

Where's a good ol' boy when you need one?

Over the last few years, I had read a bit here and there about the obsolete male. This notion I took to be the latest shiny toy of effete Eastern liberals, something to play with during pedicures. The male as obsolete, redundant, superfluous? Not here in Texas, Bubba. The market for pickup trucks would collapse, taking the state's economy with it.

Then I ran into some of them, and it wasn't shocking enough that the species has migrated all the way to Houston. On top of that, I encountered them in church. Yes, in church, the last redoubt of family values. If the nuclear family, notably including Daddy, should be fit and fearless anywhere, it ought to be in church. Not so.

At the time, I belonged to a men's group notable for its diversity. A Latino, a couple of blacks, a few whites. A couple of truck drivers, a dentist, a judge, a couple of salesmen, a computer guy. But the diversity I came to see as intriguing was that of age. One of the younger guys had been on a new job only a couple of weeks when he began lamenting that his boss didn't relate to him as he would like. The job was stressful, he could really use a few attaboys.

I thought of my paternal grandfather, for whom I am named. He died when my father was 12. Even though I never knew him, I can conjure an image based on family lore. That image cannot accommodate his even considering complaining of an attaboy deficit in his life. He remained employed through the Great Depression, working the oil fields of Brazoria County. His job afforded his family a house in the Texas Company camp outside West Columbia (home of the Fightin' Roughnecks) and put beans on the table. His boss handed him a paycheck. The way I see my grandfather, he accepted that check with gratitude and never entertained the idea that his boss should massage his feelings as a bonus. For that matter, my own dad, having had an aircraft carrier shot out from under him, left the Navy in 1946. Finding all the jobs taken by other vets who had beaten him back home, he re-upped and sailed the briny for another dozen years. No complaints.

I also thought of the unfortunate Maria. She arrives every Monday with her sidekick, Eva, to clean our house. Maria, a Salvadoran, speaks pretty good English, but her agility in my language doesn't spare her. She is still my primary victim for practicing my limited Spanish. One day when she came in I said, "¿Como esta?" And Maria said, "Bien. ¡Trabajando! ¡Gloria a Dios!" She was giving glory to God because she was working. Cleaning my house was an occasion for celebration.

The difference between them and some of my younger, paler friends is that the latter have bought the world's revised definition of the value of work, and specifically a man's work. The power to earn and to provide is no longer self-justifying. If it were, men would not expect a job to deliver the equivalent of comfort food. The affluence of modern America coupled with the reconfiguring of the wifely role has diminished the value of a man's work. When survival is at stake, men (and women) attach no higher importance to anything than to earning. The older men in our group had all accepted that burden, met the challenges, defined ourselves according to our ability to do so. The younger ones had accepted that they are no better suited to the role of provider than their wives, and felt obsolete. Indeed, if a man is not the provider, how does he know he is not a woman? If all that distinguishes us is

different but corresponding reproductive organs, we have become trout. It would be easy to get bummed out.

A couple of subtleties emerge. The older guys are in our 50s and we have college-educated wives, many of whom have worked. The difference between us and the younger men is not in the capacities of the women but in the expectations attached to the roles. My own wife was vice president of a large advertising/PR firm, and earned handsomely. When altruism overcame her, she fled the eat-what-you-kill world and migrated seamlessly into the position of VP of an international relief and development agency. I never wanted her barefoot and pregnant, but while we were both grateful for the added blessings her employment provided neither of us ever doubted that the responsibility for supporting the family rested squarely on my shoulders. The roles were clearly etched in our minds. The younger guys do not have that definition.

The second subtlety appeared as I observed another younger guy in our group, one with a degree and a highly skilled wife. He represents a group of men whose wives stay home with the kids but step in to fill the breach whenever unemployment strikes the husband. In this now-common scenario, the man feels no sense of urgency to find a new job and remains out of work for long stretches. The way men see work has changed radically. I wrote for newspapers for most of my life. Once in my misspent youth, having left the newspaper business and flopped as a stockbroker, I worked for almost a year as night manager of a fast-food outlet to put food on the table. I was not able to deploy my skill set in my preferred field, as they say, so I found some kind of job and hauled myself off to it every day.

Well, times change. Boy howdy. We had quite a flap over Best Picture when it wasn't the one about two cowboys who were sweet on each other. If it's a hunch you must have, Rooster Cogburn would not have received this well. And it's probably just as well that these gay caballeros didn't sashay into my grandfather's oil field. The profound difference isn't so much in how men live with men, however, as how men live with women. Those crazy gals are working as police officers, FBI agents, soldiers. Worse, they're driving pickups. Guys who want to be what Scripture calls "mighty men" appear to go not to a gym but a coed health club where they build up muscles to look at that aren't good for anything but looking at. This is manhood? As the Winter Olympics began, I discovered on page one of the local paper a picture of an individual with flowing red hair. Another person was in the picture and no matter how long I stared I could not make out the gender of either. Reading the caption, I ascertained that both were men. Wanting to see if my wife could tell, I showed it to her. "Androgynous," she said, glancing at the page. Many of the sports included in the Olympics seem now to attract these crossover athletes.

