



THE TOXIC WAR ON MASCULINITY

HOW CHRISTIANITY RECONCILES THE SEXES



NANCY R. PEARCEY

Bestselling author of *Love Thy Body*

THE TOXIC WAR ON MASCULINITY

How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes

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If the saga of a nation is the saga of its families written large,
then the saga of a family is the saga of its men written large.

Tony Evans

pastor and president of the Urban Alternative



The central problem of every society is to define
appropriate roles for the men.

Margaret Mead

anthropologist

Contents

Introduction: Why I Wrote This Book 13

1. “Why Can’t We Hate Men?” 17
Two Scripts for Masculinity

Part One: The Good News about Christian Men

2. Progressive Patriarchs 35
How Christian Men Shatter the Stereotypes
3. The Paradox of Christian Marriage 51
What Christians Really Think about Headship

Part Two: How the Secular Script Turned Toxic

4. Pioneers and Puritans 71
When Men Followed the Call of Duty
5. Manhood in the Machine Age 87
Why the Masculine Script Started Turning Toxic
6. Are Women Superior? 105
When Women Were Put on a Pedestal
7. “Taming” Men 123
How the Reform Movements Let Men off the Hook
8. The Wild Child 139
How the Industrial Revolution Created Fatherless Boys

9. Your Inner Barbarian 161
When Americans Embraced the Secular Guy Code
10. “Have We a Religion for Men?” 177
How Muscular Christianity Sought to Save Manliness
11. Beating Up on Fathers 191
Why Is Dad Always the Dimwit?
12. Bringing Fathers Back 211
Fix the Workplace, Fix Your Family

Part Three: When Christian Men Absorb the Secular Script

13. The Power of Men 229
It Takes a Man to Save His Marriage
14. A Cure for Marital Cancer 249
Healing Abuse in Christian Families

Epilogue: A Tribute to Manhood 269

- Acknowledgments 271
- Study Guide 273
- Notes 291
- Illustrations Credits 329
- Index 333
- About the Author 343

Introduction

Why I Wrote This Book

I had two fathers: a Public one and a Private one.

I loved and admired my Public father. He was a respected university professor with a strong work ethic. He was willing to pay the steep tuition costs for all six of his children to attend a Lutheran elementary school. On Sundays, he made sure we were all neatly lined up in church at the front of the sanctuary. Dad was ambitious, intelligent, and charming.

My Private father was a completely different man. At home he frequently went into rages that terrorized the entire family: shouting, punching, and kicking. He would call us pigs and stupid idiots. He was quite open about his violence, saying, “Do this or I’ll beat you.” Then he carried through on his threats. His favorite tactic was the knuckle fist—the knuckle of the middle finger slightly extended to create a sharper stab of pain as he punched us. He was careful to hit us where the bruises would be covered by our clothing, so that no one at school or church ever suspected. Watching my siblings get beaten was as traumatic as experiencing it myself.¹

When I was in first grade, I was still sucking my thumb (an obvious sign of anxiety). My father frequently berated me about it, telling me he did not want to put out the money for braces. One day he took me into the kitchen, put my hand on a cutting board, took out the largest butcher knife he could find, and held it above my thumb. “Do you want me to cut it off? No? Then stop sucking it.”

By the time I was eight, I had such chronic stomach pains that I was taken to the hospital for a battery of tests. The doctors found no physiological cause, so they prescribed a tranquilizer. One night I forgot to take my dose on time and my father flew into a rage. I ran into the kitchen and began gulping down my meds (it was a green liquid), but my father followed and started kicking me from behind.

Note the irony: He was physically abusing me for not taking the tranquilizer that I needed because of his physical abuse.

My brothers and sisters and I never knew which father would come home at night. Would it be Public father, the fun man who led family devotions and took us on walks in the woods behind our house? Or would it be Private father, the domineering tyrant who raged and shouted and punched us, leaving us with a legacy of terror? Would it be Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde?²

About halfway through high school, I abandoned my childhood religious upbringing. Not surprisingly, given my experience with my father, I was drawn irresistibly to the feminist movement, devouring all the classic books from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, and many more.

Later, while living in Europe, I stumbled across L'Abri, the ministry of Francis Schaeffer in Switzerland. (We had lived in Europe when I was young, and I had gone back.) At L'Abri, for the first time I discovered that there exists something called Christian apologetics, and I was stunned. I had no idea that Christianity could be supported by logic and reasons and good arguments. Eventually I found the arguments persuasive and I reconverted to Christianity.

Yet that was only the beginning of a decades-long process of spiritual and psychological healing from my father's abuse. (I tell the story in chapter 14.)³ Along the way, I also had to rethink feminism. When the #MeToo movement swept the nation, I heard many stories that sounded horrifyingly familiar—stories of men who projected an impressive image in public but were monsters in private. It would have been easy for me to join the media chorus condemning *toxic masculinity*. But as a Christian, I had to acknowledge that what God has created is intrinsically good. It is sin that has distorted and twisted his original good creation. The real problem is not an inherent flaw in masculinity itself. It's that American society has become secularized and has lost the biblical vision of manhood.

