

ACTS OF ADVOCACY



In Ukraine, Charlie visited a rehab home for men set up by a local Church. Their cure for addiction? The Gospel of Jesus Christ.



Greetings in Christ our Father!

Sorry the July newsletter is arriving in August! I had the final draft ready for delivery at the beginning of the month, but had some hesitancy about my take on the topic- Fatherhood.

This recent Father's Day had more significance than any that I can recall. First, I'm really excited to meet our new child in January. Maybe a little TOO excited- I didn't hesitate at all with posting our first ultrasound photo on Facebook, and didn't take into account that Miki might not want her uterus on display for the whole world to see! (Thankfully, she wasn't too concerned about this!) Second, I really miss my dad- and this is the farthest I have ever lived from him, so this year was hard. Finally, I spent some time considering what it means to be a father in Russia. I have to be honest, I am more confused now about the subject than when I began writing a month ago.

My initial draft was based on the premise that manhood, and fatherhood by default, had been crippled by 70 years of the Soviet Union. I made the assumption that due to Soviet suspicion many men were seen as a threat and were held back from their potential in order to lessen the ability to revolt. And over time, men were conditioned into a state of submission and were having a hard time shaking that mentality in the new semi-capitalistic Russia. I then connected this learned passivity to the alcoholism, violence and neglect that are common paths to the at-risk children that we love and minister to here in Saint Petersburg.

But something didn't feel right. I wondered if my assumptions were too simple; and that my words might do more harm than good. So I started asking people- Russians and Americans alike. Two things quickly became clear: I *had* oversimplified the path to current Russian manhood, and that I (and the other Americans with whom I spoke) seem to have a

hard time looking at Russians without inferring the Cold War. We in the west seem to forget that Russia was Russia for hundreds of years before a man named Lenin came around.

I'm starting to understand that manhood in Russia is a very different concept from the American one- and it was this way before the Revolution in 1917. I've recently learned that women have always been the breadwinners in the family (on top of feeding the family and raising the kids). In my opinion, they are (or are expected to be) "superwomen." Russian poets have celebrated these roles, Russian women take pride in it and many citizens don't see an issue with it.

So am I "tripping over my culture" here? Am I attempting to apply the American ideal of fatherhood to Russia? No doubt, and I'm grateful to those who helped clarify this to me through this topic. It was actually the decline of fatherhood in America that prompted me to consider its impact here. The fact is that 70% of inmates living in American prisons today lived in fatherless homes. So there are issues to face on both sides of the Atlantic. With manhood playing such a miniscule role in Russian society, it makes sense that fatherhood would follow that path as well. Many Russian men don't see any responsibility in raising their kids, and it undoubtedly impacts the lives of children here.

This reality is clear in Saint Petersburg. Women are the main workforce. This being the case, many women are either resentful towards their spouses or have minimal expectations of them. In my opinion, both attitudes are contributing to decline of families here. One of my Russian friends helping me with this explained it this way: "In Russian language, Fatherhood is a word very similar to fatherland. Being a good father is being loyal to your country and being a good citizen as well as being loyal to your family. You are so right when you say that women have little expectations of men here. It is so

Continued from page 1...

often that you can hear a Russian woman say: "Let him do whatever he wants. Its fine. As long as he doesn't start drinking again."

So that leads us to the issue of alcoholism. Alcohol is the great coping mechanism: Men with little expectations upon them drink because they can, and women drink to deal with the overwhelming workload they take on. More people are drinking today than in the last few years of the Soviet Union. In fact, a recent study revealed that since the Soviet collapse, 52% of deaths among Russians aged 15-54 are due to alcohol.

I often encounter scores of drunk middle-aged men on my way home from the metro station, and a few days ago Miki and I witnessed a domestic dispute on the street outside our flat. It took place in front of the small store on our corner- its main product being alcoholic beverages. Both the man and woman were very intoxicated. They would trade blows, stagger to gain their balance and do it all over again. Our first observation was that nobody on the street was trying to stop the fight, and we have since confirmed that its not customary to involve yourself in other people's affairs. From our vantage point it was apparent that the lady had had enough with the man's behavior, and all her rage and resentment came out right there on the street. I have little doubt that gender expectations impacted this situation. The man could care less that he put his spouse in this situation, and the wife seemed to be taking the whole burden by herself. I finally ran outside to do something when the man tackled her to the ground. By the time I arrived, she had left him bleeding on the curb. I watched her walk down the street in tears- I had no idea what to do.

This event serves as a somber example of the brokenness of manhood here in Russia. It is a complex struggle that plays a direct role in the large amount of orphans and street kids that live in the country. Many street kids are running from violent adults such as that feuding couple, and many of the disabled orphans we see were born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

There are Biblical fathers that we all can turn to. Abraham was chosen by God to "train his children and future family to observe God's way of life, live kindly and generously and fairly...". Eli pleaded with his sons to stop sinning against God. Job prayed for the sins of his children-sins he didn't even know of. Jesus talked about His Father loving him and including Him in everything. "The Son can't independently do a thing, only what He sees the Father doing."

For many children this is simply not happening.

The Lord has put Russian fatherhood on my heart, and I honestly don't know how to go about it. And pondering this has triggered questions about our current ministry: When we minister to at-risk kids and they ask why we're here and we tell them that our Father called us to love them, are we causing more confusion than

comfort? Their reference of fatherhood (if any) does not paint a comfortable picture when we tell them about "our Father, Who art in Heaven." Why would they trust someone who puts their trust in *a father*? It troubles me to think about it.

So what should we as the Body do? We should pray proportionate to the struggle, which means A LOT. Pray that the Holy Spirit provides direction as to how we can begin working on this fatherhood project. Pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal to you how you can participate. This will probably sound like a broken record to many of you, but **we need men to come and help us minister to these kids.** You are the key to opening their eyes to what a godly man looks like. Many of these kids were hesitant to interact with me initially because of my gender, but they had to learn to trust me first before considering opening their hearts to another man named Jesus. Imagine the privilege of being the individual who helps breaks down those barriers of fear, anger, sadness, emptiness, regret, suffering and sin. Imagine the day when a child you simply played with opens up just enough to see our Father. When your wives and sisters talk about visiting orphans in Russia, please don't push aside the possibility that you should join them on the journey.

Finally, now would be a good time to make sure you know that are are lots of amazing Russian men here. It's not my intention to insinuate that manhood here is hopeless. I have had the privilege of meeting and working with Russian men of compassion, integrity and passion for service- believers and non-believers alike. I pray that they become beacons of light in this fog of confusion that is fatherhood- Here and in America.

Peace to you in Christ!

**Charlie
(and Miki and Isabel!)**



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