Even the distinctions that remain in sports are blurred by politically correct thinking that denies all differences. Stop 10 people on the street and ask them if the Women's National Basketball Association should be abolished and its players forced to compete for jobs in the men's pro league. At least nine of them would sneer at the suggestion. Everyone knows women aren't as big, strong, fast or aggressive as men. Shutting down the WNBA would unreasonably foreclose their participation in pro basketball. Now ask the same 10 people if the U.S. military should send women into a theater of war, even one in which the enemy deploys men. At least nine would tell you that it should because it would be unfair to deny women the right to do the same work as men. No one even bothers trying to untie such knots because our current groupthink doesn't allow it.

The language washes out more differences. "Spouse" has entered the vernacular almost to the exclusion of "husband" and "wife." What's a poor bloke to do? Wrong question. This is not a yodeled plaint for my downtrodden brothers of the generation after mine. They have only themselves to blame if they choose to scoop up the stuff the world dishes. I suspect more than a few brides would heave a great sigh if their husbands, rather than describing how stressful their day was, said, "Woman, I killed a bear for you today with my bare hands. Now change that kid's diaper so he'll shut up and get my dinner on the table." The irony is that women, having made equality their idol, now have to live with the new sopranos, or live alone. The other irony is that wives are sprinting away from the office and back to the hearth as soon as Junior shows up and Bubba, left to bring home the bacon (mostly) alone, still achieves obsolescence. I'm reminded of the player on a slumping basketball team who said, "Our problems ain't psychological, they all in our head."

The more interesting issue involves how the church is responding. One answer is a proliferation of men's ministries. On the radio, I heard a fellow who runs one in Alaska groaning that men won't go to church because of all the doilies. He said a good response is to organize mission trips involving hammers and saws. A friend of mine in Houston operates one that uses quarterbacks, home run hitters and famous coaches to attract masses of men to breakfasts with a goal of funneling them into Bible studies and then into church. Those seem sound approaches and they meet with some success but the church at large stumbles around because much of it, as usual, wants to run away from Scripture.

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ also is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (Eph. 5:22-24).

God doesn't stutter. Any equivocation in that passage resides in the ear of the hearer, and yet the church has become so feminized that it couldn't say, "Stand up and be a man," if it were shooting up testosterone faster than Barry Bonds. The inclusive, sensitive, relational church can't speak in a bass voice. This is the same church in which many don't want to send missionaries to the Muslim world, asking, "Well, aren't they happy with their own religion?" What's God's truth when feelings are at stake? In the feminized church, both men and women are preaching the feminine mystique. It fits nicely with the megachurch mentality - user-friendly, unthreatening, conciliatory - and shouldn't every church want to be a megachurch? The mainline denominations are so far down the postmodern road that from their doorsteps they can see the Eiffel Tower. Churches that exonerate clergy who consecrate the union of homosexuals aren't likely to step out for biblical manhood and womanhood. The evangelical church, watching the old denominations hemorrhage members, naturally is following slavishly behind. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is celebrating a triple anniversary this biennium: 100 years since women were first ordained as deacons, 75 years as elders, 50 years as pastors. Many expect it soon to approve ordination of those practicing homosexuality openly and of same-sex unions. Some don't see a pattern.

I know a woman in an evangelical church who once served on staff and taught a large singles class at a megachurch. She gave up the class because she found that men were attending and then ducking out before the worship service. They had made her the spiritual authority in their lives. As a once-wise preacher once said, the

only difference between preaching and teaching is temperature. Good teacher that she is, she knows the Bible quite well: "I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet" (I Tim. 2:12). Shortly after she arrived at her new church, the elders changed the rules to allow a woman to teach men. She has opted to teach a class of women. The church she left was Southern Baptist, generally acknowledged the most conservative of the major denominations.

The remedy, if anyone is interested in a remedy, is to return to scriptural headship. I for one am not convinced by the doilies theory. I do not believe the church has raced out ahead of the culture in this area. Instead, as in so many things, it mimics the culture. This is believed to be sound marketing strategy, the pathway to megachurchdom. Churches of almost every flavor leave headship out of their teaching because it isn't au courant in 21st century America. Personal autonomy, the god of our age, won't tolerate it, so the church abandons it. I visited a church that observes paedocommunion. The elements are distributed to each head of family, who then serves the family members. Not every family has a male head, of course, and the sacrament done in that way is both touching and sad. What a precious thing is lost when the family circle is broken.

Fewer ruptures would occur if God's people did things God's way. In God's economy, headship is undeniable, but it is not accorded for the purpose of dominating or abusing. The god personal autonomy cannot abide either headship or interdependence, both of which are included in God's way. "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made for man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (I Cor. 11:11-12). Martin Luther, a rough-and-tumble sort of preacher, said that fools might make sport of a father washing stinky diapers but that, "God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling - not because the father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith."

Washing diapers is part of the curriculum for fathers. So is providing for the family. A fellow in Dallas named Bob Buford started an organization called Halftime to encourage Christians, mostly men, mostly in their 50s, who have secured their living to move into ministry for the remainder of their productive lives. While he has enjoyed some success, I suspect he has not motivated as many as he would have liked. I once rued the reluctance of so many to do something so useful but now I restrain my critique. Having seen the haunted look of those in their 30s who have no coherent concept of provider to organize their identity around, I can understand why those in their 50s would require a powerful enticement indeed to relinquish it. Take it from a woman: "¡Trabajando! ¡Gloria a Dios!"