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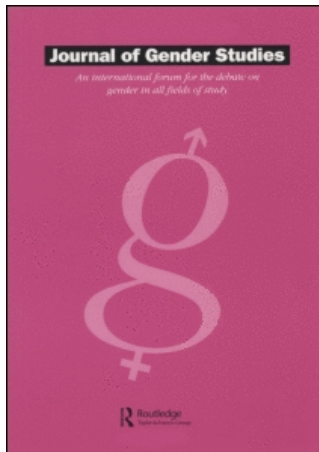
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# Andrew Singleton

## GOOD ADVICE FOR GODLY MEN: OPPRESSED MEN IN CHRISTIAN MEN'S SELF-HELP LITERATURE

*This paper is a critical content analysis of the genre of Christian men's self-help literature. It examines the ways in which this genre constructs and addresses men as a collective beset by their own 'unique' problems (including sexual addiction) and considers why the authors favor such characterizations. Men are portrayed as being just like any other disadvantaged group whose lives are characterized by oppression. It is suggested that this mediated classification of men as an 'oppressed group' is favored because it marginalizes competing social conversations about men's status in society, especially feminist critiques of male privilege.*

**Keywords** self-help literature; masculinity; gender order

Self-help literature is an extremely popular genre which can be found in abundance at any bookstore in Western society. Figures indicate that Americans spent \$563 million on self-help books in 2000 (Paul, 2001, p. 60). Some self-help books reach an exalted, almost canonical status. For example, M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* (1978) and John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992) attract followers because of their 'decisive' insights into the 'human condition' and for the paths to self-improvement which they purport to offer. Other self-help books become infamous because of their radical views. *The Surrendered Wife* (Doyle, 1999) and *The Rules* (Fein & Schneider, 1996), both about relationships, are two such books.

The appearance of Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990) in the early 1990s signaled a new trend in self-help literature: the popularization of men's issues. This book precipitated the mass-market arrival of a glut of books which exhort men to 'work on' their masculinity. *Iron John* was followed by numerous titles, including Steve Biddulph's *Manhood* (1995) and Sam Keen's *Fire in the Belly* (1992), both of which have been best-sellers. Appearing alongside these 'mythopoetic' self-help books are numerous titles directed at the Christian male. A visit to a Christian bookstore reveals a profusion of self-help about men's issues. One is also able to find magazines which present topical articles and advice for Christian men. Christian men's self-help literature is an adjunct to the 'Christian men's movement' which reached its zenith

in the 1990s. Groups such as the Promise Keepers achieved widespread support and other Christian 'men's ministries' flourished.

It is important for scholars with an interest in gender issues to consider Christian men's self-help literature.<sup>1</sup> Although it has not attracted the same scholarly and public attention as the mythopoetic men's self-help literature or relationship books like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, its importance ought not be underestimated. Arguably, Christian men devote more time to examining and interrogating their masculinity than most other groups of men. The recent growth in Christian men's conferences and groups like the Promise Keepers, in addition to the self-help literature, is evidence of this claim.

To date, some critical analysis has been directed towards the Christian self-help literature associated with the Promise Keepers movement (Donovan, 1998; Bloch, 2000; Cole, 2000; Everton, 2001). This analysis typically considers the gender politics, contents and themes of this material. Insufficient attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which men are portrayed in the pages of Christian men's self-help literature and why the authors favor such characterizations.

Self-help literature of any kind is primarily about *personal* problem solving, presenting diagnoses, analysis and solutions to particular issues. In the act of discussing personal problems, this literature has a tendency to portray its target audience as an undifferentiated whole. Readers are addressed as if members of an abiding or essential category or group, united because they suffer from the same problems or wrestle with the same sets of issues. Recent, popular examples of this type of self-help grouping include 'surrendered wives', 'women who love too much', 'men from Mars' and 'women from Venus'. In all of these cases, individually tailored therapy is discarded in favor of blanket pronouncements and solutions suitable for all.

