



Men and Church

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Some of the men who worship at St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, meet once per month, but not in the church building. With our tongues planted firmly in our cheeks, we call this meeting Book Club. This Book Club meets in a bar that has a nice long list of craft beers. Since we've never read a single page of any book as a group, there are always air-quote-marks hovering when we say Book Club.

Like everything else in the human ecology, Book Club was born of woman. Book Club began as a response to the formation of a women's group at church. A cadre of women from the congregation, mostly mothers of school age children, began meeting in response to a felt need. These women meet to offer one another support for the long road of parenting, to vent, to advise, console, pray, and, yes, study. Those women knew they needed community and began building it with and for each other.

One husband realized he wanted a comparable opportunity to be around other men for conversation. He began inviting some of his church peers to meet for beers. At first, it was little more than a household quid pro quo for spouses to have a night away from childcare. That was the birth of Book Club. It is popular, and the attendance is loyal and strong. Not all attendees are married, not all are fathers, but all know each other from church, and clearly want to be together.

Men want to hang out together. That has been true since caveman days, and it is unlikely to change. What should a men's ministry look like? The number of seismic cultural shifts that have played out in recent decades have challenged and changed every structure and institution we know. Men must reassess themselves and their roles in their family, work, and spirituality.

These men drink beer, except for that one guy who always has hard cider. There is no studying at Book Club, no service projects. Book Club does not take attendance or receive offerings. It is a man-cave experience, complete with vague monosyllabic noises. The casual observer might say the group only lacks cave paintings to complete the Neanderthal tableaux. It is a group of men. These men all are members of the same congregation. But is it men's ministry?

THE MINISTRY OF BOOK CLUB

My answer to that last question is the uninspiring no and yes. Unpacking the no and the yes will shed some light on how this group of men fit into the life of a congregation.

First, the no. Yes will come later. Gathering for beers does not suffice for a community, much less for an arm of the body of Christ. In the first few years after college I would occasionally hang out with some men friends at a bar in south Minneapolis. My semi-regular contact with these men ended with a call to serve a congregation in Wisconsin. I sojourned in America's Dairyland for some fifteen years. Another call took me back to Minnesota, not far from where my friends and I hung out years earlier in those footloose times. To my astonishment, a few of those buddies were still meeting at the same bar after work a couple of times each month.

I decided to look in on them, and I did not like what I saw. Instead of a present-day reunion with old friends, I felt I was stepping into a frozen past. Everything was the same. Same bar, same faces, same topics of conversation. I think the bar's sound system was even playing the same songs. It did not have the old-shoe feel of reunion. It was a glimpse of life without growth.

The Word and the Body of Christ continually wake me up and bring me home to love. Without that love—love for those close to me, love for the stranger, love for the marginalized—I'm just going through the motions. We all are. Without love, the time and energy spent working our jobs and raising our kids and buying our things and having our precious leisure time becomes a treadmill. We are living in imitation of meaning.

That is an excerpt from the only Book Club essay ever written. Its author, Bill Breen, is a writer, teacher, husband, father, and faithful church member. The italicized passages interspersed in this article are quotes from his essay.

That college group had no mission or purpose other than their own amusement. Ironically, it was "Cheers" but not at all cheerful. That blast from the past taught me an unexpected lesson, to wit: a stable, friendly gathering is oddly unfulfilling when pursued for its own sake. If all we are talking about is men in a bar, then, no, it is not ministry.

As senior pastor, I actively resist putting Book Club on an official church calendar. I don't announce upcoming Book Club meetings at Sunday worship. With knowledge of the damage that can accrue from alcohol abuse added to my linger-

ing pietism, I am uncomfortable touting a bar meeting at church. As a stand-alone activity, Book Club will never be church. But it is not a stand-alone activity.

One thing I have come to value deeply about our congregation is that we are truly sharing this life of work and family in this context of love and purpose. It beats the hell out of any bridge club or neighborhood social club or softball league or volunteer committee. These people are not just “church friends,” they are my beloved. And together, we are the Body of Christ.

But the Body of Christ has been alive and well without bar-based meetings. God’s church will survive with or without Book Club, perhaps even in spite of it.

