NEWS & OPINIONS

Missing Out:
What's Going On With Male Friendships?
Review and Discussion of Male Friendships
in the 21st Century—Change and Stasis

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Abstract

Significant literature now exists which strongly suggests men in Western countries are shedding orthodox masculinity tropes in favor of greater male friendship intimacies and bonding. Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) has emerged to explain and give direction to these sociocultural changes, suggesting men are gaining emotional and health benefits from greater inclusion of diverse masculinities, homosocial bonding, *bro*-bud closeness, platonic touch, all without the former fear of being labeled homosexual. However, there is also significant and concurrent literature which suggests men remain lacking in friendships and are lonely; conditions reported to worsen over the time periods studied and despite seeming advances made in male-male homosociability. In fact, this other literature suggests men not only and increasingly lack friendships, but that such lack worsens health outcomes, many self-reporting the effects of emotional and touch isolation from other men.

This discussion article reviews unobtrusive sources: research reports, published articles, online posts and materials, to assess and discuss trends indicated, and unravel their seeming contradictions. Additionally, this discussion article asks if Christian males fare any better—given the faith's emphasis on love (*agape, philia)* and mutuality.

Review of findings allow for trends to be understood in light of *generational change*, under-scoring that both conditions—social changes to male homosociability as well as stasis in male-male

stereotypic relationships—can be true: younger generations embracing novel changes, while middle- and older generations not doing so. Overall, data confirm that *men in all generational cohorts lose friends over time*, especially intimate friendships, and this is concerning. Reviewing available literature on Christian male friendships, findings suggest how cultural norms and beliefs can work to undermine male friendship formation and intimacy between men of this faith as well.

Introduction

As a discipline, anthropology has forever involved itself with men—talking *about* men; men talking *to* men; men *doing* to men; and men *doing* to women. More broadly, there has been historical Anthropological interest in exploring masculinity as a category to be examined, men engendered and as engendering subjects (Guttman 1997, 385). Of late, attention has focused on those distinct ways in which masculinity is being defined *in the plural*, underscoring vast changes which, especially in Western and westernized cultures, have come to signify how the concept of manhood has altered (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2014, 2016). We now explore *masculinities* as these relate to notions of male identity, sexuality, 'manhood', 'manliness', androgyny, and queerness, all within the context of a multigendered social puzzle.

Recent social science explorations place emphasis on how novel conceptions of masculinity in the West are altering hegemonic masculinity, focusing on how

its troubling has required—if not encouraged—dynamic changes to such traits as the homophobia historically surrounding homosexuality, and its consequent homohysteria (Becker and Weiner 2016; Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2014). Reported are changes in the meaning of masculinity, what masculine performance entails, all altering male social roles in the process.[1] We recognize intersectionalities that impact such changes, men now stated to turn more inwardly to focus on their own intersectioned identitiy vs. their relationships to women, or even to other men (Anderson and McCormack 2014, 2016; Becker 2009, 2014; Becker and Weiner 2016).

There has also been a shift from documenting non-Western traditional cultures of manhood (that interest is now in decline), to detailing how such male subcultures are influenced by the assimilation of novel concepts of men/masculinities from the West; from causative forces of war, diasporas, immigrations; and via cultural integration.[2] We now challenge any ubiquitous, universal male imagery world-wide, assumed to have been residing in an archetypal, "deep structure" of masculinity, cross-culturally seeded and historically pervasive.[3] We favor documenting the somewhat still ambiguous and fluid nature of masculinity in the now, even situating it apart from particular spatial and temporal contexts—some insisting there is now no unitary, universal "male point of view" or masculinity itself any more (Matthews 2016; Rosin 2010).

We add to these new emphases data coming from sister sciences like neurobiology and psychobiology to ferret out any underlying understandings of—for example—cooperative vs. competitive behavior, nurturance and the role of male hormones; even neuroanatomical patterns which could be influential connections underlying what we now understand to be the biosocial dimensions of being a man (Feldman 2017).

Some of the transformations afoot were predicted by anthropologists exploring men and manhood two-three decades back: Herdt wrote of "the egalitarian mode [that was] likely to be a cultural import of modernization" (1993, xxxii), as he spoke about the changing men in New Guinea; and Keesing of men in Melanesia, who noted "potential regional reactions to Westernization" (1982, 16); underscoring what Brandes also noted in Spain, where "social norms among males under the age of twenty- to twenty-five years seem to be departing abruptly from those held by their parents" (1980, 11). All well and good.

But do current social-scientific studies of men really suggest these are significantly changing—particularly Western men—so much that there are diminishing patterns of male superiority, dominance, homophobia and homohysteria; such, sufficient to make the modern Western male more apt to be homosociable? And again, particular to our interest—*more homosociable with each other*? Moreover, have novel theories of "inclusive masculinity" (**IM**) (Anderson, 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2014, 2016) accurately predicted trends toward greater "horizontal homosociality" (cf. Hammaren and Johanssen 2014, 9), or foretold the truth of these 'significant departures' from orthodox masculinity?

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[1] Ron Becker (2009) suggests the homohysteria and paranoia associated with the fear of being labeled homosexual is being replaced by an emerging 'post-closet logic,' in large part due to the visibility and cultural acceptance of gay identification. Becker (2014) further contends this enables a more secure sexual identity for heterosexual men, generating a "stable boundary" for their heterosexual identity and allowing for alterations in how they engage with other men without the fear of being labeled homosexual. In other words, by some outing and labeling themselves gay, one can presume that anyone who does *not self-identify as gay is securely straight.*

[2] Emphasis on the West, western men here and elsewhere in this article, does not intend to diminish significant work being done in *non*-Western cultures, such as the work of Inhorn (2012), Inhorn and Isidoros (2018) on Arab men; Miranova-Banjac (2019) viewing male friendships from an Eastern/Confucian perspective; Ho et al. (2021) exploring androgyny in Asia; Cao (2018, 2021) on male friendships in contemporary China; and Guttman's (2003) overview of contemporary masculinities in Latin America.

[3] This view, however, has been historically challenged by ethnologists, who rightly contend that the variegation of manhood cross-culturally is plentiful and long-standing. In many traditional, non-Western cultures, males have held instrumental roles in what in the West has considered 'female roles and tasks': that of childrearing, infant care, housekeeping, cooking, etc. As well, it can be the male who 'preens', self-decorates and cosmetologizes; and in whom one finds most interest and time spent on self-presentation. All this, without here mentioning gender crossovers of "third-gender," "two-spirit" peoples, Hijras, all documented ethnohistorically and in the present. See Matthew Guttman, "Trafficking Men" (1997).

I raise questions in this discussion article as a means of examining what, in particular, have all these alleged changes to masculinity factually offered up for Western *male friendships and bonding,* given that there has been a parallel wealth of investigations, articles and position papers written on the current epidemic of "male loneliness"; men lacking male friendships—a "friendship crisis"—and, most significant, men lacking *intimacy* with male friends (Anthony 2022; Cox 2021a, 2021b; *Friendship Report* 2022; Hill 2014, 2015; Holcombe 2022; Greene 2017; Wong 2019, to name a few).

Likewise, there are myriad studies which evidence this lack generating male-male touch deprivation (Greene 2017); a void of physical-emotional trust and support which such relationships can offer men (as these do women), and which when absent are detrimental to emotional and physical health (Greene 2021; Suttie 2023).

