

Am I A Man?

Where do I find answers? Whose definitions can be trusted?

By Kurt Horst

This series of six group studies, originally written for men's groups at Hesston College, explores some of the voices that shape our masculine identity and seeks to expose the confusion and the damage done when men try to prove their manliness according to the prevailing American "myths of masculinity." By exploring the inner voices of family, media, women, other men, work, and God; new insights can make us more self-aware and move us toward becoming better men.

These studies only mark a starting point from where men might begin to see in themselves and in the ancient stories of the Bible definitions of masculinity that cause them to stop running from God, stop blaming others, give up trying to be the god of their small world, and in honest face-to-face encounters with God learn to renounce violence, share power and put on humility.

These studies are one man's attempt to critique the sources of masculine identity, to identify and evaluate the cultural "myths of masculinity," and to challenge the authorities men turn to for authentication of their male identity. I pray they will be helpful to others as well.

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom,
the man who gains understanding,
she is more profitable than silver
yields better returns than gold
is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
and riches and honor are in her left.
Her ways are pleasant ways,
her paths are peace.
she is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
those who cling to her will be blessed.
--Proverbs 3:13-18— [NIV]

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Men's Small Group Study
SESSION 1 – Family Voices

1. As a way to get to know others in the group, begin by asking each person to introduce the group to their immediate family. For some it will include a traditional family of father, mother and siblings. For others it will be a blended family; mother and/or father and a step-parent with siblings and step-siblings. For others it will be a single parent and perhaps siblings, including half-siblings.
2. Ask: *Who were the persons from whom you learned about masculinity?*
Give a bit of time for them to think about their answer, then summarize or read the following:

If the answer to the question, "Am I a man?" were a simple genetic test, we could just look in our "genes" (you may need to spell it for them so they get the "joke"). Most men wouldn't even bother to be tested. If that's all that's needed to feel confident as a man there would be little insecurity. But masculinity isn't a biological question. If it were the question would be, "Am I a male?" The question, "Am I a man?" is bigger, much bigger. It's sociological; it's cultural; it's anthropological; it's even spiritual. "Am I a man?" isn't a gender question, it's a question about masculinity, and capturing masculinity is about as easy as capturing steam in a bucket.

Ask: *Who were the persons from whom you learned the meaning of masculinity?* (give permission for persons to "pass"). The most influential are as likely to be women as men, and popular media and culture may have as much influence as the people around us.

3. Ask: *Who have been the most significant male role models in their lives?*
Read the following if you think it is appropriate (or if conversation has been slow).
Pastor Horst writes:

Am I a man? How do I know? Can I be sure? On my worst days the question lurks in my subconscious. On really bad days it raises its ugly head into my consciousness. The worst happens when my subconscious insecurities get acted on while I am totally unaware of the ugliness they trigger. On better days my insecurities enter my consciousness where, aware of them, I at least know that I'm acting like an insensitive, insecure idiot.

I wonder if other men share this insecurity. I fear talking about it, it might make me look weak. But, I don't like facing the question alone either; I become my own critic with no one to defend me. I certainly avoid talking about it to women; I fear that they might just reinforce my insecurity. I also fear that women already sense my insecurity -- and respect me less because of it. I'm not ready to talk about it. Just asking, "Am I a man?" reveals my insecurity and makes me feel vulnerable, and one thing I know for sure; vulnerability isn't masculine.

Ask persons to name their most significant male role model and to identify one or two things that person modeled that they hope will be part of their life.

4. Ask: *Is Jesus a legitimate model of masculinity? Why or why not?* (see Luke 6:40) (Allow for open responses and perhaps give your own reflection.)
5. Ask: *What will be your take away from this discussion?*

6. Suggested follow up: Write a letter thanking the person who has been the most significant male role model in your life.

End with a short prayer

Men's Small Group Study

SESSION 2 – Media Voices (Where we get our definitions of Masculinity)

Ask: Am I A Man? Where do I turn to find answers? Is there an answer? What definition can be trusted? Who has the authority to define “masculinity” to declare me a “real” man?

