

Select Book Reviews on Complementarianism and Masculinity

Josh Blount

The Manual: Getting Masculinity Right, Al Stewart. Sydney: Matthias Media, 2022.

This book is strong overall, though written with a non-Christian or new convert primarily in mind. For that audience, it is quite a good book: clear biblical truth, winsome and wise, with appropriate humor and easy accessibility. The first half covers current challenges to masculinity, the second half looks at being a man in our primary relationships (son, friend, worker, single, husband, and dad). While he makes the point in a subtle way, I think that the relational focus in defining what is specifically *masculine* about the call to “get masculinity right” is exactly right. Masculinity is hard to define in the abstract without reference to the capacity to be a husband, father, son, etc. So this point is made in an indirect way by the structure of the book. In addressing husbands, Stewart is complementarian, though relies heavily on the Kellers’ book on marriage. Given the audience he’s writing for, I think it’s a generally good presentation, and his avoidance of some of the hot-button evangelical debates I think is more due to that audience choice. Overall, this book is similar to Phillips’ *The Masculine Mandate*, but I think slightly better. Stewart conveys all the same wisdom and biblical truth, but is more engaging and easy to read than Phillips. A mature husband and dad of many years in a good church won’t get much new from this (though some nuggets of wisdom and simply a good reminder of what he already knows). But a young Christian would benefit greatly from this book, as would a non-Christian. (The gospel presentation at the end is done really well.) Its main weakness is its lack of depth.

Reclaiming Masculinity, Matt Fuller. The Good Book Company, 2023.

Another good new contribution to the discussion. Structured around 7 principles that help finish the sentence: “A godly man is...” In order, these principles are: 1) Recognizes the differences between men and women without exaggerating them; 2) Takes responsibility for spiritual leadership; 3) Is ambitious for God; 4) Uses his strength to protect God’s church; 5) Shows thoughtful chivalry; 6) Invests in friendships; 7) Raises godly “sons” (the quotes indicating that Fuller includes both physical and spiritual fatherhood). The chapter on principle 2 is solid, though not entering into complementarian waters (but he does clearly teach male eldership in the chapter on the church, and cites Köstenberger as the place to turn for in-depth teaching on 1 Timothy 2). Reading Fuller and Stewart’s two books back-to-back makes clear a basic principle: you can tell implicitly the kind of men that each author typically ministers to by what they feel a need to say, and what they minimize or pass over in silence. Stewart’s audience is the unsaved or new Christian in suburban or urban Australian life. Fuller appears to be writing to the kind of men who show up at a city-centre church in London. The examples and real-life stories that each draw are appropriate, but very situational. This is both a strength and a weakness: as a strength, the applications clearly reflect real life wisdom. These are both men who minister to real people. But as a weakness, their implied audiences limits the effectiveness of their books. Whether you find their points helpful or leave the book feeling as though it didn’t answer your questions will largely be determined by whether you fit their imaginary audience or not. I would recommend Fuller’s book to a moderately theologically informed, but not deeply grounded, church-planter-network type young evangelical. I think the book will convince him that masculinity is important, and a necessary part of his discipleship. I especially liked Fuller’s

chapters on masculine strength and thoughtful chivalry. These aren't foundationally new, but make a necessary and pointed application to contemporary culture. For an audience not in this circle, the book likely won't answer your foundational questions.

Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs. Josh Hawley. Washington: Regnery Press, 2023.

Written by a serving US senator, this book has an obvious political and cultural context in mind. For all that, it is surprisingly biblical and solid, basing its treatment of masculine virtues exclusively on the Bible's storyline. Part One focuses on Genesis 1-3 to develop a man's mission, battle, and promise (chs. 2, 3, and 4), while Part Two focuses on roles a man must embody that are drawn from what Hawley identifies as repeated Adam stories in Scripture. Husband and father (two chapters drawn from Abraham's life); warrior (Joshua); builder and priest (David); king (Solomon). The concluding chapter gives a brief gospel call by focusing on Christ as the last Adam.

Strengths: the organization of the book, focusing as it does on roles in relation to others, makes an important point – masculinity is about ordered relationships. In general, Hawley's discussion of these roles is decently solid on biblical exegesis (his favorite biblical scholars for this project are G.K. Beale and John Collins, with Geerhardus Vos and Peter Leithart also making an appearance). There was much I agreed with. I also enjoyed the illustrations of masculinity that he has learned from his extended family. In many ways the book is a paean to his father, grandfathers, and uncles, and it's moving to read it as such.

