights of the flesh. It takes courage to serve as a godly husband and father, to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It takes courage to maintain personal integrity in a world that devalues the truth, disparages God's word, and promises self-fulfillment and happiness only through the assertion of undiluted personal autonomy. A man's true confidence is rooted in the wells of courage, and courage is evidence of character. In the end, a man's character is revealed in the crucible of everyday challenges. For most men, life will also bring moments when extraordinary courage will be required, if he is to remain faithful and true.