So in a sense, I've been writing this book my entire life. As a little girl, I wondered how a man could sometimes be so wonderful and at other times so cruel. As an adult, I have had to spend literally decades thinking through how to define a healthy, biblical concept of masculinity. What is the God-given pattern for manhood? How did Western culture lose it? And how can we recover it?

That's what this book is about.

Just the Facts

In this book, I take a "show, don't tell" approach, blending historical and sociological facts with personal stories and anecdotes.

Part 1 starts with the good news. Many people assume that most theologically conservative men are patriarchal and domineering. But sociological studies have refuted that negative stereotype. Compared to secular men, devout Christian family

men who attend church regularly are more loving husbands and more engaged fathers. They have the lowest rates of divorce. And astonishingly, they have the lowest rate of domestic violence of any major group in America (chapters 2 and 3).

This research is largely unknown, and even Christians are surprised to learn about it. The evidence shows that Christianity has the power to overcome toxic behavior in men and reconcile the sexes—an unexpected finding that has stood up to rigorous empirical testing. We should be bold about bringing it into the public square.

Part 2 takes us on a fascinating excursion into history to ask why the secular world gets masculinity so wrong. How did the notion arise that masculinity is toxic? To counter secular views, we have to ask where they came from and how they developed. Masculinity itself is not toxic, but history shows that the secular script for masculinity has grown narrow and one-sided, focused on traits like dominance and entitlement (chapters 4 through 12).

Since the rise of feminism, whole libraries of books have been written on the history of women but very few on the history of ideas of manhood. As a result, much of what you read in these chapters will be new and surprising. To keep the book to a readable length, I will limit the scope to American history (though similar patterns hold around the globe). An advantage to starting with early America is that social norms at the time were largely influenced by Christianity. This period thus gives us a benchmark to measure the decline of manhood ideals as Western culture became secular.

What happens when Christian men absorb the secular script for masculinity? Part 3 looks at what sociology has uncovered about men who identify as Christian but whose views of manhood are derived from the surrounding secular culture (chapters 13 and 14). Most of these men are nominal Christians, which means they are not particularly devout and attend church rarely if at all. They are prone to pick up terms like *headship* and *submission* but interpret them through a secular lens of power and control. Surprisingly, research has found that nominal Christian men have the *highest* rates of divorce and domestic violence—even higher than secular men.

These numbers are staggering: They tell us that men who claim the Christian *label* often exhibit worse *behavior* than men who are outright secular. Nominal men skew the statistics, creating the false impression that evangelical men as a group are abusive and domineering.

If Christians hope to offer the world a credible solution to toxic behavior in men, they must demonstrate that Christianity has the power to address it first of all among those within the church's own orbit of influence. The Bible calls men to be both tough and tender, both courageous and caring. Men who know they are made in God's image can be full persons, reflecting all the rich dimensions of God's own character.

“Why Can’t We Hate Men?”

Two Scripts for Masculinity

The report of a mass shooting in a bar in Thousand Oaks, California, in 2018 was more than a news account of a crime. It was also a story of two young men.

The killer was twenty-eight-year-old Ian David Long, a college dropout, former Marine, unemployed, divorced, living with his mother. He knew that the Borderline Bar and Grill held a weekly college night when it would be crowded with young people. He entered the bar dressed in black, a hood pulled over his head. Tossing smoke grenades into the crowd to create confusion, he drew out a pistol with a laser sight and started shooting. A sergeant from the sheriff’s office rushed over to help, but the shooter was waiting for him. After killing the sergeant and twelve other people, Ian shot himself.

In the crowd that night was another young man, twenty-year-old Matt Wennerstrom, who emerged as the hero of the hour. Sporting a backward baseball cap and a scruffy beard, Matt looked like a typical college student. But what he did was not at all typical.

As soon as shots began booming through the bar, he and about seven other young men grabbed as many people as they could and pushed them under a pool table for cover. Then they piled their own bodies over them to protect them from the hail of gunfire. One woman, who was celebrating her twenty-first birthday at the bar that night, told reporters afterward, “There were multiple men who got on their knees and pretty much blocked all of us with their back toward the shooter, ready to take a bullet for any single one of us.”

When the shooter paused to reload, Matt and his friends threw bar stools through a back window and began shepherding people outside. Repeatedly, the young men rushed back into the bar to steer more people to safety.

How did Matt have the presence of mind to respond so quickly to danger? When a reporter at the scene of the crime asked that question, the young man replied, “My life is taken care of. I know where I’m going if I die, so I was not worried to sacrifice.”¹

Two young men. One used his masculine strength to take lives. The other used his masculine strength to save lives.

When the American Psychological Association (APA) issued its first ever guidelines for counseling men and boys in 2018, it denounced “traditional masculinity ideology” as “psychologically harmful.”² But which of the two young men at the bar that terrifying night exhibited “traditional” masculinity?

Not the shooter.

Mass murder is not what anyone considers “traditional” masculine behavior. Yet groups like the APA have injected the phrase *toxic masculinity* into the bloodstream of America’s public discourse. The phrase has become a catchall explanation for male sexism, dominance, aggression, and violence.