Weaknesses: the foil for Hawley's vision of masculinity is "modern Epicureanism," which he loosely associates with the political left and takes to task for its opposite vision of masculinity. He's not wrong in most of his critiques, but the Epicurean label fits only loosely and sounds more like a straw man position. And the gospel is not front and center to the book – that may partly be an intentional choice, since most who pick up a book by a US senator will not be doing so for spiritual edification. With that audience in mind, Hawley is unapologetically biblical and will probably surprise some of his readers. So the choice to delay discussion of Christ as second Adam until the epilogue, concluding with a few paragraphs on how Christ embodies all that we are supposed to be and offers forgiveness for our failures, is probably an intentional choice to draw readers in. But, given that Hawley is basing so much on the Bible throughout the book, the emphasis that is imparted to the reader is ADAM and MEN – and Jesus as the antidote to our failures as MEN. I don't think Hawley intends that or is personally more interested in masculinity than Christ – but it's a byproduct of his structure and the implicit biblical theology it employs. (Note also the near total absence of any mention of the church, which functionally makes men acting as men in families and nations the primary arena.)

No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men. Anthony Esolen. Washington: Regnery Press, 2022.

Esolen's book reminds me of J. Budziszewski's work, *On the Meaning of Sex*. Both are Roman Catholics, both are deeply steeped in the Western classical tradition, and both are erudite men

who write with clarity and artistry. Esolen's work is an apologetic for men, for masculine agency, and for manly associations (i.e., the platoon, the baseball team), all of which together work for the common good of men, women, and children. Without a robust affirmation of the need for masculinity, we don't have a harmonious, gender-neutral society; we have chaos, violence, and disorder. (Esolen is also reminiscent of Terrence Moore's observation that a society that fails to teach boys how to become men will get either wimps or barbarians, but not knights.)¹

On the whole, I think Esolen makes a persuasive argument that I find generally appealing – but I'm not sure it will persuade those who don't already share his convictions. It is an apologetic for masculinity that doesn't fully *define* masculinity, but instead points to what is “universal,” “natural,” and “obvious.” Here is where a Reformed Protestant and a Roman Catholic are going to have subtle but significant definitions of what is universal, natural, and obvious. Esolen's appeal is based implicitly on teleology and natural law; we *know* that there is such a thing as human nature, and that observations can reasonably (i.e., with right use of reason) be made from nature and history to tell us what men and women are. The Reformed Protestant agrees that there is something about our nature *known* to all – but also has to account for the distortion of that knowledge by sinful men and women. Enter Romans 1. The secularist will read Esolen appealing to what is “universal” and either make the philosophical argument, “By what standard of inquiry do you *know* that what you observe as universal is actually universal?” (accusations of the black swan fallacy – you only *think* that is universal because you haven't considered enough data), or will actively produce counter-examples: “Native Americans acknowledged the existence of Two Spirit individuals, so clearly your ‘universal’ is only Western colonialism in disguise.” The argument then becomes historical nose counting (“gender binary societies outnumber gender diverse societies, so the gender binary really *is* universal”), or it becomes an argument about epistemology: here's how we *know* that there is a universal human nature, and that that nature includes a distinct purpose for men and for women. But the Reformed Protestant, while acknowledging the presence of natural law, should be less sanguine (in my opinion) about natural law's ability to persuade sinners and rebuild Western civilization. It *might* do that; but that's up to God, and he owes Western civilization absolutely nothing. To put it differently, we have done everything in Western society to draw forth God's judgement, but nothing that would obligate him to fix the problems of Western civilization. The City of Man's problems do not constitute an emergency for the City of God. Only on a particular reading of eschatology and history (think: postmillennialism of the Wilsonian variety) does one come to believe that the future of Western civilization *is* the future of the church.

All that said: I *do* think Esolen's case is right. Without healthy masculinity, we don't have civilization. And it is far better to live in the achievement of civilization than the natural state of anarchy and oppression that are history's most recurrent alternatives. But I think it is better to call the *church* to healthy masculinity and femininity, *for the glory of God and the future of the church*, and leave the civilizational consequences to the Lord. That's not an entire political theology, but it is a sound foundation on which to build other necessary elements in a political theology. And it may sound like quietism, but I think it's a quietness that the Preacher (Ecc 4:6) and Paul (1 Tim 2:2) would approve.

¹ Terrence O. Moore, “Wimps and Barbarians: The Sons of Murphy Brown,” Claremont Review of Books, accessed August 9, 2023, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/wimps-and-barbarians-the-sons-of-murphy-brown/>.

