

Boys to Men

Bringing up Boys

by Dr. James Dobson

Tyndale House, 2002

269 pages; Paperback, \$22.99 Can

Future Men

by Douglas Wilson

Canon Press, 2001

199 pages; Paperback; \$17.00 Can

Reviewed by Johan Tangelder

How do we raise "good" boys in a society completely out of balance when it comes to understanding the roles of male and female? How can we steer them past the many negative influences that confront them from every side?

Bringing up sons is more complex now than a generation ago. Moral relativism has confused the age-old distinctions between right and wrong, between proper and improper, and between human and inhuman. It has become the daunting task for parents to shield their kids from "safe-sex" instruction, from New Age gurus, from profane and filthy language in the neighborhood, from availability of pornography at every click of a mouse, and from enticement of every stripe. In contemporary movies male characters are often depicted as stereotypically weak, lost, confused, rather feminine, self-serving, and dishonest. And television sitcoms also blast away at traditional masculinity. How then can impressionable boys and young men possibly discern from the media what it means to be a dedicated and disciplined husband and father? The devastating impact of family disintegration and the absence of caring fathers are the primary reasons why boys are in trouble today.

A harried lifestyle and a busy career-oriented household cause many parents to be too distracted and exhausted to protect and care for their children. Due to the demands at work, often no one is at home to meet the needs of lonely preschoolers and latchkey children. All told, it is no wonder boys are experiencing a crisis of confidence that reaches deep within the soul, now more than ever before. Many of them are growing up believing they are unloved by their parents. And in a culture hostile to the very idea of masculinity, many boys are confused about their identity. In fact, many social scientists are warning of a crisis among males like nothing we have seen before.

So how do we raise "good" boys in this mixed up society? To answer that question many people in our circles have turned to two books written by popular

Christian authors: *Future Men* by Douglas Wilson, and *Bringing up Boys* by James Dobson.

Three Key Developments

From the many negative influences discussed by Dobson and Wilson, I want to highlight three key developments impacting boys.

First, it is impossible to understand what is happening to our kids today without considering the influence of feminist ideology. Many aspects of our culture have become unisexual. No wonder boys have only a vague idea what it means to be a man. Should men be feminized, emasculated, and “wimpified”? That is precisely what some feminists seem to think. In the 1970s a small but noisy band of feminists began insisting that the sexes were identical except for their reproductive organs, and that any uniqueness in temperament or behavior resulted from patriarchal cultural biases. Most of the early feminists didn't like children, and deeply resented men, yet they advised millions of women about how to raise their children and, especially, how to educate boys. In 1999 two radical feminists contended in an article that fathers are actually detrimental at home because of the amount of family resources they consume.

Second, another source of confusion is the powerful gay and lesbian agenda. In public schools children are taught the need to accommodate homosexuality, and are encouraged to embrace the view that all lifestyles are equal. Gay and lesbians seek to eliminate such terms as wife, husband, manhood, womanhood, boy, girl, masculine and feminine. These references to sexual identity are being replaced with gender-neutral terms, such as significant other, spouse, parent, child, and sibling. Some extremists even see the natural heterosexual family as an enemy. An article in *Gay Community News* stated, "The family unit – spawning ground of lies, betrayals, mediocrity, hypocrisy and violence – will be abolished. The family unit, which only dampens imagination and curbs free will, must be eliminated."

Third, divorce is detrimental during childhood when boys are especially vulnerable. Dobson notes that the most critical time is at the onset of puberty, when members of both sexes experience an emotional and hormonal upheaval. He observes, "Boys and girls at that time desperately need their father's supervision and love. Divorces at that time, more than at others, are typically devastating to boys." For example, a study revealed that 90 per cent of children from divorced homes suffered from an acute sense of shock when the separation occurred, including profound grieving and irrational fears.