Few people are really claiming that *all* masculinity is toxic. Yet the message men often hear is that there is something inherently defective in the male character. Many men today feel discouraged, devalued, and demoralized. When I told my class at Houston Christian University that I was writing a book on masculinity, a male student shot back, “What masculinity? It’s been beaten out of us.”

When masculinity itself is portrayed as a problem, the implication is that the solution is emasculation.

The *Christian Science Monitor* asks, “Are men being held hostage by culture war labels and stereotypes that blame them rather than help them?”³ In a culture that increasingly blames men, it’s time to find ways to help them instead. Because of testosterone, men are typically larger, stronger, and faster than women. In general, they are also more physical, more competitive, and more risk-taking. We need to affirm these God-given traits as good when used to honor and serve others.

The APA guidelines make a point of noting that most mass shooters are male, but they overlook the controlled power and aggression used by the heroic men who have *stopped* mass shooters. Masculine traits are not intrinsically toxic; they are good when directed to virtuous ends. In a fallen world, the lawful application of coercive force is sometimes necessary to defend the innocent.

Yet we all know that the male strength that makes a man a protector can be distorted and turn him into a predator. The drive to achieve can become egoism and self-seeking. The leadership impulse can be twisted into an impulse for domination and control. In *Play the Man*, Washington, DC, pastor Mark Batterson says, “The image of God is our original software, sin is the virus.”⁴

The challenge is to sort out *which* definitions of manhood are part of the original software and which are the virus. Which belong to God’s original design and which are products of sin?

Software or Virus?

We might say societies hold two competing scripts for what it means to be a man. Sociologist Michael Kimmel highlights the contrast with an ingenious experiment.⁵ He started by asking cadets at West Point what it means to be a good man. If someone delivers a eulogy and says, “He was a good man,” what does that mean? The cadets had no trouble answering: “Honor, duty, integrity, sacrifice, do the right thing, stand up for the little guy, be a provider, be a protector.” Be responsible, be generous, give to others.

“Where did you learn that?” Kimmel asked. The cadets answered, “It’s everywhere. It’s our culture . . . it’s the Judeo-Christian heritage. It’s the air we breathe.” Men seem to be innately aware of the software that God has coded into the male character.

Kimmel then asked a follow-up question: “What does it mean if I tell you, ‘Man the f*** up! Be a *real* man.’”

The cadets shouted, “Oh no, that’s completely different.” To be a *real* man means to be “tough, strong, never show weakness, win at all costs, suck it up, play through pain, be competitive, get rich, get laid.”

Kimmel has posed the same two questions to thousands of boys and young men in countries across the globe—from single-sex schools in Australia to a police academy in Sweden to former soccer stars at FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association)—and he virtually always gets the same answer. Men everywhere seem to experience tension between what they themselves define as the good man and the way the surrounding culture pressures them to be a *real* man. They sense the contradiction between the software and the virus.

Borrowing from Kimmel’s experiment, let’s give them labels: the Good Man versus the “Real” Man.

It’s not that every trait listed as the “Real” Man is necessarily bad. In a crisis, for example, we need men (and women) who can stand tough and not collapse in tears. But that is meant to be a short-term strategy, not a way of life. The problem with the stereotype of the “Real” Man is that it is one-sided. When separated from a moral vision of the Good Man, it can easily degenerate into sexism, dominance, entitlement, and contempt for those perceived as weak—traits we can all agree are toxic.

Of course, men do not respond well to being accused of being toxic—who would? A better course is to ask, How can we support men in aspiring to live out the ideal of the Good Man? Because men are made in God’s image, even those who are not Christian seem to understand that their unique masculine strengths are not intended to enable them to get whatever they want but to protect those they love—to provide, sacrifice, and, if necessary, fight for them.

As a result, when Christians promote a biblical moral vision—the Good Man—they are not imposing an alien standard on men. They are encouraging them to follow their own conscience, to be uncompromising in doing what they instinctively

know is right. As Paul writes in the book of Romans, people everywhere “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them” (2:15).

Our goal should be to support men in living out their innate sense of the biblical software—God’s original design for manhood. In *The War Against Boys*, feminist philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers writes, “History teaches us that masculinity without morality is lethal. But masculinity constrained by morality is powerful and constructive, and a gift to women.”⁶

But how did there come to be two competing scripts in the first place? Over the course of Western history, society has grown more secular—and so has its concept of masculinity. As a result, men increasingly feel pressure to live by the secular script of the “Real” Man. The most important conversation is not the one between men and women but the one carried out within men’s own heads between these two competing versions of manhood.

Ideally, the Good Man should also *be* the “Real” Man. But in today’s secular culture, the two have become decoupled. My goal in this book is to ask how the two scripts were split apart. We will be effective in countering the secular script for men only if we understand where it came from and how it developed.

By recognizing that there are two competing scripts, we can cut through many of today’s contentious debates over masculinity. This opening chapter begins by simply describing the problem. The word *masculinity* has become a trigger word that sets people off in all directions, making it difficult even to discuss the topic objectively. But a Christian worldview gives us the means to think critically about cultural trends. It provides a perspective that is “in the world but not of it” (John 17:14–19). A transcendent perspective empowers us to rise above the polarization—to push back against both extremes and consider a dispassionate account of the issues facing men today.