In this article, I examine the unique ways in which the genre of Christian men's self-help constructs and addresses men as a collective who are 'oppressed' and under siege, especially in the area of sexuality, and offer an explanation as to why the authors might favor such a characterization. Drawing on Connell's theory of the gender order, it is suggested that this mediated classification of men as an oppressed group is favored because it marginalizes competing social conversations about men's status in society, especially feminist critiques of male privilege. As such, this paper is a contribution to ongoing, pro-feminist examination of men and their practices (cf. Connell, 2000; Whitehead, 2002).

For the purposes of discussion, nine Christian men's self-help books were analyzed. These are: *Healing the Masculine Soul* (Dalbey, 1988), *Finishing Strong* (Farrar, 1995), *Things Only Men Know* (Gillham, 1999), *Uneasy Manhood* (Hicks, 1991), *Strong Men Weak Men* (LeSourd, 1990), *Men's Secret Wars* (Means, 1996/1999), *The Man in the Mirror* (Morley, 1989/1997), *The Hidden Value of a Man* (Smalley & Trent, 1994) and *Old Man New Man* (Strang, 2000). These texts were selected for examination on the basis of comparability. All discuss a *range* of men's issues, rather than examining just one problem, like fathering, sex or sexual addiction. Furthermore, each offers solutions which enable the reader to be restored to full 'masculine' effectiveness (that is, to be a more 'Godly' man). In addition to these books, I examined eight issues of *New Man*, a bi-monthly magazine published by the author of the book *Old Man New Man*.<sup>2</sup> These magazines contain numerous articles of the self-help variety.

A note about terms ought to be added at this point. Most Christian men's self-help literature is written by and for evangelical Protestant Christians and originates in the US.<sup>3</sup> All of the literature I discuss in this article emerges from the evangelical tradition and typically reflects evangelical concerns. However, I refer to it as 'Christian men's self-help' rather than 'evangelical men's self-help' because it purports to speak to all Christian men, regardless of denomination, creed or theological standpoint.

### **The generic features and cultural context of Christian men's self-help literature**

Before examining the ways in which men are characterized in the pages of Christian men's self-help, it is necessary to discuss the key features of this genre. I also highlight the similarities and differences between this and other forms of men's self-help, and consider the broader socio-cultural context within which this literature is produced.

Arguably, the most significant generic feature of all kinds of self-help literature is a reliance on the very simple strategy of identifying a personal problem or set of problems and then proposing a solution (Simonds, 1996, p. 16). Christian men's self-help is no different. This literature is centered on the premise that contemporary men are not the effective men God desires them to be. According to the authors, men are struggling in a range of areas, including their sexuality, working lives, parental roles and marriages. Perhaps the most common male problems which prevent men being effective Christians are sexual addiction and the 'father-wound'. According to the authors, sexual addiction and masturbation are reaching epidemic proportions amongst Christian men, while the father-wound has left them in disarray. The solutions to such problems typically require the individual to deepen his relationship with God (through prayer and bible reading) and to pursue greater personal accountability with other Christian males.

Another key generic feature of Christian men's self-help is its 'masculine' style and tone. Women are the main consumers of self-help literature and the reading of such texts is often viewed as a feminized practice (Starker, 1989; Grodin, 1991; Simonds, 1992). Oliver, a Christian author, notes: 'Publishers estimate that more than 80 percent of [self-help] books are read by women' (1993, p. 18). Traditionally and culturally, *most* men are not encouraged to engage in forms of emotional self-analysis or openly declare that they have emotional problems that need to be interrogated and solved. However, the main objective of Christian men's self-help is to assist men to deal with often unspeakable (for men) emotional problems, be it sin, lust, guilt or marriage failure.