Role of Fathers

Dobson and Wilson rightly and persuasively stress the role of fathers in the education of boys. They hold awesome power in the lives of their children, for good or ill. One crucial problem boys face today is the absence or noninvolvement of a father. Wilson comments, “We have males who have begotten more males, but we do not have many true *fathers*.” A boy needs a father who teaches him how to be a man and to correct him authoritatively when he is wrong. Fathers are to discipline their sons on the path to manhood. They are to teach them the way of the Lord as they walk along the way together. When fathers are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and live by biblical

principles, their children will probably follow in their footsteps. So much depends on what the children observe in their fathers, for better or worse.

Role of Parents

Although the father's role is vital in the rearing of a boy, mom and dad are in child rearing together. For them there is nothing to compare with the privilege of bringing precious children into the world and then guiding them step-by-step through their development years and on toward maturity. In other words, shaping and molding young minds is a product of careful and diligent parental leadership, which requires great effort and patience. Children need a strong and loving family to help survive the pressures of adolescence. Having a strong and involved family is the most effective preventative for most antisocial behaviors.

Dobson points out that single fathers and single mothers have an enormously difficult task. He says about single mothers rearing boys, the "task of the single mother, especially those who are young and poor, is the toughest job in the universe." He also states that single fathers deserve our commendation as well, trying desperately to "mother' their needy kids.

Children need discipline and guidance. Parents are to instill the concept of proper, God-honoring authority. They also should give priority to their children, teach them the love of God, hold them to high level of moral responsibility, and explain to them the differences between right and wrong. Children get their values and beliefs from what they see at home. Parents instruct and prepare their sons for a godly manhood. Boys must learn to treat girls and women with honor and respect. Furthermore, teach sexual abstinence to teenagers, just as you teach them to abstain from drug and alcohol usage. How important it is, therefore, for parents to live a morally consistent life in front of their kids. And what a privilege to lead them "to the feet of Jesus," and to teach them who they are as children of God or what they have been placed here to do. Furthermore, it is important to pray diligently for the spiritual welfare of our children, and for wisdom and guidance.

Dobson stresses also the importance of "infant bonding" between mother and child of either sex. He remains unalterably opposed to the placement of babies in day-care facilities unless there is no reasonable alternative. Mothers are just as necessary to healthy child development as they have ever been. Kids cannot raise themselves. Dobson stresses, therefore, the importance of being at home for our children. It is not enough simply to be at home and available for our children. We must use the opportunities of these few years to teach them our values and beliefs.

Grandparents

Dobson argues that godly grandparents still have a vital role in rearing their grandchildren. They have a God-given responsibility to influence them, as well as an opportunity to leave a spiritual heritage. Furthermore, they are the "library" for them, being able to connect them with their past. Dobson is right in emphasizing the role of grandparents in the lives of their grandchildren. However, in our mobile Western society, grandparents often live at great distances from their grandchildren. This modern

phenomenon leads to sporadic visits with little opportunity for meaningful interaction.

James Dobson

Dr. James Dobson – a licensed psychologist, the author of more than a dozen books on child-rearing and founder of Focus on the Family – is one of the most recognizable figures in evangelical circles. He endorses the "culture wars" idea. "Nothing short of a great Civil War of Values rages today throughout North America," he wrote in 1994. "Two sides with vastly differing and incomparable worldviews are locked in a bitter conflict that permeates every level of society." His organization seeks to promote "family values" by working against pornography, the "homosexual agenda," and the teaching of evolution in public schools.

His latest book *Bringing Up Boys* will help build within our boys lasting qualities of character, self-discipline, respect for authority, a belief in a work ethic, and unshakable love for Jesus Christ. It touches essential areas about boys. It is clear, compassionate, down-to-earth, practical, and overflowing with illustrations from his many years of experience in his field of expertise. Every parent should take time to read this book and take it to heart.