Misandry (Hatred of Males)

What *are* the issues facing men today? No one can deny that the public rhetoric against men has grown increasingly harsh and bitter—sometimes with good reason. Yet justified outrage against abuse has all too often degraded into ugly male-bashing. It has become socially acceptable to express open hostility against men even in respected media outlets.

The *Washington Post* ran an article by a gender studies professor titled “Why Can’t We Hate Men?” The *New Statesman* featured a British feminist writing, “You can’t hate all men, can you? Actually, I can. . . . As a class, I hate men.”⁷

A trendy hashtag is #KillAllMen. You can buy T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan, “So many men. So little ammunition.” Books have appeared with titles like *I Hate Men*, *The End of Men*, and *Are Men Necessary?*

Universities are hotbeds of anti-male sentiment. An article in *USA Today* says, “At today’s universities, masculinity is almost never discussed except in negative terms, usually with the word ‘toxic’ attached.”⁸

Even some men have taken to maligning their own sex. A male blogger writes, “Women Have a Right to Hate Men.” The author of the book *Refusing to Be a Man* says, “Talking about ‘healthy masculinity’ is like talking about ‘healthy cancer.’” The bestselling science fiction writer Hugh Howey tweeted, “Testosterone is the problem. . . . Women should be in charge of everything.”⁹

A media researcher named Jim Macnamara conducted an extensive content analysis of more than 2,000 mass media portrayals of men, including news, feature articles, talk shows, and so on. He found that more than 75 percent of all media representations of men portrayed them as “villains, aggressors, perverts, and philanderers.”¹⁰

How do we interpret these harsh, even overblown accusations? I suggest that people are protesting that too many men these days are acting out the secular script for the “Real” Man instead of the ideal of the Good Man. The virus has invaded the software.

#MeToo and #ChurchToo

The “Real” Man script was brought into sharp focus by the #MeToo movement. The public was shocked and repulsed to learn that many high-profile men were acting sexually entitled to a degree beyond anything most people had imagined. Names like Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and actor Bill Cosby are forever linked in the public mind to sexual assault. Perhaps the most revolting was the abuse of hundreds of young girls by the USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar.

And how did Jeffrey Epstein, the hedge fund billionaire, get away with trafficking young women for so many years—with the collusion of high-level celebrities and political figures?

Ironically, many of these men had posed as supporters of women’s rights. Weinstein had funded a gender studies professorship in Gloria Steinem’s name, attended the Women’s March, and produced a documentary about sexual assault.¹¹

But you don’t have to rely on the headlines. Just ask your friends and you are likely to hear stories that will break your heart. Cindy is a lawyer who works in a top-level position for a large city government. She told me that, until recently, it was common for male bosses to demand sex from female employees, adding, “It was only after the #MeToo movement that men began to be fired for requiring sexual favors.”

The church is not immune either. The #ChurchToo movement brought credible charges of abuse against superstar pastors like Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church and the internationally known apologist Ravi Zacharias.¹² The *Houston Chronicle*

ran a series of reports on sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches over a period of twenty years by pastors, deacons, youth pastors, Sunday school teachers and church volunteers. All together, they left behind more than 700 victims.¹³

In 2018, a poll by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that many church members think churches “are not responding well to issues of sexual harassment and assault”—40 percent of white evangelical Protestants, 51 percent of Black Protestants, and 71 percent of Hispanic Protestants.¹⁴

But again, just talk to women you know. One of my graduate students, Megan, belonged to a church that was blown apart when it was discovered that the pastor was using private “counseling” sessions to initiate sexual relations with several women. The pastor was convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison, then placed on the state sex offender list for life. Yet to this day, he insists that *he* was the real victim in the case.

Another student, Amelia, had a father who owned a large Christian bookstore and led a highly successful college-and-career Bible study at church. Over the years, he invited several emotionally troubled teen girls to live in their family home to “minister” to them. Later he paid their way through college and sometimes even bought them cars. Eventually he divorced his wife, and the ugly truth came out: He had been a sugar daddy to these young women. (As Amelia told me, “He did not pay *my* way through college or buy me a car, even though I was his daughter.”)

Predictably, the APA blames stories like these on what it calls “traditional” masculinity.¹⁵ But let’s call sexual abuse what it is: sin and immorality. It is not the original software; it is the virus.

We should not make the mistake of equating masculinity with men’s bad behavior. A biblical worldview tells us that men were originally created to live by the ideal of the Good Man, exercising traits such as honor, courage, fidelity, and self-control. A healthy society is one that teaches and encourages a God-centered view of masculinity.