The necessary question then becomes: If there have been substantive changes, why then have friendship development and "male bonding" [4] seemingly not benefitted *more men,* enabling deeper friendships, given the presumptive diversification of what it means to be a man today?

This article examines such questions via a review of published unobtrusive sources—research reports, papers, articles—and social media quotes which include descriptive data and thick descriptions. In particular and where possible, results of data-rich reports are compared and analyzed to draw conclusions or clarify seeming contradictions. It is understood that some data in evidence are not generalizable, and consequently this exploration is limited; however, its primary goal is to bring into sharper focus and discussion current sociocultural changes evidenced in the world of male social relations in the West.

Using the same methods, I also explore how these trends interact with men in the Christian faith. A long-standing requisite for the church of Jesus Christ is to be in loving community, Jesus himself calling on his apostles to be as brothers, love as brothers, be *friends.* Apostle Paul calls on the church to "stir up one another to love one another" (Heb 10:24); "to leave the prison of aloneness" (Fromm 1956, 9) and enter into close, meaningful relationships—and for this article's specific focus—Christian male to male. Thus, this exploration also examines the types of love and affections which are referred to by the Greek terms *agape, philia, eros,* in relationship to the special engagement two men may develop and sustain for one another in the Christian faith. Are Christian men faring any better than those reported in the general population—as a result of this doctrinal mandate to *love* and *be loved* by one's brother?

The State of Western Men's Affairs

Masculinity is "In Transition"

Much of 20th century research on men focused on sociocultural issues and problems surrounding masculinity. It emphasized male privilege, and the costs of such for both men but especially women; it focused on issues of hegemony, homophobia, male violence, and on the exclusion of homosexual men in male peer groups. It also maintained focus on the subordination —some said oppression—and continued exclusion of women as equals (cf. Lorber 1994; Connell 1995; Kimmel 1994; Plummer 1999.)

In this new century and by the early 2000's, studies were documenting how younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) [5] were demonstrating distinctives in male norms, attitudes, and behaviors, such as increased inclusion of gay men within heterosexual male peer groups, and in their friendship networks. Changes pointed to relational shifts in adolescent and young adult male *sociability*—these becoming more inclusive of gender differences, sexual orientation

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[4] We should note that Lionel Tiger (1984, 208) coined the term "male bonding" not as a description of male camaraderie, as much as an attempt to show the link between "inherent drives on the part of men to show solidarity for one another" (as opposed to the drive that "bonds" men to women). Tiger conceived then of a developed trait "over millennia," with "biological roots" connected to those necessary alliances for group defense and hunting (135). Today, we find absolutely that there are biohormonal markers to male bonding, and these may well be epigenetic traits with those 'long roots' Tiger envisioned (see Feldman, 2017.)

[5] Throughout this article and with reference to other studies, the standardized chronological start- and end-points for generations follows Pew Research Center's (2019) definitions, which defines Gen Z as those born after 1996; Millennials as 1981–1996; Generation X as 1965–1980; Baby Boomers, 1946–1964; and the Silent Generation, 1928–1945. See also Michael Dimock (2019).

differences, and gender identifications (Anderson 2002, 2005, 2008). Such shifts spoke to a change in social and cultural male dynamics, ones not predicated on a traditional avoidance of gay men, or on sustaining male stoicism, etc. In a word, a movement away from culturally inherited and performed tropes of hegemonic masculinity.

By 2009, Eric Anderson proposed a theoretical model which he titled "Inclusive Masculinity Theory" (IMT), inductively developed through review of published reports and grounded analyses. [6] Mark McCormack (2011, 2012) expanded the theory to account for changes coming from educational and social settings, coinage of novel terms and language use, and the 'breakthrough' of gay jocks of note who 'came out' and won social acceptance. McCormack thus included in the theory change influences from the many social contexts and institutions which were also changing, thus providing a needed backdrop. Since then, Anderson and McCormack have 'teamed up' to generate other studies in support of and for revisions of IM theory. Going forward, the theory has had numerous expansions and clarifications by other researchers and scholars, as well as gaining critics. Its impact has not remained theoretical, however: it has entered the social imaginary as more factual and representational of current changes than as a theory itself (Connor et al. 2021).

IM theory contends changes evident in men's gendered behaviors represent a fundamental shift in the practice of masculinity (Anderson 2009). Moreover, what results is not one *altered* masculinity, but "masculin*ities*," given the more inclusive tolerance of social differences. While the theory recognizes that *covert* homophobia and heteronormativity still exist, the emphasis is on the effects of the reduction of *overt*

homophobia and homohysteria in changing masculine stereotypes (Anderson and McCormack 2016, 3).

Most data used to both develop and refine IMT have come from the U.S. and the U.K. Subsequent other reports from the U.S. and the U.K. confirm sociocultural changes predicted in IMT occurring in these countries: the decline in negative attitudes toward and acceptance of gay persons; changes in what is coded feminine, masculine; acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality as legitimate sexual orientations; legal changes to gender and sex regulations; and greater social intolerance for sexual/gender bullying and violence (McCormack and Anderson 2014a, 2014b; Connor et al. 2021).

Overreliance on two countries' data makes the theory not *generalizable* to the degree its tenets become available for cross-cultural comparisons: the theory is grounded on culture-specific—Western culture-specific—data and assumptions. Yet given the focus here on Western males' roles and their relationships with other males, the theory is available as a theoretical background to exploring questions asked earlier: Are stated change outcomes factually occurring in Western men as the theory and current studies seem to suggest? (We later get to alternative reports of few/no changes, 'no friendships' and the deleterious results of such.)

Western Masculinities in Flux

In the U.S., Gen Z (18-26) has emerged as the generation that wants people to speak their truth, however distinct it is (Gil 2022a; *The Generations Defined* 2019). 'Authenticity' seems to be the glue here. Advocating for what one believes, and in concert, what others believe—side by side and *authentically*—is part of the emergent cultural discourse (*Authenticity*

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[6] This article has little room to expound on IMT. The 'heart' of IMT lies in its efforts to first bring clarity to what sustains hegemonic masculinity, it being *homohysteria*—defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay. Behind that is the cultural discourse of what constitutes the masculine and what constitutes the feminine, centering on heterosexuality as not only normative, but a requisite for being either a man or a woman. Sexual orientation (i.e., being a heterosexual male) takes center stage in propelling a masculinity that becomes 'hysterical' with regards to being socially perceived as anything else. IMT sees homohysteria as a central variable because it connects social conditions which police men's behaviors—e.g., homophobia—with the broader cultural requisites that restrict men to the archetypal form of masculinity, i.e., culturally exalted, hierarchically stratified and demanding appropriate distances (emotional, and certainly physical) man to man. IMT contends that the driver of changes in men are the improving attitudes toward homosexuality in the broader society, lessening homohysteria, enabling structural changes in the law, and social condemnation/rejection of overt forms of homophobia. Broader change agents via social institutions, economics, gender ideology itself, are not dismissed by IMT; rather, these form the backdrop upon which younger men both experience generational attitude shifts as well as participate in the larger cultural catalyzation of the changes via their male relationships. (For a full explanation of IMT, see Anderson 2009; and Anderson and McCormack 2016).

and Gen Z 2021). Thus, reports on Gen Z show a wave of friendship-seeking (highest since 2019), the kind the show *Friends* popularized*,* and the kind this generation lacked during their growing up years of too-many-activities, few friends, followed by the isolationism of the COVID pandemic. Virtual friends were one thing; but friends like in *Friends* showed how *the real deal* actually worked: And they fell in love (Gillette 2019).