But I have questions about his view of education. He seems to lack a Christian worldview, which is essential for Christian education. Dobson claims that co-educational public schools have become the most "boy-unfriendly" place on earth. He says that in public schools boys have been punished for being politically incorrect toward girls. In other words, in public education there is outright hostility toward masculinity itself. He states that if government schools continue to drift further away from traditional morality and common sense (one only has to think of today's over-the-top-sex education programs and the postmodern stuff promoted by the NEA and the U.S. Department of Education), "I soon will be very decidedly opposed to them." He tells parents, "If your level of concern gets too high, transfer your boys and girls to Christian schools or do the job yourself at home."

He sent his two kids to Christian schools, from kindergarten all the way through college, except for a few short forays into public education. However, if Dobson had it to do over again, he would probably homeschool his children. In fact, in recent years he has become a strong promoter of homeschooling. One of his arguments is that it is risky and unwise to place very young children, especially immature boys, in formalized education settings.

But Christian education whether in a "formal" school or homeschool setting should be more than a safe haven for our children. Parents holding a worldview based on Scripture want something better for their children. They make an effort to provide a God-centered education. They realize they have a Biblical mandate to raise their children to know God and His world and to glorify Him through obedient service. The foundation for Christian education, therefore, is a pervasive worldview and the practicing of a pedagogy that reflects Biblical principles. He states that it is a framework of assumptions about reality, all of which are in submission to Christ. The basic framework of this Christian worldview includes, first and foremost, the gospel which brings individuals into a covenant relationship with God. The gospel is about knowing God in the covenant.

Douglas Wilson

Wilson is a pastor of Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho, and editor of *Credenda/Agenda* magazine. Through his writings he has become accepted as an authority in some Reformed communities. He is well versed in his subject, adheres to the authority of Scripture, the creeds and Reformed confessions, upholds the Lordship of Christ and contributes fine insights into the understanding of Scripture. In *Future Men* he notes that the book of Proverbs is a treasury of instruction to help fathers and mothers instruct and prepare their sons for godly manhood. And throughout *Future Men* the citations from Proverbs are frequent. Wilson rightly argues that federal headship is foundational to marriage. The family is a covenant reality. Rearing boys is a covenantal task. Wilson states that growing up within the covenant has many great blessing associated with it, and young men must never take those blessing for granted. I appreciate Wilson's emphasis on the covenant as well as his call to teach sound doctrine. He asserts that our boys cannot learn how to be Christian men, men with doctrinal backbone, without a return to the doctrines of the Reformation, doctrines which are taught, and taught plainly in the Scriptures.

Although Wilson has many good things to say about bringing up boys, some of his arguments are questionable. He repeatedly encourages the fostering of a militant spirit in boys. He says instilling toughness in a boy is extremely important. There are times a boy should fight. Wilson even argues that it is absolutely essential for boys to play with wooden swords and plastic guns. Boys who play at war are training for something men are called to do. He claims that, "Young boys should obviously be trained in the use of real firearms." However, I fail to see the need for young boys to know how to use firearms. And unlike Dobson, Wilson has no word of encouragement for widowed, divorced, or singly-never-married mothers, who must raise their sons without the support of a husband. Furthermore, although Wilson doesn't dismiss homeschooling out of hand, his objections are more Victorian than Biblical. He contends that a boy homeschooled all the way through is growing up in a domestic, feminine environment. And one statement struck me rather odd. Wilson declares, "If a son deserts the faith, he ought to be disinherited. If he marries outside the covenant, i.e., he marries a non-Christian, he ought to be disinherited." I can't find any Biblical justification for this suggested action. And it is certainly not a way to win an unbelieving family member to the Lord. The opposite may very well happen. Hearts may be hardened to the Gospel as a result.

Wilson's language throughout the book tends to be too strident. He also uses too many clever turns of phrases. And why belittle and berate anything evangelical? For example, Wilson says, " Modern evangelicals are like a drunk Japanese businessman in a karaoke bar singing along with the Stones." I don't believe this is an appropriate way to describe fellow believers. Consequently, I suggest the Reformed community exercises godly discernment as it studies Wilson's *Future Men*.