“Repent, Abase Yourself”

On the other side of the debate, many men feel they are being labeled oppressors by the sheer fact of being male. A college student named Mike Chastain writes that he was once confronted by a female classmate who said, “You are a white privileged male. You have nothing to say, so just shut up and listen.”¹⁶ In the *Los Angeles Times*, Cathy Young writes,

Despite occasional lip service to the idea that feminism can liberate men too from patriarchal confines, most feminist discourse spends far more time bashing men. . . . Contemporary feminism’s main message to men is not one of equal partnership. Rather, it’s: Repent, abase yourself, and be an obedient feminist ally.¹⁷

In 2016, PRRI found that almost half of American men (46 percent) agree with the statement, “These days society seems to punish men just for acting like men.” And among Americans overall, almost four in ten (38 percent) agree that “discrimination against men has become as big a problem as discrimination against women.”¹⁸ Whether or not you agree, that is a large segment of the population who think men are now getting a bad deal.

Younger men, who are growing up surrounded by charges of toxic masculinity, are especially likely to feel defensive and defeated. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Erica Komisar writes, “In my practice as a psychotherapist, I’ve seen an increase of depression in young men who feel emasculated in a society that is hostile to masculinity.” Among male teens and young adults, a full 50 percent agree with the statement, “Feminism has gone too far and makes it harder for men to succeed.”¹⁹

Camille Paglia, although herself an outspoken feminist, objects that a “peevish, grudging rancor against men has been one of the most unpalatable and unjust features of second- and third-wave feminism. Men’s faults, failings, and foibles have been seized on and magnified into gruesome bills of indictment.” She warns that such sweeping condemnations are harmful not only to men but also to women: “When an educated culture routinely denigrates masculinity and manhood, then women will be perpetually stuck with boys, who have no incentive to mature or to honor their commitments.”²⁰

Paglia is right. Boys who fail to launch do not become the kind of men who rise to the challenge of becoming trustworthy husbands and fathers. Like all of us, men tend to live up—or down—to the expectations placed on them.

No Classroom for Young Boys

There are signs that many boys are already failing to launch. Boys are performing worse than girls at all levels of education. Starting in kindergarten, the classroom is set up to reward girls, who are on average better at verbal skills and fine motor skills, like drawing and using scissors. “Girl behavior becomes the gold standard,” says Michael Thompson, coauthor of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. “Boys are treated like defective girls.”²¹

As a result, boys are far more likely to have problems at school and to be suspended or expelled (especially minority boys).²²

In the past, when girls did worse than boys at school, the cause was said to be discrimination. But now that boys are doing worse, the cause is said to be their own fault—for being too masculine. Comedian Bill Maher says, “Boys are sometimes castigated for basically just being boys.”²³

Bookstore shelves are filling up with titles like *The Boy Crisis*, *Boys Adrift*, *The Trouble with Boys*, and *Why Boys Fail*.

The upshot is that our schools are producing disempowered young men who have not mastered basic skills and are not prepared to be productive adults. We fail to nurture boys, then blame them for their toxic behavior.

Males are falling behind in higher education as well. Female students now outnumber males on university campuses by about 60 to 40 percent. Women are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, or a doctoral degree. Even professional schools now have more women, in fields from law to veterinary medicine.²⁴

Yet ironically, even as women outperform men in college, virtually every campus has a women's studies department directed at deconstructing male power.

Of course, it's wonderful that girls and young women are racing forward academically. Bear in mind that women were not even admitted into many universities until the mid-twentieth century. (Harvard did not accept female undergraduates until 1946. Princeton and Yale went coed in 1969, Dartmouth in 1972, and Columbia in 1983.) The Gender Equity Act, passed by Congress in 1994, has poured millions of dollars into equity workshops, training materials, and the development of girl-supportive curriculum to offset a history of sexist discrimination. Today there are four times as many scholarships designated for women as for men.²⁵ Clearly, all that money and effort is paying off.

But there is nothing equivalent for boys. As a result, many boys are failing to develop the traits that have historically been associated with manhood, such as responsibility, self-discipline, perseverance, and leadership. A 2020 survey found that parents today are more worried about their sons "growing up to be successful adults" than they are about their daughters.²⁶ The challenge of raising boys is not to deny their unique nature but to channel it in honorable and productive ways.

Millennials in a Straitjacket

If boys are not affirmed in a healthy version of masculinity, they are more likely to feel pressure to live by the one-sided secular script. When millennials were asked which qualities they think society values in boys, most listed traits of the "Real" Man: Dominance. Aggression. Sexual prowess. Stoicism. Athleticism. Only 2 percent of boys listed Honesty and Morality.²⁷ One study concludes,

The women's movement has been hugely successful in freeing girls from the constraints of a certain kind of simpering, passive femininity. But boys have been left in a straitjacket. If they deviate from standard male pursuits, their peers will deal with them ruthlessly.²⁸

These days you cannot overlook the devastating impact of pornography on boys' idea of what it means to be a man. The average age at which a boy is exposed to porn is nine years old. It's on his computer, on his phone, and in his video games,

movies, and music lyrics. Porn is so pervasive that when a group of researchers tried to conduct a study on its effects, they were unable to find enough men in their twenties who had *not* watched porn to form a control group.²⁹

Pornography is especially harmful when it fuses sexuality to cruelty and violence. As the *Washington Post* reports, "In a content analysis of best-selling and most-rented porn films, researchers found that 88 percent of analyzed scenes contained physical aggression." As a result, those who watched mainstream pornography "were more likely to say they would commit rape or sexual assault (if they knew they wouldn't be caught)."³⁰

We want boys to grow up to be considerate, self-controlled, and respectful to women, but society is not giving them the tools to develop those qualities. Then we are shocked when young men engage in toxic behavior.