One study which allows for intergenerational and sex/gender comparisons, showed Gen Z in Western countries swinging the pendulum toward seeking live friends vs. the thousands of 'friends' made online. Males are reported to be ". . . looking for more closeness and intimacy within smaller groups. [Here,] 'love' plays a stronger role in platonic relationships than we ever knew before" (*The Friendship Report* 2021, 5).

Another study using data from the U.K. reiterates, "men are becoming more aware of, and comfortable with their need for social connection and intimacy within their male friendships, not just rapport during activities, or having similarities. Men want *emotional* connections, platonic love" (Greif 2010, 146).[7] This shift includes talking about their feelings and sharing their problems, and not thinking this is *weird.* (Some Millennial and to a larger degree Gen X males are reported to have kept alive the idea that intimate talk is a strange thing for men to do: "*That's what women do, not men.*" (Chandler 2006, 2).

The shifts also include greater physical closeness between male friends—a kind of one-on-one *nonsexual* social intimacy where platonic friends are capable of self-same impromptu hugs, forms of hold, touch; wherein and during which emotional disclosures and caring for the other are possible.[8] One writes,

> The other night I watched a movie with my best friend—we lay on the floor among tossed pillows. His young kids took the sofa beyond. We ate popcorn from the same bowl and had an eventual

popcorn throw-swallow duel. I gave a hug to my bro, the winner; told him I loved him. Later I observed that our fathers would've *never* had their buddy over to loll about the carpet with them, share hugs, feelings, laughter, all while watching a movie together. (Beaulieu 2017, 1)

This "homosocial tactility" (Anderson and McCormick 2014) among married friends is catching on; but is mostly reported among collegiates in the UK, where young, athletic men in bonding relationships with their "best buds" take opportunity for cuddling and "spooning" in dorm spaces as well as in frat houses, and in social spaces like pubs (Anderson and McCormack 2014, 220-1; Ohm and Wechselblatt 2021, 1). The report does not signal private spaces as a factor mediating these overt expressions of homosociability, nor does it imply any leanings toward homosexuality. In these younger crowds, such are very much public displays of contemporary same-self affection.

Compared to counterparts in the U.K., "American young men demonstrate decreased levels of emotional and physical intimacy, and express greater apprehension related to social and cultural influences in how they interact with their peers. [American] men are [also] desiring emotional investment and intimacy with their same-sex peers, but call into question the potential social ramifications . . ." (Ohm and Wech-selblatt 2021, 1; *vide* McCormack and Anderson 2014b). Young American males, despite also living in the midst of social change and hybridizing masculinities, appear more troubled by the necessary social negotiations challenging normative construc-tions of masculinity (Becker and Weiner 2016, 332). Nevertheless, and for younger generations overall, experiencing deeper male bonds is now a possible

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[7] As a matter of course, women have enjoyed and sustained intimate female friendships, platonic love, without question. Important to note is female socialization into friendship alliances, which begins early with girl-girl play, "telling secrets" to each other, and conversation as a means of bonding and building friendships—all founded on ideals of self-sameness. See Deborah Tannen (2017). In all this, a man's socialization differs remarkably.

[8] In contextualizing this 'novel' socio-emotional and physical connection, it does well to remember that by the turn of the 19th century, men had been enjoying this kind of platonic intimacy for a long time—well documented since the 1800's via photography and the myriad, emotive writings of men to their intimate male friends. We lost all that in the 20th century, for reasons explained in Gil (2022b).

pursuit, at the least without feeling much social stigma from their peers when doing so.[9]

Resulting Bromances

In "Privileging the Bromance," Robinson et al. (2017) reaffirm younger men having "increasingly intimate, emotive, and trusting *bromances*" (1). [10] These bromances highlight novel levels of male-male bonding. Beaulieu (2017) underscores the majority of men in bromances he interviewed (mean age range 21-34) placed a higher emotional value on their close male friendships—their "bud," "true friend," their "*bro-bud*"—than they did their romantic relationships with a woman; and did so in every measure of intimacy *short of sex* (Beaulieu 2017, 1). [11] These bromances are stated to be less contentious than their relationship(s) with women. Since the sexual is not involved, men stated there was "no worry about saying the wrong thing and starting a fight." "Besides," these said, "men do not keep grudges like women." (I note how a good amount of sexism creeps into these differentiations.) "Men can share their vibe" they said, "without having to explain it" (2).

These reports suggest younger men, even some Millennial and GenXers, are finding in these male-male relationships a deep, abiding sense of trust, love, vulnerability, all allowing for sharing of close personal matters that would not have been shared previously with another man. In these respects, and while more data are certainly needed, results reported signal a departure in some cohorts from the once well-entrenched and homophobic male friend culture.

Health Benefits of Having Male Friends and a 'Bro-Bud'

There are numerous studies on the importance of having close friends for emotional and physical health (Sanders 2016; Reiner 2019; Greene 2017; Cox 2021b). These suggest that not unlike romantic male-*female* love interests, intimate platonic male friendships also yield great emotional stability, increased sociability, increased resilience to stress; all influencing longer, healthier lives (Chalos 2018; *Friendship Report* 2022). Findings underscore having male friends and interacting with them regularly increase men's longevity by double percentage points; reduces risk of heart attacks and coronary disease; and helps men with catastrophic loss (such as that of a spouse) to better cope and rebound from its aftermath (*vide* Chalos 2018). Other studies emphasize the mental health benefits of having "coping buddies" and male friends who can willingly offer emotional support (*vide* Suttie 2023; *Friendship Report* 2022; McKenzie et al. 2018).

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[9] "On the morning following a night out clubbing, the friends will congregate at one house, where they watch TV, play video games. These activities would include frequent cuddling, which is described as 'feeling good,' adding, 'If your mate has a headache you can like massage his head, or you just lie there together holding each other and laughing about how awful you feel.'" Scott Christian (2014, 1).

[10] To be clear, the solidated definition of a *bromance* is a particular type of homosocial bonding which occurs between two friends, which increases intimacy with the perceived self-same other. It exceeds usual male friendships by offering an elevated relational-emotional experience, relational stability, thus enhanced emotional disclosure possibilities, social fulfillment, and self-other confidence. Bromances also seem to dissolve many of the taboos of intimacy which have presumed any physical or emotional intimacy between male friends signals homosexuality. Among the younger generations, a bromance is now a rather accepted staple. Bromances therefore go beyond the "side-by-side" relationships men have had with friends and resemble more the "face-to-face" intimate female friendships women have historically enjoyed. See Ritch Savin-Williams (2019).

[11] The notion of men having bromantic relationships as a 21st century "novelty" ignores the history of men in the 18th and 19th centuries, where platonic love included male intimacy which today would have not only raised eyebrows, but definite suspicions of homosexuality. Some significant historical figures are recorded as having long, lasting, intimate relations with their male friends, living together and even sharing the same bed. As notable example, Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed became friends, then close friends—emotional friends who lived together and shared one bed for six years. Speed eventually married, and Lincoln suffered a nervous breakdown which many attribute to the "loss" of his companion. This male-male bonding was not unusual in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, where unmarried men were *expected* to engage in close, intimate friendship with another man, *without* being sexual partners. This was a time when male friendships mirrored friendships between women; but of course, determinedly different in context but not in substance. Emotional and physical closeness, mutuality, pining for each other in letters that today seem 'romantic' was not unusual in male friendship exchanges. See Charles Strozier (with Wayne Soini), 2016.