Given this, it is interesting to observe that Christian men's self-help literature cultivates a distinct 'boy's own' homosociality among its readers. Steve Strang, for example, includes a 'note to any women readers' which reads: 'This is a book for men. It is NOT a book for women' (2000, p. xix). Evoking the bonhomie of an all-male social event, Steve Farrar writes in a conversational tone, peppering his text with allusions to sport:

This book is an attempt to help us understand the steps we can take to stay under His [God's] protection and power. And if we do that, guys, by His grace we're going to hit the tape and hit it hard.

(1995, p. 18)

In like manner, Preston Gillham opens his book with a 'working-man' theme:

The pickup bed was full of hard work and it was going to be a hot day. We had two long-handled shovels, one sharp-shooter, two post-hole diggers, a five-foot iron bar for busting rock, a pick, a sledge, six bags of Portland cement, a wheelbarrow, two hoes, a four-foot level, four two-by-sixes, some six-by-eight treated posts, and a chain saw. Cecil and I were building a fence, and today we were going to set the corner post.

(1999, p. 7)

Language like this is of some comfort to the male reader, who may find himself 'feminized' by the fact he is reading about personal problems and solutions. He opens the pages and is immediately positioned within the context of a 'man's world'. This impression is consolidated by the stereotypical ways in which men and women are represented. The men who appear in the pages of Christian men's self-help are restricted to familiar roles: fathers, husbands, sports fans and workers. Women, in contrast, are primarily wives, with duties to perform including emotional support, housekeeping and parenting. Patrick Morley writes:

Several years ago, my wife started feeling inadequate because she was 'just a housewife and mother'. After some discussion we realized she was being influenced in her thinking by the editorial bias of certain women's magazines. She promptly canceled her subscriptions.

(1989/1997, p. 138)

Not only do these characterizations offer men a way to read self-help without feeling feminized, it is reasonable to conclude that those men who identify with such roles are the type of reader encouraged to consume this literature. Overwhelmingly, the voices heard in Christian men's self-help literature embody American, white, middle class and heterosexual values and represent the anticipated target audience of these books. Concomitantly, the reader is encouraged to view *authentic* manhood as constituted by the narrow range of norms and behavior to which the authors refer, thus delimiting the possibilities for alternative masculinities or conceptualizations of gender relations.

The above quote from Morley, typical of this genre, reflects an evangelical view about gender roles. As Bloch notes: 'Christian conservatism promotes the subordination of women in both the theological and legal-political realms ... as well as the private realm of the family' (2000, p. 22). While Christian men's self-help generally appears to endorse such a conservative view of gender relations, the specific emphasis on 'men's problems' rather than women's roles *per se* means discussion about gender

arrangements remains an incidental rather than an abiding concern in Christian men's self-help.<sup>4</sup>

In describing the generic features of this literature, it is important to comment on how this literature relates to other men's self-help books, especially the 'mythopoetic' men's literature of authors such as Bly (1990), Biddulph (1995) and Keen (1992). Mythopoetic self-help exhorts men to rediscover a lost, but essential masculine self which all men possess – the 'deep masculine'. Restoration of this deep masculinity, achieved through rituals, initiation and brotherly camaraderie, is required if men are to lead fulfilling, less problem-filled lives. While the discussion of men's problems in Christian men's self-help shares some similarities with the mythopoetic texts, there are significant points of divergence. One of the most notable of these is the way in which men's problems might be resolved. Christian self-help places considerable premium on the spiritual dimension, arguing that change and self-improvement comes about not through earthly means but with divine assistance. Men are consistently represented as powerless to effect change, or to do so unassisted. Another key difference, as will be elaborated upon in a section below, is the particular problems men face. For Christian men, the various problems they encounter are far more likely to have an otherworldly component or be specific to them. More generally, the emphasis on emotional problems marks its difference from other advice literature for men, which is usually about attaining career success or some other measurable, goal-oriented outcome such as better health, sex or finances.