Men in Distress

Despite the growing evidence that boys are falling behind, many people resist proposals to help young males. After all, they say, men still end up in most positions of power. And it's true that men are more likely than women to be presidents, CEOs, film directors, Fortune 500 board members, and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.

But while we focus on the maybe 10 percent of powerful, successful alpha males, we have been blinded to the fact that *on average* men are doing worse than in the past. Men are more likely than women to be homeless, to suffer mental illness, to wind up in prison, to commit suicide, to be murdered, to be addicted to drugs or alcohol. Men's workforce participation has dropped to Depression-era levels. (It doesn't show up in unemployment statistics because many men have stopped looking for work.³¹)

In recent years, men's life expectancy has even gone down, while women's has remained the same. The *New Scientist* says, "Being male is now the single largest demographic factor for early death."³²

One of my students, Jillian, commented, "We constantly hear about the problems women face—sexism, misogyny, discrimination, sexual harassment. Because men still occupy most high-level positions of power, we think they are doing fine."

But many men are not doing fine.

They are even dropping out of marriage and family. The US marriage rate is plummeting and today is at its lowest level ever.³³ When sociologist Michael Kimmel interviewed young men across the country for his book *Guyland*, he found that many "report having a difficult time making a transition to serious adult relationships" *even when they want to*. Why? Because years of engaging in casual sex have left them self-centered and immature. As pastor John Lambuth observes, "Men have found ways to get what they want without commitment. This robs them of an essential part of true manhood."³⁴

Social norms that rob men “of an essential part of manhood” are not good for men—or for society. A columnist for the *Globe and Mail* reflects, “It may take a village to raise a child. But it takes a village to raise a husband, too. And modern society has largely abdicated from the job.”³⁵

Is the Church “Feminized”?

What about the church? We’ve all heard the cliché that churches are bastions of male power and privilege. And it’s true that men continue to hold most leadership positions, especially in theologically conservative churches. But women predominate in the pews. The typical US congregation draws an adult crowd that’s 61 percent female and 39 percent male.³⁶

Women are also more likely than men to volunteer at church or participate in adult Sunday school. They are more likely to shop at a Christian bookstore, watch a Christian TV station, or listen to Christian radio. As a result, retailers and media executives tailor their message to women’s tastes and concerns.

Or what they *think* are women’s tastes. When my book *Total Truth* was in the production process, it was contracted out to a design company to create the cover image. What the designers came up with was a tea cup on a doily—with the title in baby-blue font with curlicues. I had to remind the publisher that *Total Truth* is not a “women’s book.” (Many women would not be attracted to that cover image either.)

The church has become a place where many men feel they are asked to leave their masculinity at the door. David Murrow nails the problem in his book *Why Men Hate Going to Church*. He describes a clever experiment in which he created two columns of personality traits, then asked people to indicate which list best represented Christ and his followers. What he did not tell them was that the lists were compiled from the masculine and feminine traits proposed in the bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray. More than 95 percent of respondents said the words that described Christ and his followers were terms that our culture stereotypically associates with femininity, like *relationship*, *nurture*, *sharing*, and *harmony*—and not the terms stereotypically associated with masculinity, like *competence*, *achievement*, *competition*, and *accomplishment*.³⁷

Gary Yagel, director of a men’s ministry called Forging Bonds of Brotherhood, says, “Today’s church is exalting predominantly feminine virtues; no wonder it is repelling men.” Men are now the world’s largest unreached people group.³⁸

In *Healing the Masculine Soul*, Gordon Dalbey says the work of the church “is not to feminize our masculinity, but to redeem it; not to make men more like women, but to make us more authentic men.”³⁹ How can the church help make more authentic men? How can we encourage men in living out the ideal of the Good Man, while

resisting the culturally driven script for the “Real” Man? These are the questions we will pursue in the rest of this book.



The Biblical Blueprint

Each chapter ends with a brief reflection giving theological or historical background. In this chapter, we ask a question that is basic to everything that follows: How do we identify which traits are inherent to the male nature as God created it and which are results of the fall? How do we distinguish between the software and the virus?

The Christian worldview pivots on three points—creation, fall, and redemption. To craft a biblical perspective on any topic, we ask: How did God originally create the world? How has it been damaged, deformed, and defaced by the fall? And how can we participate in God’s work of redemption, working toward the restoration of his original purpose?

Creation—“Bone of My Bones”

The creation account states that the division of humanity into two sexes is “very good” (Genesis 1:31). We must reject any notion that being male is inherently toxic or that being female is inferior.

In Genesis we learn that both male and female equally reflect God’s image. Throughout history, there have been theologians who claimed that only men, not women, were made in God’s image. Yet Genesis repeatedly uses the plural pronoun to include both male and female: “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created *them*; male and female he created *them*. God blessed *them*” and told them to be fruitful and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:27–28).