1. Have each person take a few moments to try to identify a “real man” that they are attracted to. Is it a character in some movie, a cultural icon, a teacher a performer, an athlete? Have them name the person and say what they think it is about that about that person that draws them to that person.

After they finish read the following.

Our media driven culture constantly bombards us with images of “the ideal man.” Movies, television, books and magazines, give us models against which to measure our masculinity. Women’s studies raise awareness of destructive female “body images” put before women from these sources. It isn’t often that equal time is given for a parallel critique of media’s dominant male images.

2. What are the character traits most glorified as masculine traits in the media?

After they finish read the following.

Someone has said that, according to the media, the ideal male is an independent powerful fighter (either fighting physically or for power in some other way) who single-handedly takes on the enemy and fights for justice while prevailing in a few sexual encounters yet resists the temptations of attractive female adversaries. Meanwhile, media’s image of a father is often a bumbling, angry, or narrow minded man who stands in the way of everyone’s pursuit of happiness.

3. Ask: *What are the dominant male images seen in the media? How do these compare to the significant male role models they identified last week?*
4. Ask: *How does Jesus compare to your media masculinity character list? Have everyone note their answers to all the numbers that are divisible by 5. Those are the Fruit of the Spirit. (see Galatians 5:22-23)*

Did you rate those “Spirit Fruit” character traits as masculine or feminine? Does your answer teach us anything about Cultural vs. Spiritual standards of masculinity?

(Allow for open responses and perhaps give your own reflection.)

5. Ask: *What will be your take away from this discussion?*
6. Suggested follow up: Watch a movie and critic the “masculinity” of the main characters.

End with a short prayer

Men's Small Group Study
SESSION 3 – Women's Voices (Confusion)

1. Ask: *What is pop culture telling us about the relationships of men and women?* (Encourage them to just observe, not evaluate or critique. If you have a few popular magazines or video clips available it may help get the conversation going.) Perhaps have each person make a quick list of the significant women in their life: mother, sisters, female friends, girlfriend.

Ask: How do these “real women” stand up to the pop culture portrayals of women? Allow time for discussion.

Ask: *Do you think what is ‘normal’ between men and women has changed from what your parents experienced? In what ways?*

2. Read the following quote from Sam Keen (*Fire in the Belly*):

The woman in a man's life is...the center around which our lives circle, the mysterious ground of our being, the audience before whom the dramas of our lives are played out. She is the judge who pronounces us guilty or innocent. She is the Garden of Eden from which we are exiled and the paradise for which our bodies long. She is the goddess who can grant us salvation and the frigid mother who denies us. She has a mythic power over us. She is at once terrifying and fascinating.

Ask: *How much do our relationships with women shape our identity as men?*

[If it helps ask about the difference between our relationship with mothers or sisters compared to romantic relationships as it relates to the quote.]

3. Although few admit it, men often look to women to authenticate their masculinity. It's a treacherous and zig-zagging path to travel.

Ask: How do you respond to the following paragraph?

The question, “Am I a Man?” when we look to women's voices to authenticate our masculinity, reveals a complex set of gender interactions. The cultural code of masculinity says dependence is “un-masculine,” especially dependence on women. At the same time it proclaims that the measure of a man is his ability with women. To “succeed” as a man he must “possess” a woman. But he is always unsure if he “possesses” her or if he is “possessed” by her. The more obsessed he is in thinking about her, the more possessed he feels and therefor the more she controls him. The less he feels in control the less “masculine” he feels because the validation of his masculinity becomes subject to her choice. It feels like Paul in Romans 7:24 “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Consider the story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. It is a classic tale of confusion. (see 2 Samuel 13).

4. Ask: *What can we learn from the Bible and from Jesus?*

Both Jesus and Paul display models of contentment with singleness. King Solomon (who did or didn't do well with women depending on your values) says of the seductress, “her guests are in the depths of hell,” (Proverbs 9:13-18). King Lemuel warns his son, in an oracle that he credits to his mother, “Do not give your strength to women.” (Proverbs 31:3)

Ask: *What is your response to this statement?*

A man is not ready for a healthy relationship with a woman until he has learned to be content with himself (as a single entity) and with God.