It should be noted that while evangelical Christianity is often characterized as resistant to broader cultural trends, the overall emphasis in Christian men's self-help on self-improvement is typical of the primacy accorded to the self in both self-help literature and in late-modern Western society generally. Sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that in contemporary society the 'self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible ... We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (1991, p. 75). Christian men's self-help, with its emphasis on men closing 'the gap between the life you could be living and the life you are living' (Strang, 2000) fits well with contemporary concerns about the ongoing refinement and development of the self (Rimke, 2000).

As suggested at the beginning of this section, self-help is about problem identification and solution at the level of the individual, rather than structural social or economic change. In the act of discussing personal problems, self-help books have a tendency to portray their target audience as if they are members of an abiding category who all suffer (or, in this genre, are oppressed) for the same reasons. In the next section, I offer reasons why such a characterization of men is favored. After that, I provide a specific example of how this characterization is achieved in the pages of Christian men's self-help.

### **Why are Christian men characterized as 'oppressed'? A theoretical perspective**

According to its authors, Christian men's self-help offers solutions to problems which beset Christian men. If the reader examines a book or magazine article carefully, accepts the author's diagnosis about his ills, and then puts in place the appropriate

solutions, he may find the assistance he needs to rid himself of his compulsive masturbation habit, heal his longing for true fatherhood, or even form new male communities with other struggling Christian brothers. Thus, the reader can become a truly 'effective' man.

In leading the reader on a process of self-discovery and healing, Christian men's self-help gives him a clear way to interpret his life. Readers are encouraged to take up and embody identities organized around men's *collective* experiences of oppression, resulting from either their sexual addiction, father-wound, problems at home or lack of 'true' friends (this process is demonstrated in greater detail in the next section). According to the authors, social class, race and sexual orientation do not figure as differentiating factors in men's problems, nor does individual psychology or pathology. Men's problems emerge because men are *men*. Gillham typifies the authors' position when he notes: 'Men, regardless of race, religious background, or home turf – are weak and wobbling' (1999, p. 23).

That Christian men's self-help makes central the idea that men are oppressed gives rise to the question of why the authors favor this particular characterization. According to the authors themselves, men have problems because of their gender. In this respect, these texts are reproducing a popular cultural narrative about the status of contemporary men – the idea that men or masculinity itself is in 'crisis' (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Robinson, 2000). Recently, (pro) feminist scholars have challenged such characterizations of men, arguing that assertions about men in crisis are in fact the product of a simplistic and selective reading of evidence about male suicide rates, employment statistics and educational outcomes (see Beynon, 2002; McDowell, 2000; Whitehead, 2002). Even if it is a simplification, the idea of 'male crisis' dominates the broader social conversation about men and boys.

To assert that Christian men's self-help is simply reproducing a prevailing cultural narrative is only a partial explanation. Any examination of men's lives in late modernity (which Christian men's self-help purports to do) also raises the prospect, directly or not, of alternative understandings of men and their gender relationships, particularly feminist ones. The idea that men are oppressed is not the only way that men's lives and practices are interpreted in contemporary society. Feminism has produced an examination of men which highlights the very real and measurable privileges society accords to heterosexual men.

Importantly, if men are understood to be oppressed, then it is far less plausible to claim, in the manner of feminist critiques, that men are materially and socially privileged by the organization of society. In making such claims, I am not suggesting that the authors characterize men as oppressed to deliberately resist feminist challenges, what has been termed by some as a 'backlash'. This term implies a more deliberate 'anti-feminist' agenda, of the kind found in men's rights literature (see Clatterbaugh, 1997). But this does not mean that the oppressed men characterization has nothing to do with resistance. Deliberate or not, the authors' ideas about men will be informed by, and are the product of, broader patterns of gender relations, feminist critiques included. As the pro-feminist scholar Stephen Whitehead notes: 'Men do not exist in some neutral, benign context, but by definition, exist in relation to women' (2002, p. 59).