Psychologist Jordan Peterson, as a non-Christian reading Genesis, was stunned to find such an ancient text teaching that both men and women are made in God’s image. In his words, “both carry within them the divine stamp, which is very egalitarian, very appropriate, and, I think, unbelievably advanced.”⁴⁰

After the fall, Genesis restates the creation account, and again the text uses the plural pronoun. “When God created mankind, he made *them* in the likeness of God. He created *them* male and female and blessed *them*. And he named *them* ‘Mankind’ when they were created” (Genesis 5:1–2). The implication is that even after the fall, both men and women still had the status and dignity of being created in God’s image. They did not lose their original identity or calling.

THE CULTURAL MANDATE

What does the Bible mean when it says humans were given responsibility to “be fruitful” and “subdue the earth” (Genesis 1:28)? In the streamlined, highly symbolic language of Genesis, these phrases pack rich layers of meaning. The first command is to “be fruitful and increase in number [and] fill the earth.” Filling the earth starts with the family, but as extended families grow, they become clans, then tribes, then villages, then cities, and finally nations and empires. Groups also form to address specific needs: The village needs a school, a church, a government of some kind. People come together to sell the work of their hands in shops and marketplaces. And so on. Implied in the command to “be fruitful” is to develop the entire social world, all the social institutions. It also includes the rules and principles that structure those institutions—laws and policies, treaties and constitutions.

The second command, “subdue the earth,” means to cultivate the earth’s natural resources. The phrase covers any creative activity for harnessing the forces of nature—from farming to building houses, mining metals, inventing tools, and composing music. Picture in your mind a computer game like *Civilization* where players build cities and create technologies, advancing from prehistory to modern times. God set human beings over the earth to be the stewards and cultivators of creation, to discover and delight in his handiwork.

Genesis 1:28 is called the cultural mandate because it tells us that God’s original purpose for the human race was to create cultures, to build civilizations, to make history.⁴¹

The context of the verse is important. Like a theater director, God has set the stage: He has created the heavens and the earth, the plants and the trees, the birds and the animals. Then the narrative pauses. This is the only time in the creative process when the members of the Trinity consult with one another. They say, *Let us make a creature in our image, who will represent us and carry on our work on earth* (see Genesis 1:26). Then, finally, the curtain lifts on the first human couple.

And what is the first thing God says to them? He gives them the cultural mandate. He tells them why he created them, what their purpose is, what he intends them to do. We might call the cultural mandate the original job description for the human race—given *before* the fall into sin and therefore operative for all time. As Psalm 8:6 puts it, “You made them [humans] rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.”

Think of it this way: When we sin, we go off the track. When we are saved, God puts us back on the track. But *what was the track?* What were humans originally created to do? To fulfill the cultural mandate.

Finally, there’s a subtle message for men in particular that is often overlooked. It’s tucked into a verse that Jesus later quotes: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Matthew 19:5, quoting Genesis 2:24). In patriarchal societies (even today), a woman is expected to leave her parents and kinship group to become part of her

husband’s family. A man’s primary loyalty is expected to stay with his family of origin, and wives typically have low status.⁴²

But this verse tells men that their primary focus must shift to their wives. Both men and women must break with their family of origin and make their marriage their first priority. “This attitude represented a dramatic threat to ancient patriarchy,” writes Carrie Miles in *The Redemption of Love*.⁴³ Throughout history, the impact of this verse has been to raise the status of wives and marriage.

Fall—a Fateful Prediction

The next stage in the biblical drama is the fall. Tragedy struck God’s creation through the sin of the first couple. What does the fall imply for the relationship between men and women?

The key verse is Genesis 3:16, where the text says because of the fall, the husband will “rule over” his wife. This verse has often been misunderstood to be a command, but it is not. It is a prediction of what *will* happen because of sin—just as the text warns that the ground *will* produce “thorns and thistles,” that work *will* become “painful toil,” that humans *will* eat food “by the sweat of your brow,” and that they *will* “return to the ground” from which they were taken. In the same way, the husband is not commanded to rule over his wife; instead, the wife is warned that he *will* do so. In a fallen world, a husband will seek to have dominion over his wife as though she were part of the created order that *both* were originally given dominion over.⁴⁴

Because Christians have a realistic view of sin and evil, we should be the most courageous in calling it out. We should confront men who use their power to exploit and control women. And we should also hold women responsible who malign men, using derogatory language like “Kill All Men.”

Redemption—Dismantling Cultural Patterns

Redemption starts with acknowledging that Christianity is true, then accepting Christ’s salvation. But it does not end there. It includes working out the implications of a biblical worldview in every area of life. Because everything God created was originally good, its goodness can be restored. Sinful cultural patterns can be dismantled. Conflict between the sexes is not the original state of human nature but something that can be fought against, just like any other aspect of a fallen world.

Amazingly, the final consummation of history is pictured in the Bible using the metaphor of a marriage—a wedding between God and his people, who are collectively referred to as his bride. In other words, the endpoint toward which all history is moving is a union with God so profound and loving that the best metaphor for it is a marriage.