Biohormonal Underbelly of Male Bonding

What has also come to the foreground recently is how these dyadic, platonic experiences engage biohormonal elements to further the ability of men to bond with each other. Without these affective bonding experiences, men do not receive the full emotional-health benefits the literature mentions. Therefore, and because I am a medical anthropologist, I briefly review these novel understandings of how endocrine profiles in men affect and are affected by male-male social interactions; how such can aid or hinder their getting to the place of bonding relationships with other men.

Investigations into the neuroendocrine correlates of male friendship formation, while largely unexplored in the past, are now revealing the role of male hormones in male friendship formation.

There are interesting revelations to ponder in what recent studies reveal: how low levels of self-disclosure conversations—as those between recently-acquainted males *who do not perceive themselves as competitors*—keep both cortisol and testosterone (T) levels *low* in the socializing pair (Ketay, Welker, and Slatcher 2017, 88). Such engagements and lower hormonal levels can increase the feeling of "closeness" between acquaintances and may thus help facilitate initial male-male social interactions, eventual bonding. It is also suggested that these forming social bonds may, in turn, be agents in *maintaining* hormone levels at "socializing" ranges (Gettler et al. 2020). The reverse was found to also be true: men in high T levels engaging in dialogue with a recent male acquaintance felt *less close* to the other male and desired *less social interaction* with them (Ketay, Welker, and Slatcher, 90).

Intuitively, it makes sense that the most important hormones implicated in male aggression and competition—testosterone and cortisol—can also play a part in men's sociality when lowered: When these hormones are organically low *while* in lexical exchanges of *low risk,* such levels encourage further mutual engagement: lower levels of T and cortisol also allowing men to *want* to be closer to their socializing other.[12] In simpler 'personalized' language as example, "*This conversation reduces my tension and helps me to dialogue without the need to act or feel competitive* [the "one-up, one down" relational tropes men instinctively feel when around little-known other males]. *In turn, I am prone to liking more 'this guy,' and letting myself get closer to 'this guy.'*" Low cortisol is known to reduce stress, blood pressure, and even blood sugar levels (*Cortisol: You and Your Hormones* 2023, 2).

Neuroendocrine contributions here would be incomplete without mentioning the role of oxytocin (OT), that neuropeptide hormone produced in the hypothalamus and known to play key roles in our affects and sociability. A plethora of studies document the role of OT in social situations, friendship formation, pair bonding, intimacy; even the regulation of anxiety, among other effects (all summarized in Jones et al. 2017). Regarding men who are open to forming a homosocial relationship with another, OT's significant anti-stress effects, which are central to bonding, "can induce a feeling of safety and support," allowing approach behaviors required for eventual male-male sociality and bonding (Jones et al., 195–96).

Reports of Gen Z mentioned earlier, which reveal novel forms of dialogical exchanges among men, could corroborate neuroendocrine findings that social dialogues of this sort serve as a triggers for "biobehavioral synchrony" in the socializing pair. These are sex-specific, hormone-specific mechanisms which further social attachments, and at the same time yield health benefits (Djalovsky et al. 2021, 12421).

Such studies are not suggestive that men who are homosociable are so solely because of their neuroendocrinology. They do suggest the importance of how hormonal elements are altered and influence our human dispositions *as these are processed through our socio-lexical exchanges*; our cognitions, emotions, and enculturation. We now have a clearer window into

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[12] Testosterone (T) often serves as a physiological mediator of behavioral trade-offs. In particular, a male's T is often higher during periods in which these compete with other males (e.g., 'mating' opportunities, sports, even when perceiving the other male is superior in some way). In contrast, during periods when males partner with females to raise young, for instance, their T often declines, which helps divert limited time and energetic resources toward cooperative parenting efforts and away from competition. (A great example comes from Gettler et al., 2020, 15422.) Consequently, T has the potential to shape variation between males in health, survival, and reproductive fitness. In this general framework, higher T has also been linked to competitive, dominant behaviors in men related to pursuit of social status. Meanwhile, there is also evidence that men with lower T may engage in greater prosocial, generous, and empathetic behavior overall. What is becoming clearer is that male perception of another male as non-threatening enables lower levels of T and cortisol, which then allow the sociability quotient to rise. See S. M. van Anders, 2013; and Ketay et al., 2017.

understanding these biobehavioral elements, as well as how these can be catalyzed to encourage, support, greater homosociability among men.

To be clear: hormones do not in and of themselves determine behavioral outcomes in humans. Our knowledge of hormonal elements and their actions can, however, clarify how a generation of more open-minded males—men who have engaged greater openness about what it is to be a man and how these communicate—can be aided *by their hormones* in their quest for 'biobehavioral synchrony' with a liked other (*vide* Feldman 2017).

Likewise, such studies can help explain why older generations of males, who admittedly *do not* have many close friends and report to have made no significant gains in male friendships within the timeframes studied, can remain socially disconnected, not experiencing sociality with other males. Older males have typically retained stereotypic masculinity norms in place, relying on time-worn modes of lexical exchanges that can keep them 'on their guard' with new acquaintances (thus producing higher levels of T and cortisol), making feelings of attraction more difficult to detangle from any suspect move to greater intimacy.

Contradictions? Multiple Reports Also Signal a 'Crisis in Men's Friendships'

In the recent *State of American Friendships Survey* conducted by the American Enterprise Institute (2021, n=2,019), primary author Cox (2021b) reiterates young adults (Gen Z, 18–26) as those males most likely to have developed new friendships within the year surveyed, and most likely to have engaged a "bud"(3). The *Survey* also confirms older males not gaining new friendships, with nearly one-third of such seniors (over 60) stating it has been at least five years since they developed new male friends (4).

Overall, the *Survey* emphasizes close friendships among men have considerably *declined* since 1990, most men in 2021 generally having *three or fewer friends*. A majority report "few or *no close* [male] friendships," and are not satisfied about the size of their friendship group (4). This *Survey* finds men are also far less likely than women to have received emotional support from a male friend, despite these sharing their feelings with them (5). In this respect, this

large and randomized study finds there are *no generational differences* when men do share feelings with a male friend, meaning younger men are not more likely than older men to have shared feelings (5). Finally, and with no surprise, when men and women are compared, twice as many women regularly tell their friends they love them vs. males doing so (5).

Comparing these survey findings to findings from singular reports of sampled populations, as noted above, the conclusions are strikingly different. Formal comparisons are difficult, however, since definitions of friendship, intimacy, etc. are not standardized among surveys and reports, and thus become problematic to equate. Sampled sizes also range from non-generalizable small cohorts to large and randomized samples in singular reports.

Stepping back, even when the larger research reports substantiate fundamental changes to manhood, some appearing significant and even transformative, those data reviewed do not confirm a majority of Western men are neo-configuring their masculinity in some way, or to a degree sufficient to validate **IM** theory collectively.

Most novel changes to masculinity, its performance and its value propositions are evidenced in age-specific, *younger* cohorts of men. These have managed to question orthodox masculinity for the many reasons stated in the studies and reconfigured themselves differently: performatively, emotionally, affectively. The tenor of culture change is underscored here, reminding us of its unevenness across the fabric of society and population groups. Gen Z may thus well fit the typology of *Innovators*, if not *Early Adopters* coined by Rogers (1962), and later elaborated by Rogers & Shoemaker (1971).