WHY BOOK CLUB?

We might even ask why men would need a special group at all. Church history could be characterized as a story written by men telling about men keeping their hands on the controls of all congregations, schools, synods, missions, and hierarchies. Since men have been official leaders for so long, it could be argued that the institutional church *was* a men’s ministry. Men have always had access, influence, status, and ownership, both in church and in society.

Not one of these men limits their engagement in the congregation to Book Club. All of them serve, teach, lead, give, and help maintain the vitality of ministries.

All that notwithstanding, Book Club fills a need. Churches must understand the origins and the urgency of that need. There are plenty of reasons to question the motives of a bunch of men in a bar. To the question, “Is it ministry?” “No” is a pretty easy answer, but these men persist. They want to be together. There is a loud yes behind the initial no. Not one of these men limits their engagement in the congregation to Book Club. All of them serve, teach, lead, give, and help maintain the vitality of ministries.

One Book Club elder commented that Book Club filled a need that simply did not exist in the world of his childhood in the fifties and sixties. He came of age in a cohesive neighborhood where the people who went to your school also went to your church and the men who ushered together also worked together at the factory. The women of the congregation also saw each other at PTA meetings and Tupperware parties. The experience of community was woven into every aspect of living.

Congregations did not need to develop community. There was enough communal support and friendship outside of church walls. Inside those walls, worship and Sunday school were enough. Of course, that Book Club member recognizes our culture has changed. He was not pining for a reconstruction of the past. Fragmented urban life will not allow continuity of community that was a given in an-

other time. Churches must work at creating community. Book Club is one strategy to fill the gap.

WHAT IS MEN'S MINISTRY?

Men want to hang out together. That has been true since caveman days, and it is unlikely to change. What should a men's ministry look like? The number of seismic cultural shifts that have played out in recent decades have challenged and changed every structure and institution we know. Feminism has redefined roles for everyone, not just women. The rapid growth of secularism has scoured the patina of power from the church. Technology has forged unprecedented patterns in human relationships and work. These forces and others have converged to press for greater democracy in all manner of human endeavor. Greater democracy means automatic authority is out the window. The brave new world is flat, as Thomas Friedman pointed out.¹ Men must reassess themselves and their roles in their family, work, and spirituality.

Even where women are heartily welcome in leadership, men are adjusting to a landscape that is still historically new. Who will men be now that women are busy rightfully reclaiming their power?

There are voices among American Christians calling for a masculine faith, a more "muscular Christianity." It seems this perceived need is mostly articulated in the traditions that still ban the ordination of women. Women are breaking more and more glass ceilings. If you assume men are supposed to lead in church, it follows that male defenders of male privilege feel a growing need to assert their control. Neither this article nor the Book Club has any interest in the perceived need to reassert male dominance. Retrenchment is not an option.

Even where women are heartily welcome in leadership, men are adjusting to a landscape that is still historically new. Who will men be now that women are busy rightfully reclaiming their power? How do men navigate between old messages about masculinity and the press for gender equality? Many, if not most, men are running an internal sparring match between a real desire to live out gender equality and the lingering fear that change means loss. A modern man wants to honor women and be tender to his kids. He also can't help wondering if that makes him a wimp. As memoirist Tim O'Brien observed, whenever men are afraid, they are also afraid of appearing fearful.²

MEN'S MINISTRY AND MASCULINITY

For too long, men have worn masculinity like a straitjacket. Power and com-

¹Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

²Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990).

petition are the hallmarks of that restricting suit. One female sociologist wrote with pathos about men she studied. Her observations led her to sympathy for the sad reality of men measuring, measuring, measuring. Another critic put it even more harshly. “Man, from my perspective, is not an identity so much as a Long Con, and masculinity is a concatenation of anxiety-founded posturing.”³

Speaking now as a man and husband and father, without the Word and the Body of Christ I am left to my own devices, which is ruinous. As a man, I mostly need to be saved from myself. The Book Club helps tremendously in this regard. I think most of us feel gratitude for the group because in some small way (or not so small?) it saves us from ourselves.