Today we live in the in-between period, looking *back* to Christ’s work on the cross to defeat evil while looking *forward* to the time when evil will finally be completely

destroyed and God will create “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17). In the meantime, Christians are called to live out their original job description—to fulfill the cultural mandate.

No Pink or Blue Boxes

An important implication of Genesis is that the two sexes need each other to fulfill their mission. The cultural mandate is not divided by sex. God does not say to the woman “be fruitful and multiply” and to the man “subdue the earth.” The cultural mandate is given as a joint calling to both members of the first couple.

In fact, the vast majority of commands in Scripture are addressed to all Christians in their shared calling. The Beatitudes are not divided, with some labeled “for men only” and others “for women only.” Jesus addresses both men and women when he says, blessed are the poor in spirit, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart (Matthew 5).

The gifts of the Spirit are not divided by sex either. Prophecy and teaching are not masculine, as most people today might expect. Mercy and service are not feminine (Romans 12:6–8). Instead, “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” of the Christian community (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Finally, the fruit of the Spirit is the same for both sexes: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23).

The Bible’s evenhanded treatment should not be surprising because, after all, men and women are more alike than they are different. Most psychological characteristics can be described by bell curves that overlap closely. In fact, there is greater difference *within* the categories of men and women than there is *between* men and women as groups. For example, this graph shows difference in science ability:⁴⁵

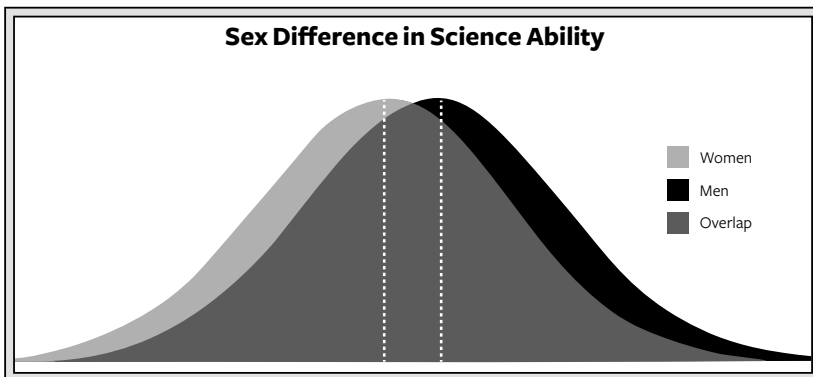


Fig. 1.1 There is greater variation *within* each sex than *between* the sexes.

What’s the Difference?

This is not to deny the reality of differences between the sexes. The most obvious ones arise out of biology. Because women get pregnant and nurse infants, a great deal of their time and energy is devoted to caring for children. In pre-industrial ages (which includes most of human history), families were large and homes had no labor-saving devices. Women spent most of their adult lives pregnant or nursing or carrying babes in arms (usually all three at once).

Women also have more estrogen and oxytocin than men. These are bonding hormones that equip mothers psychologically for their caretaking function in the family. (As *humans*, of course, women are equipped for many other things; we are talking here about their distinctive contribution as *women*.) As a result, mothers are more likely to perform work that is close to home and can be done while tending small children. Even today, most mothers cut back on paid work outside the home when they have young children.⁴⁶

Men are taller and stronger, and their time is not required as much for early childcare. As a result, in most cultures they are the family’s main protector and provider. Men have more testosterone than women—the aggression hormone that equips them psychologically for their role in the family. It makes men, on average, physically stronger, more competitive, and more risk-taking. (When men become fathers, however, their oxytocin increases, which makes them more attuned to their children, as we will see in chapter 11.)⁴⁷

Thus, even though most virtues are universally human—both men and women are called to be loving, merciful, just, courageous, and so on—those virtues may be exercised differently in male versus female experience. Our goal should not be to deny those differences but to be grateful for the unique contribution of each of the sexes. Men and women exercising their gifts are like a violin and a cello playing a duet, blending in harmony while retaining their unique, individual tones.

The Arrogance of Stereotypes

Today the secular stereotype for masculinity has grown so narrow that when a man is sensitive or compassionate, people will often say he is tapping into his “feminine” side. But that language reinforces the stereotype that men are not naturally kind or caring—which is insulting to them. It is also harmful to men who *do* fall on the gentle, empathetic side of the personality spectrum. C. S. Lewis even denounced sex stereotypes as a form of arrogance:

It is arrogance in us [men] to call frankness, fairness, and chivalry “masculine” when we see them in a woman; it is arrogance in them [women] to describe a man’s sensitivity or tact or tenderness as “feminine.”⁴⁸

No sex has a monopoly on any particular virtue. The problem with stereotypes is that they cut us in half—men get one half of the human character traits and women get the other half. But in redemption, God calls us to be whole persons, recovering the full image of God in both sexes.

Genesis gives God's original blueprint for what it means to be human. In later chapters, we will ask how the secularization process has obscured that blueprint. But first, let's spell out in greater detail what a God-centered masculinity looks like—not in theory but in practice. Sociological studies find that committed Christian men make the most loving and engaged husbands and fathers. And that's not just church talk. That's the result of empirical research, as we will discover in the next chapter.