It's Good to Be a Man: A Handbook for Godly Masculinity. Michael Foster and Dominic Bnonn Tennant. Moscow: Canon Press, 2022.

This book started out provocatively (“Patriarchy is inevitable”), ended on a helpful slogan (“It’s good to be a man”), and in between, in what I might charitably call a spasm of good intentions, broke the China and fouled the air. I agree that it’s good to be a man (though, could they make the corresponding affirmation, it’s good to be a woman? More on that below); I agree that our society is hopelessly confused on masculinity; I agree that dominion-taking is at least a helpful component for understanding masculinity. But their exegesis is partial at best, relatively non-existent at key points (can you write a book on masculinity and never address the imperatives to husbands in Ephesians 5?). And so their definition of masculinity is at best only a partial one. It’s difficult to escape the conclusion that these authors already know what they want to say about masculinity, patriarchy, society’s problems, etc., and don’t really want to pause long enough to consider biblical counter-examples or to flesh out their portrait.

Here, then, are my main critiques, in no particular order:

1. A Wilson-esque postmillennial scheme is evident throughout the book, and I think is key to their argument. They repeat the line “as a man goes, so goes his household; as a household goes, so goes the Church; as the Church goes, so goes society” (15) or something similar throughout. The problem is not that I disagree with a link between those elements; it’s that joining them so tightly in a cause-and-effect relationship lets them effortlessly work back and forth between men, household, and society, as if the problems are obvious and the solutions are simple at every level. It’s sloppy theology, cultural analysis, and history all at the same time, and when society really is at a crossroads, the consequences of sloppy thinking are potentially massive. To give but one example, to say “We are the ones who must overcome the evil patriarchs of our day, whether in the deep state or the media-industrial complex” takes an anthropology (the war of the patriarchs) and a particular cultural/political analysis (the presence of the deep state), mashes them together and lumps both under the Christian man’s dominion mandate. I’ve watched, both first-hand and second-hand, the devastating consequences when someone thinks it’s their “Christian obligation” to “see through” the media-industrial complex and expose the deep state: YouTube becomes your source of “revelation” and political movements (usually far-right) your hope for redemption. Foster and Tennant’s book, it seems to me, would only pour fuel on that particular contemporary fire – and even baptize it with a cloak of godly masculinity. Yes, there are major cultural and political problems in our day! But sloppy thinking here could do harm to the church in our time.
2. Their basic definition of masculinity would appear to be dominion-taking (“productive, representative rulership,” 19), which in another place they gloss as the “aggressive instincts” of masculinity (25). This is similar to Harvard philosopher Harvey Manfield’s definition of masculinity in his book *Manliness*, where he links masculinity with aggression. I think this is *an* element of manliness, but the way Foster and Tennant develop it is, in my opinion, unfaithful to the storyline of Scripture and therefore to actual texts in Scripture. Their scheme seems to look something like this: Adam (failed dominion) □ Christ (successful dominion) □ godly

- men (in Christ now able to extend Adam's dominion task). And, sadly, the book doesn't magnify the glory of Christ in his unique role as the second Adam; it really leaves the reader impressed with the glory of being able (in Christ, of course) to resume Adam's task and become men of gravitas. This scheme doesn't consider the way the dominion mandate is derailed by sin, and now refracted through Christ the *last* Adam (all others need not apply) as indicated by, e.g., the use of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2. Foster and Tennant's biblical theology seems calibrated to show that Jesus needs men to accomplish his dominion-taking task, whereas I think the storyline of Scripture says Jesus *needs* no one, but graciously chooses to accomplish his purposes *through his Bride*, a body made up of men and women in union with their covenant head. (This is related to my next critique, but before I get there I have to say that the sloppiness of the scheme is evident by the way the "Gravitas through Duty" chapter contains nearly no exegesis. Again, it seems like they already have their scheme in mind first, their list of virtues and duties, and look for proof-texts that fit. I also found it striking that they argue manhood is found by focusing in the *missio Dei*, "God's mission" on page 173. The idea of *missio Dei* as a vague biblical theology concept has been used in missiology circles by some to advocate all kinds of social justice movements as a necessary part of Christian mission [DeYoung and Gilbert's book *What Is the Mission of the Church?* addresses this.] I'm sure Foster and Tennant would *not* support those uses of the *missio Dei*; but it's telling that both right-leaning and left-leaning proposals can use the same, fuzzy concept to advocate for ethical/moral/social positions to which they're already committed.)
3. Lastly, I don't think Tennent and Foster could write a companion book, "It's Good to be a Woman" – their framework wouldn't allow it. I suspect it would be entitled, "It's Good to be a Man's Woman." And their chapter on marriage was horribly instrumental – it basically boils down to, "Find a wife whose useful to your mission." Again, I find it telling and deeply problematic that they write a chapter on marriage and *never cite Ephesians 5*. Their position would raise the question, "Did Jesus 'choose' his bride because she was useful to his mission?" Sadly, I have to say that I wouldn't want one of my daughters to marry a man steeped in this model of masculinity. I would question whether, if the call to nourish and cherish his bride conflicted with his sense of "mission," his bride would get sacrificed on the altar of ambition.