The postures are eroding, but slowly. Pop culture icons of maleness document the evolution. On the TV series *Parks and Recreation*, the character of Ron Swanson represents the traditional stoic male. Ron Swanson eats only red meat and never shows emotion. When asked to name his best friend, Ron Swanson indicates a coworker whose name he does not know.

That we can all laugh at the emotionally stunted stud is the evidence that we are recognizing the limits of old ideals. Men are evolving. But the strong, silent type is still with us. One of the most successful and enduring recent TV dramas, *NCIS*, serves up the male icon of Jethro Gibbs. Gibbs is a sort of latter-day Marlboro man. Gibbs updates the Marlboro man because he doesn't smoke and does accept women as his colleagues. On the other hand, he is still called “Boss” and he still carries a gun. Male evolution is on the march, but it is moving at the speed of, well, evolution. Jethro Gibbs would be welcome at Book Club, and he might actually show up.

Minnesota poet Robert Bly recognized early the need men have to be together in a post-feminist world. Bly has been the de facto leader and spokesperson for a loosely organized men's movement over more than three decades. Bly has been wrongly accused of trying to beat back the advances of feminism. His retreats have been caricatured as a group of suburban men spending the weekend in loincloths, beating drums in the forest and venting venom about uppity women. That stereotype was the darling of pundits, but it bears almost no resemblance to Bly's events. (There *is* some drumming.) His purpose has always been to discover ways for men to navigate a world that has changed in right and necessary ways. What do men do when the rules have changed?

Whether they say it or not, men are asking how to forge a masculine identity in a world of shared power, shared domestic roles, and the necessity of diminishing privilege. The most remarkable aspect of Bly's retreats is the revelation that when men are together, and honest, the longing for identity and belonging is palpable. A tribal shaman from South America or Africa will teach a chant in a language no one

³David J. Schwartz, “Masculinity Is an Anxiety Disorder: Breaking Down the Nerd Box,” in *Uncanny: A Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 2015, at <http://uncannymagazine.com/article/masculinity-is-an-anxiety-disorder-breaking-down-the-nerd-box>.

else knows, and in minutes the men are shouting it at the top of their lungs. Similarly, at Bly's gatherings, the same men who would stoically refuse to dance at a wedding reception eagerly jump into a circle of men dancing, singing, and shouting. Their bodies express a kind of joy that has no words. There is shouting without anger. There are hands thrust in the air without any ball to catch. Those men are not shouting for their unfair privileges to be restored. This is not the noise of tribal bloodlust, but the joy of tribal belonging. For some it is the first experience of belonging in their lives. Perhaps cave painting had to be invented to communicate something that goes beyond words.

One flaw in Bly's approach is the transitory aspect of the fellowship. Those men will likely never meet again. The dancing ends and the men disperse. They may only feel free to shout because the group is temporary and anonymous. No one from work will see them weeping out of sheer relief. At the end of the retreat, the band of brothers disconnects and fades back into the matrix. Question: If a bunch of men shout together in a forest just once, have they made a sound? Bly's method is instructive, but it won't serve for the long haul.

SEEKING AUTHENTICITY

Men want to hang out together, around some kind of fire. The whole world is now gathering around the glowing screens of social media. These marvels facilitate connectivity no Neanderthal could have imagined. Today, we really can have an active book club (the kind that reads books) with members on separate continents. People with the most arcane shared interests find each other like needles from distant haystacks. Facebook keeps us informed of the homes, kids, and work status of even casual friends. We now arrive at school reunions with the standard reunion questions already answered. We already know about the kids, the jobs, the notable places visited. So we are connected, but have nothing to talk about. Once again, pop culture holds up a mirror. A current car commercial shows us images of cool drivers, fully engaged in the excitement of driving. They pass by an eerie glow: a sea of smart-phone distracted people, every one of them alone in a crowd.

Christian singer/songwriter Jay Beech penned the lines, "To a hopeless man, there isn't much to say. If words had flesh perhaps he'd find his way."⁴ Even a men's group that is not a Bible study can be a word made flesh. Is Book Club a ministry? Yes. A word made flesh.