A useful way of conceptualizing gender relations and how this in turn informs the authors' understanding of men is Connell's (1987, 1995) theory of the 'gender

order' – the way in which gender relations are organized and structured throughout society. The gender order is the 'historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity' (Connell 1987, p. 99). The current gender order is patriarchal and yields men a 'patriarchal dividend': 'honour, prestige and the right to command' (Connell, 1995, p. 82). As such men (as a group) have an overall interest in preserving the gender order (Connell, 1995; McMahon, 1999). As Connell argues: 'a gender order where men dominate cannot avoid constituting men as an interest group concerned with defence, and women as an interest group concerned with change' (1995, p. 82). The reality and ubiquity of feminist discourses means that contemporary men are the subject of discourses which offer challenges to male privilege. Such discourses are not necessarily acceptable for men in the current gender order, especially as readers or producers of *self-help* (a genre which specifically deals with issues of self-examination). To construct men as oppressed is a useful tactic in marginalizing calls for men to change their practices in ways that might involve the relinquishment of privilege. This further explains the appeal of the oppressed male position; taking up an oppressed identity gives the male reader a means to regulate, resist or simply ignore competing social conversations – particularly feminist ones – about the status of men in society.

Obviously, the foregoing comments are applicable to any cultural text which claims that men as a class experience social dislocation, victimization or oppression. What sets Christian men's self-help apart, and makes it a worthy object of inquiry, are the unique, largely spiritual sources of men's oppression. The most important of these – sexual addiction – is considered in the next section. In this discussion, I highlight the various rhetorical strategies the authors employ which characterize men as an oppressed group.

## The quiet shame

In Christian circles, masturbation is the quiet shame.

(Strang, 2000, p. 49)

The topic of sex features prominently in Christian men's self-help literature. For the Christian male, sexual activity does not necessarily equate with pleasure. The locus of pitched battles with Satan, sex is a potential anxiety, danger and enduring source of problems. In *Finishing Strong*, Farrar expresses the point unequivocally: 'I think sexual temptation is the number one issue in the lives of men, and I think it is the primary way that the enemy [Satan] picks off Christian men' (1995, p. 59). According to the self-help authors, the problems men face with sex are principally centered around pornography, leering at women and masturbation. These problems are very different to the sexual problems discussed in other sex-related self-help books, which might discuss impotence, how to find a partner or how to generally improve one's love-life.

Neither alarm about the potential excesses of male sexuality, nor warnings about the attendant dangers of inappropriate sexual practices are new themes among



evangelical Christians. However, what is particularly distinctive about the Christian men's self-help literature is the way men are constructed in relation to pornography and masturbation. Christian men are portrayed as literally besieged by sexual temptations and powerless to stop themselves. This essentialist tendency is evinced in three separate articles appearing in *New Man* magazine. All of these characterize sexual temptation as pervasive, inescapable and overpowering. For example, self-proclaimed 'reformed sex addict' Mike Fehlauer recalls his own experience:

It was a Saturday morning when I first confronted the trash problem. I was out on the front lawn picking [it] up when I noticed a paperback book by the roadside. Out of curiosity I picked it up and started leafing through the pages. It didn't take long to realize it was pornographic.

(2001, p.40)

Not only does pornography reach men when they least expect it, it is available quickly and easily on the Internet. Watters observes:

It often doesn't take much for us men to give in to temptation, especially when the temptation is Internet pornography – what one psychologist recently called 'the crack cocaine of sexual addiction'.

(2000, p.32)

Even women are complicit in the forces which beset men. In an article titled 'Tell your daughter: Quit tempting my son', Vickery writes about his experiences at a church rally:

Every other 14-year-old girl looked like she'd just stepped off the cover of *Cosmo* magazine ... Their jeans appeared to be painted on. Their shirts accentuated every rise and fall. Honestly, you had to work *not* to notice cleavage. I had to remind myself that this was a *Christian* youth event, complete with what I thought was a rather strict dress code. It's amazing how some girls can obey the letter of the law yet so creatively violate its spirit. No wonder the boys were struggling.