The expectation that “the right woman will make me whole,” is, at its core, purely selfish and demands that the other do for me what I am failing to do for myself. [What only God can do for me through Jesus.]

5. Ask: *What will be your take away from this discussion?*
6. Suggested follow up: Choose two other men to form a discussion/accountability group with for the summer.

End with a short prayer

Miscellaneous Masculinity Quotes

(Choose the one you resonate with)

In conferences, conventions, and radio and television programs, wherever I have ministered to men, one basic question consistently pops up: *What is a real man?* – ON BECOMING A REAL MAN by Edwin Louis Cole

...manhood doesn't come easily . . . if it ever comes at all. – UNEASY MANHOOD: THE QUEST FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING by Robert Hicks–

As men have addressed feminism, many of them have discovered that they cannot respond to women's demands for justice, equality, and opportunity without exploring a radical redefinition of how manhood and maleness are understood and lived out. NEW ADAM: THE FUTURE OF MALE SPIRITUALITY by Philip Culbertson

"What does my own culture offer as a validation of manhood? The driver's license at 16; and freedom at eighteen to join the Army, attend pornographic movies and to buy cigarettes and beer. The message is clear: becoming a man means operating a powerful machine, killing other men, masturbating, destroying your lungs, and getting drunk." – Gordon Dalbey, from an article, "Healing the Tear in the Masculine Soul"

Men and masculinity in America are beginning to break down. ...most of our major cultural problems relate in some way to the collapse of masculinity: homelessness, crime, drug addiction, divorce, single-parent families, gang warfare, and so on. ...many men are also beginning to recognize the masculine spiritual crisis...in the form of father-wounds, alienation, emptiness in their work, collapsed relationships, and loneliness.... I love men...I love myself...some unwritten rule in our culture seems to forbid the expression of such love and pride in masculinity. A positive, affirming attitude toward masculinity is frequently dismissed as 'male chauvinism'." – WILDMEN, WARRIORS, AND KINGS by Patrick M. Arnold

Men, as men, are systematically oppressed, or mistreated, not by another particular group (women, children, etc.), but by society as a whole. The mistreatment takes at least four forms. First, men are exclusively required to sacrifice our lives in the protection of others (e.g., conscription for military service). Second, men are required to carry heavy responsibilities (e.g., financial and institutional), leading to grim overwork and significantly reduced life expectancies. Third, men are inhibited from expressing our emotions, including our emotional responses to the above mistreatment and responsibilities. Fourth, men are... stereotyped in our society as inherently violent, emotionally constipated, relationally incompetent, and sexually compulsive." – REDEEMING MEN" edited by Stephen B. Boyd

There is a 'tear' in the masculine soul—a gaping hole or wound that leads to a profound insecurity...and into this tear demons have fled—demons of insecurity, selfishness, and despair. Consequently, men do not know who they are as men. Rather, they define themselves by what they do, who they know, or what they own." – HEALING THE MASCULINE SOUL by Gordon Dalbey

...all navigate a pathway to manliness that is without clear signposts. To attain their goal [men] inch forward by trial and error, following sometimes vague injunctions laid down by their cultural script.... In modern America there is such a bewildering range of options for men at every stage of life that it creates problems of diffuseness and ambiguity.... The result...can often be a "makeshift masculinity." – MANHOOD IN THE MAKING by David D. Gilmore

Men's Small Group Study
SESSION 4 – Men's Voices

1. Ask: *What do you like to do with other guys? What are things men do in groups exclusively with other men and where are the places they go? [i.e., the club, the bar, the golf course, the woods, the lake, the race track, the ball park etc.]*

Ask: *What do media and Madison Avenue (advertisements) tell us about men with men? [If homosexuality comes up don't avoid it – see next page for notes.]*

2. Ask: *What were the all-male activities you participated as a child and in your youth? Have there been any men (fathers or mentors) in your life who took you along to men's group activities? What did you learn about being a man in those settings?*
3. Ask: *How do you respond to the following?*

In a man-to-man world, masculine identity can be both freeing and restricting. It is restricting because there are fewer settings where a man can be "number one," (there can only be one "alpha male," boss, captain or general per group). It is freeing because if a man falls short in a man's world he may be the lesser man – but he is still a man; to fall short in a woman's judgment raises masculinity anxiety.