Whether truly hopeless, or merely confused, weary, or isolated, we need a word made flesh. In the global village no single religion or ethic is accepted as authoritative for all. Christianity remains faithful to the proclamation that Jesus is Messiah, but in the total relativity of the flat earth, the church has lost its automatic

⁴From the song "World Full of Humans" by Jay Beech, *Big World Getting Smaller*, Baytone Music, 1989. The song can be found at: http://www.baytonemusic.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=890103&Store_Code=BTM&search=go&offset=200&filter_cat=&PowerSearch_Begin_Only=&sort=&range_low=&range_high=

authority. No claim is accepted at face value. In the wired generation every voice must earn the right to be heard. The old youth ministry adage applies: they don't care what you know until they know you care.

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Churches must realize and embrace the requirements of building trust. Credibility must be earned, and no clever marketing or awesome website will substitute for time together, earning trust, building relationships. People are fed up with Astroturf authenticity. Congregations must accept the need to build trust slowly, to allow space for doubt, to replace pontificating with patience.

With the Book Club...there is a shared frame of reference in the gospel. If we are talking about our jobs or our wives or our children or the world at large, we may gripe and complain and make smart-ass comments but there are boundaries to our talk. There is accountability and creativity and respect and honesty. There are expectations in community, and those expectations continually kick us back into play when there are problems rather than allowing us to check out and descend into attitudes and behaviors that are harmful to the ones we love or to ourselves. Sharing in the Body of Christ gives us the right to expect things of each other, but that right is codified in the man-cave, where we hunch over our beers together and talk about nothing and everything and get real with each other. So I think this time together is far deeper and more valuable than it might appear. Yes, it's fellowship but it's fellowship on our own terms, which makes it authentic.

In the friendly welcome of the group, each man can see another struggling with the same balancing act between old requirements of aloof manliness and the new ethic of engagement. At Book Club, technology takes a back seat to conversation. Book Club offers the mercy of no homework, and the haven of no competition. And Book Club is a meta-conversation in the language of God's grace. Men who might cross their fingers as they recite a certain portion of the creed can see the embodiment of grace in the fact that they have a place at the table. In worship, we practice the open proclamation of Christ crucified and risen. The Sower's seed lodges in these men and begins to root. If the Holy remains unspoken at the bar, it may be a practice akin to the ancient Jews who would not dare to pronounce the divine name. We know the friendship is holy, and the Holy touches Book Club.

At Book Club we don't do any embarrassing tribal shouts because we know we will be seeing each other again and again. Still, we have the deep joy of belonging to a tribe. Men need a gathering where the pressure is off. Book Club is the place "you somehow haven't to deserve," as Robert Frost put it.⁵ Men are drawn to

⁵Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man," *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt, 1914) 14–23.

this fellowship because real community is a resource for real living. The Holy Spirit provides the fire that gathers us. Living in Christ does not remove us from the world, but draws us to engagement with the need and the alienation around us. The congregation has avenues for service, and Book Club members engage in those causes. For all its slacker vibe, Book Club is not escapism. We know we are called to more than hanging out.

Of course, we should be going out and doing God's work. But that's not the purpose Book Club serves. In Book Club, we are simply getting to know each other and making ourselves known to each other. We are witnessing each other's lives and experiences. To overextend the man-cave metaphor, our conversations are the Lascaux paintings—we put our experiences and observations up on the wall as if to say, "See? There! That!" And all grunt in agreement. A grunt or a nod goes a long way among men.

So what makes one group of men sitting in a bar different from another group of men sitting in a bar? It is the fact that the Book Club does not exist for its own sake. It is a small sliver of a larger living body. We don't play softball, raise money, or pursue service projects, but, yes, it is ministry. Book Club is nowhere close to the sum total of the Body of Christ (thanks be to God!), but I think it is one of the places the Body of Christ is made manifest.

We do not claim people can meet in a bar, talk about sports, kids, and the news, drink mostly beer and one hard cider, and call that church. But the church visits the bar whenever these men get together.

"Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there."⁶ ⊕

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⁶Jalal al-Din Rumi, "Out beyond Ideas," *The Essential* (New York: Harper, 2004) can be found at <http://allpoetry.com/Out-Beyond-Ideas>.