A Loneliness-Friendship 'Crisis'?

Notwithstanding generational changes, one finds many reports which suggest men are *still lonely*—some suggesting a "friendship crisis"—men remaining socially isolated and lacking meaningful male connections. *Cigna,* a large and well-known health insurer, continues to report via a series of large, yearly surveys (2018–2022) that nearly half of all American men remain—by their own self-assessments—lonely or isolated.[13] Moreover, and paradoxical to what has been

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[13] Cigna Corporation. See variously: *Cigna Loneliness Index: Ipsos Survey 2018.* This survey's data are based on interviews with 19,000 U.S. adults. Also, Cigna Corporation, *Cigna Morning Consult Survey 2021*, which surveyed 2,469 U.S. adults on loneliness; and Cigna Corporation, *2020 Cigna Loneliness Index Ipsos Survey,* based on 10,400 surveyed U.S. adults. All these, plus

reported elsewhere and covered above, these *Cigna* reports underscore the "loneliness epidemic" (their term) *impacts all age cohorts* and runs across known fault lines of mental health, affecting most those males with intersections of race, underrepresentation, lower incomes, and physical-emotional health issues (Cigna 2022).

Of most interest here is the finding that *young adults* (overall) *are twice as likely to be lonely as seniors.* These are also twice as likely to experience feeling "left out." The 2022 report is specific: Nearly 8 in 10 Gen Zers (79%) and 7 in 10 Millennials (71%) report being lonely, vs half of Boomers (50%). Men, overall, remain "the loneliest" compared to women (4).

Mentioned earlier, the *State of American Friendships Survey* may offer a more nuanced, if not complex picture of male friendships or their lack. In that survey, reported data substantiate men's state of loneliness and male friendship loss. However, the *Survey* also documents roughly half of the men interviewed *also made new friends* over the same period reported. This report includes disaggregated data. Controlling for age, both situations can, and in this instance probably are, true: disaggregated data showing (again) younger men making new friends, while older ones (again) not doing so. Men who don't make friends, however, do remain lonely and feel isolated regardless of their age (Cox 2021a, 2021b).

Structural factors may most certainly be at work and could explain some of the perceived discrepancies between age cohorts. Lead author Cox reports,

> . . . we found that higher rates of loneliness among Millennials was due primarily to lower religious involvement, lower marriage rates, and greater geographic mobility. Once accounting for these factors, Millennials were not any lonelier than Baby Boomers. If men are marrying later than women on average, are moving around more, and are less connected to religious or other communities, it may further exacerbate the friendship gap (2021a, Abstract).

Cox et al. (2019) also suggest that Gen Z, whose work ethic differs significantly from Millennials, Gen Xers, and definitely from Boomers, are more prone to changing jobs for sundry reasons, and thus more likely to lose out on making friends at work. It is precisely at the workplace that most Americans find and form friendships—these sometimes becoming close friendships (Carmichael 2023; Cigna, 2022). Switching jobs more often, working remotely, working fewer or even longer hours; or in service jobs which do not allow much socializing on the job, all tend to affect the nature of work friendships. Such conditions, in turn, affect the ability of individuals—especially young men who are regularly more gregarious than older men—to form friendships (Cox 2021a, 3).

A Quick Recap

To sum up thus far, it is evident that male ideology and consequent friendships are in flux in the U.S., the U.K., and reported other Western countries. These changes relate well to theories of masculinity such as IM, which underscore a breakdown of hegemonic masculinity and its corresponding homophobia, lessening homohysteria and enabling avenues for a more open sociality among men and in male friendships. However, IM cannot be wholly corroborated, nor are all men experiencing social role and/or identity changes. Data reports emphasize *particular generation cohorts* evidencing the most changes in views and performance of masculinity, this occurring mainly among Gen Z (18–26) males. Reports also emphasize the greater lexicality, emotional openness, bonding, physical (non-sexual) touch and intimacy in this cohort, resulting in the now colloquially-labeled *bromance,* or "bro-bud" system of male friendships.

One can detangle those variables which make *both* conditions reported—social change and stasis—factual: there is overwhelming data to corroborate that the artifice of the Male Code *is* breaking down in the 21st century—but not wholly so. Among the innovators and early adopters of novelty are Gen Z males, no doubt. When studies allow for control of variables such as *age, workplace factors, marital status,* etc., we find that change takes hold most prominently in the younger, unattached (i.e., without a mate, unmarried) males. Older males—even half a generation removed—do not evidence sharp changes in ideology or behaviors, irrespective of attachments. Such stasis maintains homosocial strictures imposed by orthodox masculinity on making and keeping friends.

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newer data, are reported and referenced in Cigna, News and Insights (2022). *The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness in the U.S.*

Accounting for generational distinctives here are life event changes, work, marriage and family involvements, all factors reported to influence men *letting go of friendships*—of the type these enjoyed at earlier ages and with more abandon, thus dwindling the cohort of personal friends and lessening the time men spend with each other. Despite such factors, Gen Z appears more volitional and directed in seeking out and making friends than earlier generations. It remains to be seen, however, if Gen Z remains a primary catalyst for change, or if its novel efforts at male intimacy get subsumed by staid ways of being and doing over time—with work, marriages, and family.

Reported accounts in both directions, change and stasis, friendship seeking and friendship loss, are true despite the seeming discordances: that some men are changing, others are not, and that both have lost friendships regardless of the age cohort in question, are all factually correct. There are significant shifts in the way masculinity is identified and played out; but while these are definitive generational distinctions, Western men overall have still not achieved a level of homosociability that would lessen the inured homosocial cautions traditionally in place which affect how men construct their lives together. This continued hesitancy is most evident among American young men, who want that *bro*-intimacy, but still feel suspect about public demonstrations of *bud*-closeness. Overall, Western men remain with a loss of male friendships, and thus "lonely" for additional male companionship.

What About Christian Men?

Do these exhibit any changes to hegemonic masculinity tropes? Are these "any better off" because of their faith, the doctrine of loving your brother as yourself? What, if anything, does the literature report on Christian male friendships? Are these missing out also, or cashing in on a Christian version of *bro culture*?

Long Shadows, P(f)ew Relations, and Stained Glass Ceilings

There are recent and plentiful writings on male Christian friendships in the West, from Wesley Hill's *Spiritual Friendship* (2015) to Jon Bloom's *Man Among Men* (2021), all of which repeat the dire state of male friendships *in the church as well*—and regardless of age.[14] Hill asks in a *Christianity Today* article, "Why Can't Men be Friends?" (2014). Other writers also underscore a continued difficulty by Christian men in making friends: the "loneliness epidemic", male fears of intimacy, their seeming inability to share emotions, being seen by other guys as weak if they do; all the traditional pivots of orthodox masculinity; and the list goes on (Nicoletti, 2010, 2019). Men get the blame and blame themselves for not being capable of male friendship—and here, their Christian culture *is* implicated.

Culbertson's 1997 analysis of Christian men's friendships may seem chronologically dated, but on close examination, is completely relevant to today's male predicaments.[15] Reading Culbertson accentuates a sad fact, that "certain influences in Christian theology . . . continue to keep [close] friendship between men a near-impossibility, even with the increasing influence of the men's movement" (150). I review these "influences in Christian theology" because of their long shadow-casting over centuries, and still today.