In movies and books the "ideal" man is a leader of men. There is the occasional man among women, the Don Juan or Hugh Hefner, but in the end these are ornamental men, "real men lead men." But, because in a man's world there is usually someone at the top, men learn to both desire and despise positions of authority. Male identity often becomes a secondary loyalty or association, "I served under General MacArthur," "I'm related to the owner of the Dallas Cowboys," "I went to school with _____," "I'm a Packers fan." Even to identify with the losers is not a sacrifice of manliness; loyalty is the mark of a real man. The claim to have stuck with it through the good and the bad, through thick and thin, becomes a claim of manly strength (just ask any loyal Chicago Cubs fan).

[After a bit of discussion remind them that the images they have of "real men" are probably the invention of scribes, story tellers and movie producers, fiction so that they are always just out of reach. If you want to take a few minutes to talk about women in all-male settings, see back of page.]

Ask: *Do you find yourself fantasizing or being driven to be the star, the leader, numero uno? Or are you at ease with who you are in most settings? If your group might enjoy and understand poetry you might consider using C.S. Lewis's, "Donkey's Delight" (see:*

<https://revmaanum.wordpress.com/2010/10/24/donkeys-delight-by-c-s-lewis/>)

4. Ask: *What can we learn from the Bible and from Jesus?*

Jesus' disciples were all men (but there were women who traveled with them and Jesus is much more affirming of women than the general culture of the first century). Women are not mentioned among Paul's traveling companions. Is this a cultural pattern from the first century or a model for discipleship?

Ask: *Would you rather be in an all-male discipleship group or a mixed gender group?*

5. Ask: *What will be your take away from this discussion?*
6. Suggested follow up: *Plan a guy's outing for your group. End with a short prayer*

LEADER'S GUIDE - **Women in "all male" contexts.**

Women in male dominated worlds like those mentioned for discussion not only don't share center stage with men but are given very subservient roles that easily become socially, emotionally and even physically abusive. Some have suggested that, "Our fathers knew it, and our mothers tried to hide it from us; the women in these settings were there to serve the men.

Men with men are often thought of as settings that don't include women. However, in many of these settings there are women. Whether it is the sailor, the soldier, the athletic team, or the "after hours club, there are generally women on the borders of these communities. The women around sea ports, military bases, in frontier towns, around men's sports teams, and even in the men's clubs of both the executives and the common laborers, are women who serve men, often women for pleasure and sometimes women for hire.

The attitudes toward women in these settings, whether it's the ship, the horse, the gun, the car, the boat or even the sports equipment, they are generally referred to with female pronouns or even given women's names -- men replace women with things they can control and then give them female identities.

LEADER'S GUIDE - **Homosexuality (and homophobia)**

If conversations turn to homosexuality it will be most helpful to steer these conversations toward self-examination of personal fears and attitudes toward homosexuality and away from moral discussions of whether homosexuality is "right or wrong." There is a great deal of homophobia among the general male population, especially among late adolescents, and this homophobia is, in many ways, connected to anxiety about sexual identity. Using accusations of homosexuality or making jokes about homosexuality reveals the level of homophobia within a given group of men. It may be helpful to point out that making disparaging homosexual remarks and jokes reveals more about the fears of the person or group in which this is considered acceptable than it says about actual sexual identity issues. We are seeking a healthy sexual identity not one driven by anxiety.