(2001, p. 56)

These statements give the impression that men (and boys) are oppressed – under attack from all sides, whether they are doing chores, surfing the Internet or attending church. Men, it appears, are living in an environment in which they are almost destined to fail.

Importantly, the reader who might be struggling with sexual issues is repeatedly told that he is not alone. Instead, he is suffering from an affliction that besets all men, many of whom go on to become addicts. In the previously discussed examples, men are represented as being subjected to forces which are beyond their control. Sex,

indeed society itself, is depicted as a danger to men as a gendered *group*. Even if a man can individually achieve self-control, *men* as a whole cannot achieve mastery over the society which produces sexual temptations. By this logic, men are rendered powerless. Pornography, as the key instrument in sexual temptation, has men in its grip: they are the ones who are truly oppressed. This characterization is compounded by an absence of discussion about the role men play as producers of pornography or any engagement with feminist critiques about how men's consumption of pornography perpetuates male dominance.

Notably, men with an excessive interest in pornography or a tendency to masturbate find their 'problems' referred to as an 'addiction' in the pages of Christian men's self-help. This labeling of 'excessive' behavior in such a manner is not unique to this genre, but is part of a wider cultural shift in which 'an increasing number of behaviors acquired the label of *addiction*, and the word simultaneously acquired an elasticity that stretched it beyond physiological dependence' (Irvine & Klocke, 2001, p. 29). The psychological language of addiction, recovery and therapy employed by the authors consolidates the idea that men are oppressed.

One further point needs to be added to this discussion. Upon initial examination, it may appear paradoxical that men benefit from particular oppressed characterizations and yet readers are encouraged not to remain suffering but to move onto healing, becoming the 'New Man' about which Strang (2000) writes. It is difficult to retain the status of oppressed if one no longer suffers. However, like others who overcome ills, the reader is positioned to create for himself a 'recovered' identity typical of the kind promulgated by self-help books. Importantly, with such a recovered identity, the original suffering is not forgotten, rather, it is woven into the narrative the reader is encouraged to tell about himself. One can only claim a 'well' or 'restored' identity if trauma or pain was experienced in the first instance. Indeed, to claim to be a 'New Man' is to know endlessly that you were an 'Old Man', embodying the full knowledge that men have difficult, fraught and painful lives and that something needs to be done about it.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways in which men are represented and addressed in the pages of Christian men's self-help. For the most part, the reader is positioned to see himself as a member of an oppressed group, suffering from problems – especially sexual addiction – which are beyond his doing or control. It was suggested that this mediated classification of men as oppressed is privileged because it effectively resists competing social conversations about men's position in society, especially feminist critiques of male privilege.

In the main, men in Western culture are not encouraged to reflect upon the gendered aspects of their lives. In this context, the promotion of male introspection and self-analysis in Christian men's self-help would seem to have some value. However, the authors' focus on men's oppression, in addition to the essentialist and conservative characterizations of men typically favored by the authors and discussed in this article, means that this literature ultimately defends and reinforces men's

privileges, rather than encouraging any real and substantive change in gender relations.

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## Notes

- 1 In this article, the term 'self-help literature' refers not only to books but also to magazines which contain self-help advice.
- 2 The following issues of *New Man* magazine were examined: May/June 2000; September/October 2000; November/December 2000; January/February 2001; March/April 2001; May/June 2001; July/August 2001; September/October 2001.
- 3 Evangelicals place a strong emphasis on the infallibility and literal interpretation of Scripture and salvation through grace rather than works (one cannot earn a place in heaven, it is a gift from God) (Balmer, 1989).
- 4 Some scholars suggest that the Christian men's self-help produced by the Promise Keepers is relatively progressive in its view of gender relations (Bloch, 2000; Everton, 2001). My own reading of Christian men's self-help leads me to disagree with such a conclusion.

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