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A REVIEW ARTICLE

Robert Pyke

MIGHTY MAN OF GOD: A RETURN TO THE GLORY OF MANHOOD

Sam Laing

Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International (1999)

156 pages, paper, \$9.99

Discipleship Publications International is the publishing house for the Church of Christ, and Sam Laing is a Church of Christ pastor. He leads the Triangle Church in the Raleigh-Durham—Chapel Hill area of North Carolina. Author of *Be Still, My Soul*, Mr. Laing has also co-authored several other family-oriented books with his wife, Geri. Because the Church of Christ published this book, it will probably not be widely known in evangelical circles. It is being reviewed not because of its influence, but to alert readers to the subtle dangers often found in current Christian books arising out of the contemporary climate of confused evangelical theology.

The author stresses that God created men to thrill to the challenge of a great cause, to hunger to go out and do mighty deeds, and to bravely overcome adversity as mighty warriors for God. Mr. Laing wants to rouse Christian men from the sloth, mediocrity, and forgotten dreams to which they so easily succumb, so that they may set their sights and standards very high. Who could argue with that goal? It is

not the goal of this book, but the *motivation* and *means* driving the goal, which trouble me.

Mighty Man of God reads much like Promise Keepers literature. It is an inspiring call for men to band together in groups committed to pursuing radical Christian discipleship. One can easily be caught up by the book's appeal to lay aside the sin which so easily entangles, and become fired up to press on toward the mark of our high calling for which we are earnestly challenged to aim. Mr. Laing has high standards, a good deal of insight into human nature, and an infectious zeal. His velvet-gloved appeal for men to take Christian discipleship seriously also cleverly conceals the steel fist of works righteousness that drives it.

Mighty Man's genesis is found in a challenge Mr. Laing gave to the men of his church:

You are invited to a special meeting on Saturday, October 10, at 5:30 a.m. at the Triangle Church. I have some plans to present that will change your life and have a profound influence on the entire church. The inconvenience of the hour is by design. If you do not wholeheartedly desire to be there, please do not come. If you are late, turn around and go home. The doors will be locked at the beginning of the meeting and will not be opened until we finish one hour later.

The meeting will be with a handpicked group of men. I believe one of the greatest needs in the Kingdom of God today is for the men to rise up and become like the great men of God we read about in the Bible (9).

This appeal does not necessarily have to mean that the efforts at Christian discipleship which follow will be driven by works righteousness, but it set a tone at the book's outset that raised red flags for me. Elitism and pride seem to be mixed into this challenge, a strain that never recedes

throughout the book. Mr. Laing likens the men who accepted his challenge to King David's thirty mighty men mentioned in the Old Testament. The goal of his group was "to imitate the heart and deeds of David's mighty men." At its first meeting he laid out seven areas in which his men should seek to grow and excel. They were spirituality, family life, career, finances, benevolence, physical fitness, and fruitfulness. Each man was to make goals for himself in each of those seven areas. Any man who excelled in meeting his goals would be awarded a Mighty Man Sword (149).

Where does grace end and works begin? Mr. Laing makes no distinction between Old Testament promises to honor Israelite fidelity with material prosperity and victory over their enemies, and New Testament calls to Christ's discipleship where realization of the glory and might of that discipleship is rooted primarily in future expectation. Though Mr. Laing's goals seem to be spiritual, they are goals achieved by the flesh, through self-effort and willpower. A "just grit your teeth and obey" spirit permeates his exhortations. Through this self-effort, more disciplined lives are to be achieved. The appeal to, and reliance on, human willpower is difficult to show by quoting a single proof paragraph, for any single exhortation taken by itself looks like a strong challenge to obey God. But string challenge after challenge together, and make little or no mention of grace, and this spirit becomes clearer.

Here is one example of the above-mentioned approach to discipline taken from a chapter where Mr. Laing discusses learning to deal with emotions constructively:

A man controlled by fear must realize the impact his fear is having on him and on those close to him. Fear confines many a man to a life of small and limited influence. It also keeps him from enjoying life with his wife and children and from helping them to overcome their own fears. As a hus-

band and father, you are the head of your household. The leader in any situation is called upon to have courage and inspire it in others. When you are in the grip of fear, you are a weakening, discouraging influence on your family. Realize the problems you are causing under your own roof, and become a man of courage (87)!

Mr. Laing ends with an appendix devoted to listing the accomplishments of twenty-three of the men in his group. Here is a sample entry:

As a former sub-four-minute miler at North Carolina State University [member name], has reclaimed his running career: he has dropped two minutes of his 5K time and last year ran his first marathon in 3:30. He began the Triangle Running Club, which has over 100 members and sponsored its second annual 5K race in September 1998, with over 700 participants. He has also maintained an 18-pound weight loss. [He] recently made a career change that may result in a fifty-percent salary increase this year (155).

Other entries are similar:

He memorized and publicly recited the book of Philippians (155).

[He] organized an ongoing auto repair project to help single mothers, single women and the needy, in which he and other brothers in the church have completed over \$17,000 worth of labor for free (154).

He has lost 55 pounds and has learned to play golf, consistently shooting in the 80s. He is currently learning first-year, college level Greek (152-53).

He has had six or more visitors to church every Sunday of 1999 (155).

The accomplishments listed are commendable, often being disciplines or actions urged in the New Testament. But what about the motivation and the means? What *Mighty Man of God* is missing is grace. The author issues a noble, high-minded call, but he makes little provision for personal failure and shortcoming. There is no practical mention of the gospel in this book, for Mr. Laing does not discuss the fact that Another came and lived a perfect life in my place. He does not leave the sense that this One who has already satisfied a holy God now gives me his perfect record, empowering me in my brokenness and weakness to do through his power what I cannot do on my own. I can envision men who take this challenge seriously ending up in one of two places. Those who fail to measure up, once zeal and self-effort run dry, might well become more defeated and discouraged than before. Those who successfully achieve more obedient and disciplined lives could well become proud Pharisees who minister Law and not mercy to those whose lives they touch.

Author

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