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Why men are in trouble

By William J. Bennett

Editor's note: William J. Bennett, a CNN contributor, is the author of "The Book of Man: Readings on the Path to Manhood." Bennett is the Washington fellow of the Claremont Institute. He was U.S. secretary of education from 1985 to 1988 and was director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President George H.W. Bush.

For the first time in history, women are better educated, more ambitious and arguably more successful than men. Now, society has rightly celebrated the ascension of one sex. We said, "You go girl," and they went. We celebrate the ascension of women but what will we do about what appears to be the very real decline of the other sex?

The data does not bode well for men. In 1970, men earned 60% of all college degrees. In 1980, the figure fell to 50%, by 2006 it was 43%. Women now surpass men in college degrees by almost three to two. Women's earnings grew 44% in real dollars from 1970 to 2007, compared with 6% growth for men.

In 1950, 5% of men at the prime working age were unemployed. As of last year, 20% were not working, the highest ever recorded. Men still maintain a majority of the highest paid and most powerful occupations, but women are catching them and will soon be passing them if this trend continues.

The warning signs for men stretch far beyond their wallets. Men are more distant from a family or their children than they have ever been. The out-of-wedlock birthrate is more than 40% in America. In 1960, only 11% of children in the U.S. lived apart from their fathers. In 2010, that share had risen to 27%. Men are also less religious than ever before. According to Gallup polling, 39% of men reported attending church regularly in 2010, compared to 47% of women.

If you don't believe the numbers, just ask young women about men today. You will find them talking about prolonged adolescence and men who refuse to grow up. I've heard too many young women asking, "Where are the decent single men?" There is a maturity deficit among men out there, and men are falling behind. This decline in founding virtues – work, marriage, and religion – has caught the eye of social commentators from all corners. In her seminal article, "The End of Men," Hanna Rosin unearthed the unprecedented role reversal that is taking place today. "Man has been the dominant sex since, well, the dawn of mankind. But for the first time in human history, that is changing – and with shocking speed," writes Rosin. The changes in modern labor – from backs to brains – have catapulted women to the top of the work force, leaving men in their dust.

Man's response has been pathetic. Today, 18-to- 34-year-old men spend more time playing video games a day than 12-to- 17-year-old boys. While women are graduating college and finding good jobs, too many men are not going to work, not getting married and not raising families. Women are beginning to take the place of men in many ways. This has led some to ask: do we even need men?

So what's wrong? Increasingly, the messages to boys about what it means to be a man are confusing. The machismo of the street gang calls out with a swagger. Video games, television and music offer dubious lessons to boys who have been abandoned by their fathers. Some coaches and drill sergeants bark, "What kind of man are you?" but don't explain.

Movies are filled with stories of men who refuse to grow up and refuse to take responsibility in relationships. Men, some obsessed with sex, treat women as toys to be discarded when things get complicated. Through all these different and conflicting signals, our boys must decipher what it means to be a man, and for many of them it is harder to figure out.

For boys to become men, they need to be guided through advice, habit, instruction, example and correction. It is true in all ages. Someone once characterized the two essential questions Plato posed as: Who teaches the children, and what do we teach them? Each generation of men and women have an obligation to teach the younger males (and females of course) coming behind them. William Wordsworth said, “What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how.” When they fail in that obligation, trouble surely follows.

We need to respond to this culture that sends confusing signals to young men, a culture that is agnostic about what it wants men to be, with a clear and achievable notion of manhood. The Founding Fathers believed, and the evidence still shows, that industriousness, marriage and religion are a very important basis for male empowerment and achievement. We may need to say to a number of our twenty-something men, “Get off the video games five hours a day, get y ourself together, get a challenging job and get married.” It’s time for men to man up.

— The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of William J. Bennett.

Notes

¹<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/04/opinion/bennett-men-in-trouble/index.html>