

## **Noble Masculinity**

*To rescue families, Pastor Robert Lewis is calling men and fathers to a higher standard. An Interview with Robert Lewis*

The most obvious thing in Robert Lewis's office is the sword. The pastor's desk and shelves of commentaries are standard issue. The large photos of his four children hugging Minnie Mouse and the family in a raft shooting the rapids are warming, but expected.

Not the sword. It demands to be examined. A full three feet long, it looks like Excaliber, the sword Arthur pulled from the stone, thereby becoming king. "The men gave that to me," he says. "It's attached to the frame by magnets, so I can draw quickly if I need it."

We chuckle and pull our fingers back a bit.

"The men" are the Men's Fraternity, the 1,100 who gather at the church Wednesday mornings at six to hear Lewis teach on what it means to be a man. Some are members of his church, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas; many are not. Many are not yet Christians. "We had a car dealer in town bring all his salesmen," Lewis says. "He opened the paper and saw our ad: Learn how to be a man. He said, 'We're all going to go.' And you know what, they did. They stuck with me the whole year and finished, too."

The men haven't crowned Lewis king, but they hold him and his teachings in high regard. With fractured families and alternative family forms increasing, and the traditional family in the minority, Lewis's approach is changing his church and his community. He's helping harried working parents to cut back their kids' over programmed schedules and to take charge of their moral and spiritual development. He's taking well-to-do suburban men into the inner city where there are few fathers and giving kids a hope and a future. And with his wife, Sherard, he's raised four children. Their youngest son is in high school.

Lewis founded Fellowship Bible Church with Bill Parkinson and Bill Wellons in 1977. They are still the preaching team today. Leadership editors Marshall Shelley and Eric Reed met with Lewis to talk about his notable work with men and their families.

### ***What is noble masculinity?***

I love that term. Guys stick out their chest when I say the word noble. We still live in a time of dumbed-down masculinity. Nobody knows what it means to be a man, or if it's okay to be a man. I think guys want to step up and be men, in the way that knights were men.

It started one night in 1989 when the three of us pastors and our families had supper together. Our children were playing around us, and one of the wives said, "How are you going to raise these boys to be real men?"

It was a simple question, but it stopped the conversation. Among us we had seven boys, two about to enter puberty. Someone else asked, "What is a man?" Amazingly, we couldn't answer that most basic question. Just silence. Three pastors, and we had not a clue. But it started us talking. Not long after, my family and I spent the summer in Poland. Our church partners with a seminary there, and it was just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. My two boys and I would take trips into the countryside where we visited huge castles overgrown by the forests. One, right on the German border, was hanging off a cliff. Inside we found armor from the Teutonic Knights. They had feathers attached to their armor so when they galloped into battle, it gave off a terrifying whistle to their enemies. The scene captured our imaginations.

When I returned home, I began studying about knights. Knights grew out of a dark age, a time when there were no noble men. The knights were called to stand above the age, and to stand for something. I knew these were values I wanted to teach my sons.

***So you put this to work at home first?***

Yes. Bill Wellons and Bill Parkinson and I began to develop the ideals we wanted to teach our sons. We designed family crests and eventually manhood rings. We learned that knights became knights through a process, and we knew that raising our boys to become men would be a process, too. I thought it was a good model.

We crafted four knighthood ceremonies corresponding to our boys' development: a page ceremony at 13, a squire at eighteen, and when he completes college, a knighthood ceremony where we at last dub him "a man." He joins our "roundtable" and he receives his ring. (Lewis adjusts the ring on his right hand.) Later, when he marries, we challenge him a final time with a knight's calling—to faithfully love a woman for a lifetime.

The boys really got into this. They loved the ceremonies. But more than that, it gave us opportunities to talk with our boys. We developed a short definition of manhood for them to learn, and we said, "We're going to hold you accountable to this calling, and you can hold us as your fathers accountable to it, too."

***What is your definition of manhood?***

A test! (laughter) We compared the first Adam with the last Adam, Christ, and we found four differences. They are our four foundation stones for authentic manhood. A real man is one who rejects passivity, accepts responsibility, leads courageously, and expects the greater reward, God's reward.

