

Disbanded Brothers – Has a ‘Feminised’ Church Alienated Men in the UK?

Christopher Ducker (cjducker@yahoo.co.uk)

Redcliffe College, Gloucester, June 2007

The **2007 Church Attitudes Survey** was part of a broader investigation into general aspects of the UK Church, asking:

- (1) Why significantly fewer men than women attend British churches;
- (2) Whether a recent process of ‘feminisation’ has taken place in our churches and what impact this might have;
- (3) Whether the Church undervalues both male and female distinctive qualities; and
- (4) Whether there is evidence of divergent male and female spiritualities, forms of worship and views on the significance of gender.

Research has indicated that there is a gender gap, or disparity, within the UK Church: men now constitute between 35% and 40% of churchgoers. Figures are almost universally disturbing but are especially low for Wales; amongst those aged 15-19, 20-29 and 30-44; amongst members of the Methodist and URC Churches; and amongst low church and liberal denominations.

Conventional explanations for this gender gap have included demographic factors, social and cultural factors (such as leisure alternatives, the stigmatisation of churchgoing and socio-economic factors), and explanations relating to the ‘nature of men.’ Yet a more plausible explanation was found to be that, over the last 25 years, how Christians meet together as Church has changed, in terms of *worship, ethos, language, activities and spirituality*. One unintentional result of these changes may have been forms or expressions of Church that are more appealing or satisfying to women, but perhaps alienating to men – a process sometimes termed ‘feminisation’. This process may have been exacerbated by the Church’s failure to appreciate and celebrate what is distinctively positive about God-created masculinity and femininity (or maleness and femaleness).

The multi-denominational *Church Attitudes Survey* was conducted in February-April 2007, and attracted responses from 456 British Christians (51.1% of participants were male; 48.9% female). Some of the survey findings were as follows:

- There was no public consensus on why men were less likely than women to attend Church: 35.3% attributed this to church factors, 32.5% to social factors and 32.3% to the ‘nature of men’. Men were slightly more inclined to cite church factors (36.9%), women more often blamed social factors (35.4%).
- 78% of British Christians agreed that men-only church outreach was a good idea.
- Women seemed to underestimate the extent of alienation that many men feel from church: whilst 48% of male Christians said church was less welcoming to men than women, only 34% of female Christians thought this was the case.
- Similarly, 68% of men argued that women felt more ‘at home’ in Church, while only 46% of women agreed.
- 54% of women thought that UK church services appeal more to women – and 67% of Christian men agreed.
- There was not very much difference in male/female use of religious language, but with some interesting exceptions. For example, although both men’s and women’s strongest preference was the expression “I accepted Jesus as my personal saviour” to describe becoming a Christian, men were more likely to say they “recognized Jesus as Lord” (7.3% of men described their conversion this way, compared to just 2.7% of women).

- When using language to relate to God, men and women generally preferred the same names: Father, Lord and Saviour. Women, however, were more likely to name God 'Friend' (47%, compared to 36% of men) and, perhaps not surprisingly, 'Lover of my soul' (13% versus 6% of men). Men were more likely to consider God their King (31% versus 25%), Judge (12% versus 6%) and Master (13% versus 5%).
- Men tended to regard their *experience* of God as somehow different to women's: 65% said this was the case; 53% of women agreed that gender made a difference.
- There was more agreement that men and women *relate* to God differently: 76% of men and 67% of women said this was the case.
- There was also strong agreement that men and women *reflect different aspects* of God's character: 86% of men and 76% of women stated this was the case.
- A vast majority of Christians (92%) thought that it was a significant part of God's plan at creation to make men and women with fundamental differences. But there was uncertainty whether these differences were eternal: 34% thought they were, 23% thought not, and 43% said they did not know.

These and other data suggest that gender differences, created by God as described in Genesis, are both real and significant, yet are ignored or underplayed by the Church in the UK. The result of not acknowledging differences between men and women will inevitably be a form of gender confusion. Specifically, a Church that fails to recognise gender differences may become repressive, failing to affirm people in their specific maleness and femaleness. It may stifle the richness of life and the glory of God's creation. It may lead to a poor model of Church since it reduces our diversity as a body. And it will almost certainly lead to an ineffective Church: its preaching, evangelism and pastoral care will all be less effective than if men and women's God-given identities were acknowledged and worked with. This is a lesson in *contextualisation*: effective witnessing will recognise and respond to differences in male and female "cultures." Failure to appreciate what it means to be male and female in Christ will make it less likely that the Church is able to speak to people at the core of their being, since in essence they are ultimately male or female.

There are, however, some steps that may be taken to restore the balance of the Church, to acknowledge and challenge the alienation that many British men appear to be experiencing:

- Reinvigorating our understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ in such a way that holds in proper tension both the Body's unity and its diversity, with regard to gender.
- Repenting of the abuses of patriarchy and masculine excesses, without condemning or vilifying masculinity itself.
- Recognising that Biblical role models, including and especially that of Jesus Christ, are instructive in helping men live authentically masculine lives.
- Accepting, valuing and celebrating our distinctiveness as males and females, a God-created differentiation that is part of the glory of His creation.
- Without compromising any aspect of the Christian gospel, developing language, metaphors and methods of communication that men relate well to. This may involve restoring the balance between how we speak of God's *transcendence* as well as His *immanence*.
- Acknowledging that some aspects of how we meet as Church work to alienate men, and that we should therefore endeavour to create forms of worship and expressions of being Christian communities that are as attractive and open to men as they are to women.

To share your feedback with the author (Christopher Ducker) or to request a full copy of the 54-page report, please e-mail cjducker@yahoo.co.uk.