An alternative approach might be to note that women's studies have raised awareness of how female "body image" and "body anxiety" can be destructive, but equal time has not been given to critiquing male body image and anxiety. When a man's goal becomes trying to "appear" or "act" masculine, whether he is trying to impress other men with his masculinity or using it to try to gain the attention of women, he enters a paradoxical world. At the core his goal becomes "projecting the right image." As a result, rather than nurturing the inner self and developing and cultivating a healthy masculinity; over time he behaves as if masculinity is external and can be put on or even bought and paid for on credit. When men become obsessed with the masculinity of the "man in the mirror" they enter a world much more familiar to women and perhaps even feminine. They become "ornamental men," which creates an inner anxiety, not only about their appearance but also about their sexuality.

Men's Small Group Study
SESSION 5 – Work's Voices (Men and Work)

(This study is a bit long – feel free to pick the most relevant sections)

1. Ask: *What wage earning jobs have you had (if any)? What would be your ideal job? What is/was your employment? Did/do you like their work? If more than one was employed, who was the primary wage earner?)*
2. A brief history of men at work: Historically, pre-industrial revolution work was a shared family experience and everyone who could worked to help meet the family needs. More children meant more workers to provide for the family. With the industrial revolution work moved away from the home and people “went” to work and then came home. Home became the place to escape work. Because infants required nutrition, and men were not equipped to feed them, married women weren't as likely to “go to work.” With the development of infant formula (baby bottles) and contraceptives (to allow for family planning), both men and women are more likely to “go” to work.

Ask: Have any of you worked regularly with one of their parents? Did they ever go to work with a parent? Was that parent's personality or behavior at work similar to at home or did he/she take on a different persona at work?

3. Continuing the history lesson: As the industrial revolution continued men began to feel less “at home” when they came home from work since the house became the woman's domain. Home felt like a place to unwind since either discipline of children and major decision where waiting when he got home or they done without him because he was either at work or too tired to be burdened with such things, leaving him feeling a stranger at home. As home became the woman's world men found other places to go after work. Lodges bars, clubs, union halls, VFW's, sports leagues, etc., became the place to “unwind” after work (and, like our previous observations in male settings, women in these places were there to “serve” the men). This also resulted in a shift from 18th century expectations that men are to be the teachers in the home and are superior to women in matters of training children. Progressively through the nineteenth century motherhood became a sacred calling and by the 20th century women were thought to be morally and spiritually superior to men in caring for children.

Ask: Did your parents see home as a place to relax after work or did they have other places they went to “unwind?” Was this different depending on gender? If they had two parent household which parent took leadership in spiritual teaching/training?

4. One more history lesson: With time a “Blue collar” (labor) and “White collar” (management) division emerged in work places. Because there is a clear “ladder of advancement” in the management structures of corporate America, men in management are conscious of trying to advance up the corporate ladder and are always aware of the men “below” and “above” them. Relationships in management are tenuous. There is a need to “look good” when compared to other managers or departments and a need to “look out for yourself.” The result becomes an environment vulnerable to making image more important than substance, a basic distrust of fellow workers often undermines cooperation and there is a continual temptation to “fudge” numbers in order to look good.

Meanwhile, among labor, there is a greater sense of community. They are in it together with a common enemy—management. They are more likely to look out for each other. The man who is

“brown nosing” as a way of trying to move “up” into management will likely be ostracized and criticized. There is a fraternal community “in the shop” or “on the floor” and when one of “ours” has a crisis they are often quick to help and exceedingly generous.

A secondary result of the labor-management division is that trying to appear loyal to the company will be strong among management—it could affect advancement, while company loyalty among labor is often weaker and becomes a concern of management -- even though management level employees (not often even called “workers”) may be more likely than “common laborer” to “jump ship” if a better job comes along.

The tendency to tie a man’s identity to his work is greater in management than it is for laborers (sexual harassment takes quite different tracks between labor and management as well). A man’s status in the white-collar working world is based on his economic power and his job title or authority. The status of men in blue-collar culture is not as tied to his job but more likely to be tied to his persona either on or away from the job. Recreation in management is more likely to be in one-on-one competitions (tennis, golf, gambling) while labor tends to join in group activities or team sports or activities (softball, hunting, fishing). Even advertising, when it targets “white collar” men often portrays a single man with a woman or women while “blue collar” advertising is more likely to include a group of men in a shared activity.