It gave our sons understanding of who their fathers are and what we expect and hope of them. Our boys are mostly grown now. Of the seven, four received their rings. My oldest son will be the next to finish college. We'll have a big party and dub him into manhood.

***So you wrote the book, Raising a Modern-day Knight. What happened when you brought knighthood into your congregation?***

We touched a nerve. Fathers took the idea and ran with it. When I shared our story from the pulpit, within six months we had hundreds of dads initiating elaborate ceremonies with their sons and teaching them about manhood. Someone was saying, "It's okay to be a man, and here's how."

***Your ministry to the family seems to be about building up fathers.***

Men. If men aren't reclaimed, you can say good-bye to the family. I think that's the most important challenge of the church today, to create new masculine heroes rather than complain about how dads don't do enough and how families are falling apart. Young men want to grow up; they just don't know what up is. I think the most powerful thing that has happened in this church has been this new identity for men. Our men know what a man is; they know what up is. It has energized our church to be a force in the community.

***How is the lack of parenting in the previous generation, particularly the lack of a strong male identity, affecting the family and the church?***

It shows up in two ways in church life: One is a young man's inability to make and keep commitments. They've been raised without a noble calling, and, naturally, it's made them selfish. They demand more from the church and they give less.

The other is the busy-ness of families but the passivity of fathers. There's a lot of activity in families, with kids and Mom and Dad all busy with their own schedules. But they don't do anything together.

I surveyed young families of our church. Many rarely sit down and eat together. I think a lot of this non-stop activity is masking pain and a lack of direction. Suburbia tries to buy it off with sports camps and things that often give kids a narcissistic focus, but little substantive meaning and purpose.

Even in families where parents have stayed together, there's not much real parenting. We have a lot of hang loose dads. He knows he's supposed to attend his kids' games, but aside from that, he doesn't take an active role in parenting his children. He's there, but directionless.

***How do you prevent the church from contributing to the over scheduling of the family?***

At Fellowship Bible Church, we expect only three things: regular worship attendance, participation in a bi-monthly small group and the ministry that flows from it, and spending time with your family. If you don't do all three of these, you're not a member here. You go on what we call "independent status." You're doing your thing, not ours.

I tell them, "I'm pastoring a church of 5,000, and I'm at home with my family at least four nights a week. If I can do it, you can too."

And to make time for families, we limit the elective ministries we offer. The staff meets once a year to "cleanse" the calendar. We put on the calendar what each ministry wants to do, then we put on our "family hats." We go through month by month and ask, "Is this too much for the families of our church? What are we going to drop?" And we drop a lot of stuff.

We tell our people, "Choose your church activities carefully. You don't need to do everything." Families are too busy, and somebody must give them permission to say no.

***From your own account, the present-but-absent-father scenario describes your childhood home.***

We were, in the 1950s, the modern family before it was modern. My family didn't attend church. Both my parents worked. My mother was the assistant to the Lieutenant Governor of the State of Louisiana, and then administrator of a big law firm. My dad was the son of the editor of our hometown newspaper, but he was spoiled. He was better known in town for how much he drank. My two brothers and I were pretty much on our own. We were hellions.

I have a photo of us boys and my father standing together. Dad is the farthest from the camera, and a shadow covers his face. You really can't distinguish who he is. That's how I remember him from my childhood.

As I got older, he drank more, and when he drank he got angry. I became the mediator between him and my mother. When I was in high school, I broke up a lot of fights.

***What was the impact on your brothers?***

My older brother, who was super smart, became an artist and a lawyer. He became a practicing homosexual, and tragically he died of AIDS. My younger brother kind of got lost in life. He studied

classical guitar, majored in Oriental History, and after college he drifted off to Wyoming to work, hunt, and fish.

I was an athlete. And gratefully, I had a coach who encouraged me and believed in me. In college I played football for the University of Arkansas, but my freshman year was miserable. I was miserable. A fellow started a chapter of Fellowship of Christian Athletes in our dorm, and in a Bible study I received Christ. Later, I got into a Bible study with Campus Crusade. Two guys there, Don Meredith and Dennis Rainey, who would later found Family Life here in Little Rock, really had an interest in family. I liked what they were saying about families; mine was totally out of control at the time.