Long Shadows Cast by Theology

Perhaps one of the longest shadows falls on Jonathan and David and their friendship (1 Samuel 13 to 2 Samuel 1). The persistent question is how can such intimacy of friendship *not* be suspected as homosexual in nature? According to Culbertson (1997 152, 171), patristic writers ". . . struggled with the same issue: how can two adult men develop an intimate relationship that went beyond any taint of suspicion, when protagonist David recalls it as far superior in virtue to the marital relationship between a man and a woman?" (Culbertson, 152; *vide* Boswell 1981).

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[14] A survey through Google Scholar on articles in Christian journals, magazines, church newsletters, and published sources reiterate what we hear in society at large: Men are in dire straits when it comes to friendships. There is an acknowledgement in many writings that the Christian male is not impervious to the friendship void, and that in fact, the community of the church isn't really providing adequate means for men to reconnoiter and garner more intimate friends.

[15] See also John Boswell's (1981) *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.*

The 'seed of doubt' planted early in church theology and culture about sex continues in the nervousness we Christians have regarding, specifically, *male sexuality:* Any male-male relationship that becomes privatized, as in intimate friendships male-to-male, raises our fear because we have been taught to fear both male behavior and male sexuality "as though either may spin out of control at any moment" (Culbertson 152; *vide* Nicoletti 2019).

Lurking within this fear is the homophobia. Even though the term "homosexual" was not coined until 1869 (Beachy 2010, 807),[16] and "homophobia" did not crystallize as a term till 1960 (McCormack 2013, 35),[17] fear of men moving into 'male genital intimacy' with one another was biblically well stated from Genesis on; written against in the historical church canon; certainly cautioned about repeatedly by the time monasticism was established. The term *prospatheia* (avoiding feelings of partiality to another) was used by St. Basil to caution against high affectation toward another male monastic brother—which could lead to intimacies of a sexual nature if one wasn't careful.[18]

Theological control of male intimacy via ensuing homohysteria set the stage for safeguarding men from homosexuality, and generating a theology and culture of male friendship that of necessity required spiritualization (*vide* Dreyer 2007). Aiding and abetting was the need to theologically sublimate the spiritual nature of man vs his carnal nature. To briefly explain how such necessity impacts male friendship, we must turn to Augustine and his doctrinal contributions to our sinful nature.

One of Augustine's main thesis centers on *originale peccatum:* that the body was 'by nature' sinful because one is born in "original sin" (i.e., all human beings are born *culpably misrelated* to God)—the disquieting result of Adam and Eve's fall from grace (*Confessions*

8:12). For Augustine, it is this consternation with *his own flesh*, the irrepressible sexual impulse and inability to rein in his penis' seeming self-will that consistently leads him to equate this *peccatum* with the corruption inherent in male sexuality (Freeman, 2012; Stanley, 2006). In his *Confessions* Augustine repeatedly, and through a large number of autobiographical chapters bemoans his own "unquiet, *concupiscent* sexuality"—a carnal eroticism he (and presumably all men) found uncontrollable (see also *City of God* 14, 16-19). It plagued him until he took on monastic vows of chastity for the priesthood; vows which he eventually did keep (*Confessions* 10:41).

Such personal struggles set the stage for separating and dissociating male bodies, their "insatiable lasciviousness" (*Confessions* 6, 161) from their spiritual soul. The soul of man can be redeemed in the here and now, even if he continually has to safeguard himself from his flesh. As Augustine draws conclusions which enable male friendships, he argues these must come to symbolize Christ's own supreme friend-model: sinless in body, engaging acts of benevolence and hospitality, responsibility to others, and self-sacrifice. We thus see a culture of friendship centered on living out *brotherly* love through selfless acts toward *many* others, which then fulfills the "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" mandate (Leviticus 19:18) and protects you from *prospatheia*. To Culbertson, "Once male friendship was spiritualized, it was easily universalized" (1997, 165). I discuss more below.

Credit Augustine for moving another shadow into place here, one being cast by distinctions among and separations between *agape, philia,* and *eros,* the three common terms in Greek for love.[19] His definitions and usage lend credence to his ideas that male friendships needed to be protected from putting too much affection or love on another (in this case, another male.)

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[16] K. M. Kertbeny, often cited as Benkert in its Hungarian form, is said to have initially used the term "homosexual" (and also coined "heterosexual" as its opposite) in letters to his friend Karl Heinrich Ulrich. See Robert Beachy, "The German Invention of Homosexuality." *Journal of Modern History*, 2010, 82(4), 807.

[17] George Weinberg, a psychologist, is attributed to first using the term "homophobia" in the 1960's, but the term did not appear in print until 1969. This, although the aversion toward, and fear of, homosexuality was already culturally entrenched in the West.

[18] St. Basil is well known for not only his theological, trinitarian contributions but also for his laborious organization of ascetic communities, laying down a series of "long rules" for male monastic communities to live by. See Claudio Moreschini, "Basil of Cesarea." Chapter 15 in Anna Marmodoro and Sophie Cartwright (eds.) (2018), *A History of Mind and Body in Late Antiquity.*

[19] For elaboration, see footnotes 47 through 49.

Augustine had many male friends, and describes these friendships with endearing language (*Confessions*, 8:4). However, reading Augustine carefully, especially after the death of his closest friend Nebridius plunges him into deep and prolonged despair, is the repeated admonition that to place much love on another self-same can supplant one's love for God, which should be paramount (*Confessions,* 4:4; 4:6-12). In other words, *agape* toward God cannot be diminished by the energy of any *philia* invested toward another; and cannot supersede the *agape* expressed toward God, it being paramount. Thus, for a man to love (*philia)* another man, such love must be free from any taint of pleasure—emotional or platonic—hence, free from any love-driving force (*eros)* and thus, in this 'divine economy,' avoid any element of over-affection.

In this format, *eros* is segregated from *philia,* and certainly from the purest form of love, *agape.* In rendering the terms in such contexts, Augustine ignores the connections of love forms in Greek ideology of love.[20] To love neighbor, friend, as 'self' is not through increased intimacy of souls, what we've called "same-self mates," "soul-mates," "*bro*-buds" today—these are carnal and perish; but rather through loving acts which do not include *prospatheia.* Culbertson rightly concludes that in this theological framework, *eros*—the substrate force which rouses, which calls us to union and creation—is dehumanized by this division, rendering *philia* devoid of its animus.[21]

Augustinian theology thus casts a long shadow on any men who, via their platonic closeness could be suspected to be "perverse."[22] Further, relegating *agape* to the spiritual and *philia* to social duty, constructs lexical distinctions which keep men under control and conformed.[23] This platonic tying of good moral behavior to action is the result of *choice* and carried out by *will power.* Surrendering your will to Christ, then, makes God's will the centerpiece of choice. Thus, being in intimate friendship doesn't mean self-same emotional closeness; rather, it means giving up your will, energies, life for another (Jesus is the model here). Men continue to become by *doing* and not by *being,* certainly *not by being in relationships of the heart with other men.*[24] Augustinian theology is all

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[20] This separation ignores Greek ideology of love, which saw these expressions related along a continuum and not as separate categories. In Greek thinking, there is the assumption that a feeder *eros* motivates the passions to then embrace the platonic other in *philia,* and ultimately enervate higher forms of devotion and duty in love as *agape.* This is the Platonic refinement of the connections. See Plato (1973), *The Symposium.* Translated by Walter Hamilton. Such thinking gets significantly altered by Augustine. See John Wallace (n/d), *Interpreting Love Narratives,* "Early Greek Philiaophy," 25:4.