Allow time for discussion of whether “white collar” or “blue collar” culture, as described here, is the expectation of what work will be like in the future?

5. The Bible and work

The story of creation and fall in the bible (Genesis 1-3) suggests that men and women have differing attitudes toward work because of the curse that resulted from their disobedience. God decreed that women’s burden would be in child birth and in her husband’s rule over her. Men’s burden would be in the work required to produce food. This suggests that women might seek fulfillment and identity in bearing children and men will seek identity and fulfillment in work. The Biblical texts do not assume that men will “work” and women will not “work” but the text suggests that men will have a different relationship with, and a different attitude about, work. Work becomes a key source of identity for men. When men meet they want to learn the other man’s name and where he works. The type of work they do a key to their place in the masculine social hierarchy. As a result, problems related to the loss of a job or a demotion becomes a loss of identity or even a loss of masculinity. Evidence of this is clear to social service workers who nearly always see an increase in domestic abuse, depression and substance abuse by men following significant layoffs or regional unemployment due to a downturn in the economy.

6. What can we learn from the Bible and from Jesus?

Jesus’ disciples were all men (but there were women who traveled with them and Jesus is much more affirming of women than the general culture of the first century). Women are not mentioned among the Apostle Paul’s traveling companions. Is this a cultural pattern from the first century or a model for discipleship? Ask each person in the group if they would rather be in an all-male discipleship group or a mixed gender group?

7. Ask: What will be your take away from this discussion?

8. Suggested follow up: Plan a service/work day with your group.

End with a short prayer

Men's Small Group Study
SESSION 6 – God's/Jesus' Voice (Men and Spirituality)

1. Ask: *Is Jesus the ideal model for masculinity? Why or why not?*
2. General adult church attendance in the US is about 60% female, 40% male. A variety of reasons have been proposed for why this might be.

Ask: Did you up going to church? With who? Do you expect to regularly attend church in the future? What attracts you to a church? What would make you not want to attend a church? Do you think most churches are too "feminine?"

3. Ask: *Do you generally think of God as male or female? Do you find assigning a gender to God to be helpful or harmful?*

Persons who have experienced men, especially father figures, as abusive or overly authoritarian sometimes prefer **not** to think of God as male (Father) but to see God as either female or gender neutral.

Ask: How do you respond when others refer to God as "she" or as "mothering?" Can you think of any Bible images that portray God as female or feminine? What about God do they identify with masculinity?

[One bible image not often considered is that Jesus is credited with giving us New Birth – birthing is clearly a female image. Some counter this with the understanding that it is Jesus working alongside the church to bring new birth (and the common pronoun assigned to the church is female).]

4. Jesus and women

Ask: Do you think Jesus was attractive to women? Why or why not? What is the scriptural evidence?

Be prepared to introduce a few of the stories of Jesus interaction with women and ask what might have attracted these women to Jesus. [The woman at the well (John 4:1-42); the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11); the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-8:3)]

Remember all of Jesus' disciples were men. Do you think that would be true today?

You might consider listening to or watching a video of, "I don't know how to love him," from the musical Jesus Christ Superstar. (It's an attempt to capture the sense of how Jesus, without being the typical "masculine" personality, is really more attractive to women than the common cultural model of masculinity. But a bit dated – 1970's.)

5. Ask: *What will be your take away from this discussion?*
6. Suggested follow up: Visit a church that identifies a target audience as men under 35. Go out to eat afterward and discuss your observations. [Perhaps invite a group of girls to join the trip.]

End with a short prayer

LEADER'S GUIDE - Pornography

You may have noticed that the topic of pornography has not been mentioned in any significant way in any of these studies. If this comes up, you may refer to the following publications on the Mennonite Men website:

Pornography: *Lies, Truth and Hope* (Mennonite Central Committee, 2013) available [here](#).

Seeking Sexual Integrity: Stories of Men and Pornography (Mennonite Men, 2018) available [here](#).