In fact, during that time my father seriously injured my mother. In a drunken rage he pushed her as he was leaving the house. He didn't know that, as he went out the door, she fell backward into the coffee table and broke her neck. It was a terrible time, awful, but God used it to bring my dad to Christ.

Later I helped mediate a reconciliation between my parents.

***So that's the kind of model you brought into your own marriage?***

Yes. And that's why I was so interested in what I was learning from the Scriptures while I was in college. Don taught that men should love their wives as Christ loves the church. Sacrificial love was a new concept to me. So was servant leadership. But I tried it, and my girlfriend, who is now my wife, responded. So I was ready to give another verse a try.

But authentic manhood was still a mystery. I carried a lot of pain there. I was a closed-off, screwed-up male. I probably went into the ministry, in part, to find some answers. Ultimately, it went back to my relationship with my father.

***Did you have what you've called a "father wound"?***

Absolutely. I had no idea how deep it was. A lot of kids of alcoholics have this moment when they really start to get healthy. I think it's a moment that most men who struggle with dads also need to have. I had been a speaker for Family Life conferences eight years when I had my breakthrough.

Dennis Rainey had gotten on a kick on honoring your father and mother in your adulthood. He described a tribute he wrote to his parents. It stirred me since mine were getting older. So, while on a retreat with other Family Life speakers, I took a free day to write my tribute.

I sat at a table in the hotel restaurant. It was the off-season, and the only guy in the place was behind the bar. I got out a piece of paper and started to write down a few thoughts. I began remembering things, and a half-hour later I found myself wailing. The bartender came over to ask, "Should I call somebody?"

I went back to my room. I was having flashbacks. This is only time I've done this in my life, but I threw myself across the bed and cried for about three hours.

***What kind of flashbacks?***

All the things I missed because of my father's emotional absence. I was crying for the affirmation and guidance that I rarely had with him.

I remember being the only kid in seventh grade who didn't know what a jock strap was. When the coach said we'd need one to play football, I was just stupid enough to raise my hand and ask, "What's that?" I was teased the whole year, because Dad didn't tell me. I wanted to go fishing with him, and we never did. I cried my eyes out when I realized how much anger I had over things like this. I discovered the anger and tears were more a cry for Dad than at Dad. It was an honest admission. And then—no anger.

I came back and told the guys at Men's Fraternity. It was like—errrrrk—opening the lid on emotions I'd had closed off since childhood. I know a lot of men who need to take a look inside. It's so painful, but it's the key to our healing.

***Did you finish the tribute?***

I did. I called it, "Here's to My Imperfect Family." I acknowledged some of the pain, but I also thanked Mom for not divorcing Dad. And I thanked Dad for making his way back and trying to make things right.

It was a healing time for us all. They took down the big mirror in their living room and hung my tribute in its place until they died.

Both my parents came to Christ in the end, and my younger brother, John, met a pastor in Wyoming who encouraged him in the faith. John is now a pastor and a seminary professor—teaching New Testament Greek.

***Is this "father fracture" something men think about? How do you get "closed-off males" to start talking?***

I ask, "How do you remember your father?" In a few minutes they can quickly see the fracture they have with their fathers. Then the stories start pouring out. I usually tell them to go to their dads, if they're still living, and talk it out. Get in his face and say, "Dad, do you love me? Are you proud of me?"

Sometimes, it's the fathers who recognize they've wounded their sons. One man whose son was about to graduate from medical school heard me. He got on a plane, flew to the east coast, and took his son to lunch. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know what it meant to be your dad. Will you forgive me?"

Before the man arrived back home, his son had called. He said, "Mom, I met with Dad today. It was the finest day of my life."

***Isn't that incredible stuff?!***

The pastor's role seems central to a life-transforming men's ministry. How can the pastor who hasn't had your personal experience guide men?

Some pastors aren't going to lead from a position of family brokenness. They're going to have to say, "Guys, I never lived this. My parents were there for me." They can speak out of strength and help men see what spiritual health looks like.

Our churches are full of guys who are killing themselves working, trying to make up for the pain in their pasts.