[21] *Eros*—to Augustine, is a carnal element (not just an animating force of our nature), which he fought mightily against, thus a debased and dehumanized form of passion due to sinfulness which was the root of all of Augustine's carnality—his "concupiscence." And, while Augustine wrote enough about the benefits of friendships—and he did have cherished friends—his ultimate prescriptions are not at all what we would call intimate in emotionality nor in platonic physicality. Through his writings we see friends and friendships increasingly described by serving one another, not self-involved with one another; and together, always serving God. After the loss of Nebridius, friend of the heart, Augustine's teachings on friendship aim to guard the person from heartbreak, and any codependent 'idolatry.'

[22] This platonic and loving closeness Augustine had with Nebridius, of which he writes emotionally, he himself attempts to redact in his later letters. It seems by close reading of *Confessions* 4:11, where Augustine explains his grief at the death of his friend, that his reference in this text to two Greek characters (friends in the 5th century tragedy *The Libation Bearers of Aecschylus*) alludes to erotic longings between him and Nebridius—given that Orestes and Pylades were Greek lovers. (All the more the need to insure *prospatheia* would not occur in male friendships.) See also Matteusz Strozynsky (2019), "Augustine on Loving Too Much. Friendship and the Fall of the Soul in *Confessions.*"

[23] Let's recall Plato placed an exceptionally high value on the exertion of the *will,* and thus asserts the benefits of discipline are measured by the degree of will power one can marshal. He posits morality as the soul being confronted by choices, with the better men, "men of spirit," making the more difficult choices that require will power to conform the body and mind. *Agape* becomes that level of spiritual willpower love. See John Wallace (as above in footnote 20).

[24] A generous example of this thinking is John Cuddleback's recent (2021) book, *True Friendship: When Virtue Becomes Happiness.* Cuddleback combines Platonic virtue with the wisdom of St. Aelred to generate an Aristotelian guide of virtuous living by, again, *doing* for a friend, and not by *being at one* with a friend.

about selfless service, selfless love *that has no affective attachments.*

Marriage and Shadows

One more long shadow needs discussion, the one cast by marriage. To be objective here, how marriage intersects with friendships is a concern older than Christianity, of course; yet Christian views on marriage and marital oneness do affect how Christian men in particular negotiate their male friendships—before they are married, and most certainly afterwards.

Contemporary articles as well as earlier literature detail the historical process by which Western men "lose friends" as they move from singleness and male groups to marriage and the requisites of familial life (Anthony 2022; Reeves 2023). The powerful attraction of marriage in Christianity, and the bond it creates in the "one flesh" ideal—freely sexually erotic at that— becomes the bond into which men are encouraged to invest most deeply. Rightly so. Over time, the marital bond influences and often directs male friendships, sometimes at the *cost* of male friendships—a cost which most women *do not pay* when they marry (Anthony 2022; Fiori et al. 2018).[25]

The sense of "competition" between a man's male friendships and his marriage, i.e., competition with his (best) friend, his wife, points to male sociality after marriage often being governed by the wife (Gomillion et al. 2014). Such usually means curtailment of the husband's male friendships in exchange for *married couples* with whom the wife gets along. This point, the literature well confirms (Hamlett 2019; Anthony 2022; Fiori et al. 2018; Kalmijn 2003): Purely dyadic/ exclusive male friendships are difficult at best for men to sustain after marriage, and often non-negotiable if these pit time away from spouse and family to cultivate

bro-intimacy and time together (Gomillion et al. 2014). A Gen X Christian psychologist friend confided,

> When I got married, I set out to keep a couple of my intimate male friendships intact. I can tell you that eventually this took us [spouse and self] into many strong discussions of how my time was being used. I've had to carefully but steadily be convincing that these are essential relationships in my life, and without them, I would be less of who I am. But it's taken time and a lot of will power to get here. . .[26]

In the U.S., most men by their later thirties or early forties, married, with children, have virtually given up old friendships and are mostly with acquaintances fostered through work or the marital filter (Cox 2021b). *Bud*-intimacy, or a close personal friend increasingly disappear from the male's social world— and this is also true in the world of the church (James 2021). He is lucky to find a companion at the gym, or running track, or at work and with whom he can enjoy an occasional lunch. Any intimacy usually takes a third seat here.

P(f)ew Relationships and Stained Glass Ceilings.

In many church contexts, it is the *woman* who is invited by programs and venues into friendships and encouraged to do the one-on-one: "meet friends," and "make friends." Men are mostly encouraged into Bible studies (attending or leading them—see below), competitive sports, work-related venues of service or missional in nature (James 2021).

At church, the mid-week men's group is not about building *bud*-intimacy, but about whatever biblical topic takes the hour, and whatever ramblings take up the half hour before or thereafter. If any of these meet-ups happen, *men don't talk intimately,* nor do they

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[25] Women tend to keep intimate friends when they marry. Some of these may go back decades, to childhood, adolescence, college, etc. Others are *made while married.* Women often *keep up* these friendships via social dates, lunches, or other activities which have been enjoyed for years. Such activities are never seen as more than friendship, or sexually suspect, or robbing time from other responsibilities. As a matter of course, it is culturally expected for women to *keep their intimate friends* and *do things with friends*—who are often stated to "relieve them" from household, work, or other requisites which married life brings. Few men complain about women taking time with friends—it is expected that these should be cultivated: *"Isn't that what women do?"* (Chandler 2019, 2).

[26] This psychologist is keen on understanding the necessity for men to have intimate friendships with male friends. He confirms this is a widespread problem—i.e., negotiating the spouse's understanding of such a necessity for men, and overcoming what appear to be suppositions if not stereotypes, that men don't 'have' the kind of friends that women do: intimate, close, and personal. (Personal conversations, April, 2023.)

presume their relationship with other males will go any further than the mutual moments shared in these spaces. Perpetuation of a rather orthodox masculinity in Christian culture continues the superficiality of male friendships through church events (McCormick 2021). Fortunately, some Christian males are noticing and writing about the dearth of male friendships *in Christian circles* (again, see Hill 2015; Bloom 2021; McCormick 2021; James 2021).

The church has historically cultivated *male packs* if these are institutionalized, sometimes ritualized, and bounded in some way. For most males, these are 'pew relationships'—*'Sure, I know Ralph. He's in my men's group. We talk sometimes.'* Think of men's activities fostered by the church that it agreeably supports: the once-a-month men's breakfast, men's yearly retreat; and yes, the men's mid-week 'study group.' All are public and predictable in outcomes. James (2021) believes men's gatherings are thought of *instrumentally:* they are to be valued to the extent that they represent opportunities to do the "real" stuff of studying the Bible, or praying, *or doing.* What matters in men's events is *being productive:* programming events and groups so that men are free to come, download the content or do the work, and leave efficiently (2).