One guy said to me, "I remember when we lived in Ohio. We lived outside of town in an old trailer. Every day I would step outside to go to school, and I'd say to myself, I'm gonna get as far away from this trailer as I can. And I have. Today I'm a millionaire. I've owned hundreds of restaurants. And I work 100-hour weeks. Today, I found out why: I'm still trying to get away from the trailer."

Many men are trying to get away from their "trailer" and they don't know why. They have to identify the source of their pain, deal with it, and move on. I'm not talking massive amounts of therapy. But men need to understand much of their behavior comes from the hurts of the past, and they need God's help addressing it if they're going to be the men he created them to be.

### ***What can the church provide for men that their own fathers did not?***

Robert Bly said, "If you're not being admired by other men, you're being hurt." That struck a chord with me. As I talk with men about their struggles, I realize many men are languishing because nobody is recognizing the noble things in their life. Men need male cheerleaders. If no one cheers for nobility, men are going to collapse back into a dumbed-down masculinity that follows the cheers of the world—obsessive careerism, selfish pursuits, and ignoble deeds. We try to cheer men on—for the right things.

### ***How do you help men find the right cheerleaders?***

I can do two things: first by talking to men about the importance of male cheerleaders, and second, by challenging older men to cheer on the next generation.

I had one man tell me, "I'm old. I'm sick. I have no purpose in life."

"Oh, no," I told him. "You've got a lot of things you can do."

"Like what."

"Tell younger men your story."

He objected. "Nobody would want to listen to me."

"You've got seventy years' experience, and here's a generation of guys who haven't had anybody to share real life with them."

He sputtered, but said he'd meet with a younger man if he had the opportunity.

Later at a Men's Fraternity meeting, we were talking about teammates in life. I told them the story of this guy and that he was available. Young guys came up after the meeting wanting to meet with him, and to this day, the older man meets with five or six guys a week and has a waiting list of more.

Every time I mention it in Men's Fraternity, we have young guys who want a mentor. They want to know what's real. They want to know was the marriage worth it, how you spent your time, and what you did with your money. They want to learn from an older man's successes and failures.

I ask the younger guys to initiate the mentoring relationship, because older men aren't likely to. But when asked, the older guys often say yes. We call it "investing down."

### ***Your new book details your shift in philosophy from programming for church success to "investing" in the community. Has that grown from your investment in men?***

Definitely. Given their new identity, we first saw men stepping up to the challenges in the church. Now we have no shortage of male volunteers. They even lead our children's ministries. Then we saw men investing in fatherless boys and girls within the church.

Then men and their families started going into the community. Eastgate, which was one of the most violent neighborhoods in Little Rock, is one example. When we first began ministering there, there was just one father in the whole community. The rest were pass-through males.

We started reading readiness programs and sports programs. Church members started working down there, and today we're operating a gymnasium and teaching all kinds of life skills. We take the kids to summer camp. And we're offering college scholarships for those who finish high school. Now a bunch of men involved with Men's Fraternity have started Sportsman's Quest. They mentor young boys from single-parent homes and take them on duck-hunting weekends with the guys. And those are just a few of the ministries our men are leading.

***Today's congregations are filled with single people. How do you preach about family in a way that doesn't increase their brokenness?***

We hold up the family relationships God intended us to have, and if we're willing to help people move closer to those ideals, there's no need to apologize for it.

In preaching, I want to give our people a North Star, something to guide their family life by. That is, of course, Jesus Christ. Christ and his Word are above all we are and do. Our families aren't perfect. We're all different distances from the goal, but at least we all know where we should be headed.

By calling men up, I feel I'm helping, not offending the single mother. The woman raising a child alone can see the importance of a male role model for her son. And when the men offer to take her son fishing, she believes what we've been preaching. One single mother spoke to our church recently. Her son was about to go into high school. She said, "I want to recognize the male mentors who carried me through the last eight years with my son. He looks up to all these guys."

Another woman walked up to me the other day and said, "I hated men till I came to this church. And I still struggle some. But," she said, "I've been in a small group, and I've watched how respectfully the men treat their wives. I'm beginning to believe there could be a man like that."

Robert Lewis is the author of *Raising a Modern Day Knight* (Focus on the Family, 1997) and *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Zondervan, 2001).

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