It is predictable also, that such forms of male socializing do not result in deep friendships, or friendships of the sort that can be cultivated in *other spaces* and lead to male-male closeness. By their very own testimony in studies, articles and books, Christian men confirm these church relationships do not yield growing or abidingly deep friendships between participants (Bloom 2021; Hill 2015; James 2021; McCormick 2021). *Why not?*

McCormick (2021) suggests these are not the "third spaces" that can cultivate the sort of "common horizons" that foster *time one-on-one,* or *one-on-one conversations,* and thus opportunities for more than acquaintances to happen (3). Church culture provides little opportunity for men getting to emotional sharing, much less for vulnerable conversations to happen in dyads among these. (If these happen, they do so within the context of a group meeting, which can then turn the session into an impromptu *Al-Anon* type moment.) The programming just doesn't encourage men to *form dyads*—so awkward for men, so familiar to women—when having social gatherings.[27]

To begin transforming this shortcoming, McCormick (2021) rightly suggests we become cognizant of the culturally constructed, gender-specific ways that men bond; and then construct *third spaces* where more than just common interests can be birthed, conversations of the type which can open men up to form dyadic friendships (3). Churches could stop filling a program and allow men to couple-up by giving them time and permission to just mingle among themselves—and in dyads. Then, sharing a horizon (i.e., themes that allow for the type of social conversation-starters over a topic, a familiar life moment, etc.) can pave the way for men to engage sociality and proffer likeability. I add, now that the neurobiology of male friendship formation is better known, fostering such *low-risk environments without competition* (i.e., aside from physical or athletic 'competitive' activities), and which promote appropriate neurohormonal responsiveness to the other, are suggestions worthy of inclusion and practice.[28]

Christian men also want, yet find restrictions on how to seek, a male relationship which is 'close' and which can feel intimate; one with some hoped-for permanence, given our need for lifelong friendship supports. We want that "friend that loves at all times" (Prov 17:17).

Yet a 'stained-glass ceiling' for men is still in place in the church, men not being helped in reaching deep connections with each other—because if these relationships aren't public (enough), structured (enough), it makes others—including some wives—feel nervous; men "spinning out of control at any moment

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[27] At any women's church event one will see women meeting up with friends, taking the time to break away from the group, often occupying a lone table or corner somewhere, and immediately involved in face-to-face life debriefings. It doesn't matter whether the event is a group one, or one of small social "round table" settings of the eight-or-less type. Women will find the time and space to reconnoiter with their friend and, if not seen regularly, make the time 'there and then', and mutually move to engage the personal. See Anthony Bradley, "American Evangelicalism Isn't Patriarchal or Feminized. It's Matrilineal." *Mere Orthodoxy,* August 26, 2020.

[28] Sam Woolfe, in his blog on masculinity and sociality suggests dyadic set-ups at lunches and dinners where men can 'couple up' vs. sitting in packs; two-member car rides to whatever events are taking place (vs. packing the car with 'guys'); and activities where men with similar interests can talk to another like-interested male. See Wolfe (2018), "On Masculinity and Male Bonding."

unless open to external controls" (Culbertson 1997, 171.) Unstated, yet deeply felt, this other "*problem that has no name*"[29] makes the private nature of close male friendships something the Western church finds inherently awkward, paradoxical to masculine Christian culture. [30] And we have much of our background theology affirming distrust of the male, his body, his sexuality—if not, his lack of self-control—to blame for that.

Conclusions

This has been a long piece, not by intention, but by necessity. Multiple factors play into our understanding of male friendships in contemporary Western cultures. Seeming contradictions in data reports—some highlighting essentialist changes in masculinity which are opening up male emotional friendships and thus bonding while others continue the decry the dearth of male friendships—can render confusing images of what is going on. This article has attempted to understand data reports in both directions, and suggests both are more than likely correct, yet only interpretable when one disaggregates their data and sees the facts at hand: Young generations are indeed changing masculinity tropes, allowing for greater variety of gender expressions and friendship bonds to occur. At the same time, middle-gens and older men continue to hold on to traditional elements of masculinity, sufficient to interfere with these gaining a more relaxed familiarity with same-self other males. All generations of Western men lose friends over time for many reasons, and this pattern is not limited to those married and/or involved with family responsibilities.

Regardless of aggregated or disaggregated data evidence, men, overall, are losing more friends than making friends; a concerning pattern. Some loss can be attributed—even in young generations—to shifts in work environments, remote work, communication styles that rely on media vs in-person exchanges, difficulties in the negotiation of male friendships after marriage, economic and occupational variables, and continuance of male friendship stereotypes—i.e., what a male friendship ought to represent and include.

This exploration has also taken time to examine how Christian men in particular are faring amidst the reported positive changes to masculinity, and the reported lack of friendships among all men. This was an important population exploration, given Christianity's doctrinal and cultural emphases on brotherhood, love and camaraderie.

We find Christian men, as variously reported in cited sources, faring no better at cultivating deep male friendships than the general population of Western men reported. The realization underscores the voiced illusion of some Christians—and their Christian congregations—of being intentional agents of intimacy and brotherhood. It perpetuates a syntactical means of keeping faith in our assumptions about how Christian norms and views facilitate friendships, rather than the cultural-doctrinal realities which still hinder men from being intimate with one another.

A deep dive here reveals historically assembled Christian doctrine and dogma also contributing to congregations of faith being tremulous about deep male friend relations. We find rationales about male sexual mistrust, as well as a continued emphasis on stereotypic masculinities; of male friendships; of prototypes of what male gatherings and leadership ought be like. In many ways, the Church resembles and oftentimes supports hegemonic masculinity tropes that further 'aid and abet' maintenance of stereotypic performances for such men of faith. [31] Christian men seeking alternatives experience the stained glass

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[29] The term is borrowed from Betty Friedan's (1963) revolutionary tome, *The Problem That Has No Name* (NY: Penguin-Random House). Here, the unnamed problem is noted as church-going men not being trusted with their emotional investments or time; nor being trustworthy to rely on themselves to monitor how their male-male relationships fit in to their lives when married. Men can only move 'up' so far with another male in the emotional scale before they encounter the 'ceiling limit'—of it seeming inappropriate; (here too) suspect of being homoerotic; or robbing the family, the spouse, of their time and affections.

[30] We have many examples, but to be extreme, read about Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church (Seattle), in Jennifer McKinney's (2023) *Making Christianity Manly Again: Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, and American Evangelicalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[31] Refer to Joshua Darwin's (2022) article, "TheoBros, Muscular Christianity, and Other Hyper-Masculine Nonsense." Retrieved from https://eagleandchildblog.wordpress.com/. See also Jennifer McKinney's (2023) *Making Christianity Manly Again: Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, and American Evangelicalism.* UK: Oxford University Press.

ceiling" (my label) of not being helped to move beyond casual friendships and into intimate ones with men in the faith. We find there are no *third spaces* enabled by the church for such to easily occur. We've described these issues collectively as "*another* problem that has no name."

Changing the current threshold of male loneliness will take mental agency as well as the power of intent. Human intentionality is required to both complete the task of reimagining masculinities as well as building, or rebuilding, intimate friendships. Men, of course, are hardly hapless victims in all this. Men need to awaken more to both—imagining healthier masculinities and friendships—lose the fear of one-upmanship, of intimacy, homophobia, while learning the joys of such alternatives. Women need to encourage their men to discover intimacy with their male friends, the type which most women have forever enjoyed with *their* female friends. Society at large, while changing, needs to "man down" on men, and allow alternative masculinities to emerge, coexist, and thrive. It will also take a different course of male socialization from infancy forward to achieve all this, one that finally does away with hegemonic models of masculinity. What is published and cited here all agree on this: male mental health and wellbeing will benefit immensely from the changes. So will Western society and culture. So will women, and all future male children who sex-gender-identify as male.

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