So, to summarize: I share their concerns that manhood is adrift in our culture. I agree feminism has had deadly effects. (I also agree the media-industrial complex is a problem!) But I think their solution is only partly biblical, and therefore is partly unfaithful. Someone once made the observations that our culture, when it comes to manhood, can only produce barbarians or wimps. I think Foster and Tennant would agree – but I think their scheme may only produce sanctified barbarians. Let's not aim for wimps – but let's not also aim for barbarians with a Hebrew tattoo on their forearm. Neither represent mature manhood in Christ.

God's Good Design: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Guide to Human Sexuality. D. Michael Clary. Ann Arbor: Reformation Zion Publishing, 2023.

Of the books reviewed to date for this project, Clary's work is the best so far – though with a few idiosyncrasies that I'm still pondering. The book's strengths are its fairness and wise application of biblical truth. Whether dealing with same-sex desire, or singleness, or headship in marriage, or the question of wives working outside the home, Clary does not back down from biblical truth but is also careful to not prescribe specific practices that go beyond the text. His pastoral experience is evident here; it's clear he's pastored a lot of people in different seasons of life, and has the appropriate "case-wisdom" from such background.

The book's basic definition of masculinity and femininity is "potential fathers and mothers," which Clary acknowledges is from J. Budziszewski's work. He does a good job talking about "gendered virtue" (chapter five), the ways in which these gendered potentialities call us to men- and women-specific virtues, not merely gender-neutral Christianity. He has a helpful paired set of chapters celebrating fatherhood and motherhood in relation to parenting future men and women: "How Boys Become Fathers" (chapter seven) and "Blessed Motherhood" (chapter eight). He deals with sexual immorality in chapter eleven and is both clear in his condemnation of sexual sin and equally as clear in his application of the gospel. There's not much I would change in that chapter (accept perhaps a little more robust theology of sanctification to help prepare someone for the real work of progressive sanctification in areas of sexual identity, but that's somewhat beyond the scope of his book).

My own hesitation about recommending the book in its entirety is its odd dependence throughout on a particular vision of the household. Clary cites C.R. Wiley's book *The Household and the War for the Cosmos* (a Canon Press publication) as influential in his thinking, but I found the statements about households odd. For instance: "God rules through households" (86, 94). Or:

From now until he returns, God's future rule is represented in Christian households: husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, parents and children, and brothers and sisters. The household codes of the NT tell us what that should look like in practice. By God's grace and in his strength, obedience Christian households embody the future reign of Christ. (95).

The church is absent from the entire chapter on households, and the significance accorded to households in God's plan is startling. To be sure, when he covers "Sexual Dynamics in the Church" in chapter ten, Clary has a clear view of the place of the local church and makes the important point that the church is organized as a household (which makes a strong argument for male eldership). But to my mind, it seems that Clary's substructure of thought reverses the biblical order and makes churches exist for households, not households for the sake of churches.

There are other possible problems, not ones that Clary makes but ones that his framework could create. If the household is the site where God's future rule is present, where the future reign of Christ is embodied... is there a "household discipline" mechanism at work in the home? How is sin within the household handled? Are wandering teens "excommunicated" from the household?

Clary doesn't say any of that, but I worry about the implications of this "household mission" theology on his young disciples.

Clary makes some good points in his chapter on "The Productive Household" (chapter six) about the post-Industrial Revolution changes in the household and their impact on the family. When "household" is nothing more than the place where we watch Netflix together, the household codes of the NT or the Proverbs 31 woman sound very distant. Still, statements like "we cannot properly understand the scripture's [sic] teaching about headship and submission without recognizing the productive nature of the ancient household" (151), or that "the biblical vision of the household is a unified mission, led by the husband, and all the household members pursue it together" (157), seems (at best) to have imported a particular vision for the household into the text. And this paragraph especially gave me pause:

Establishing a productive Christian household is an act of spiritual warfare. Men and women who fill their households with children who bear his image and are equipped to exercise dominion are pushing back against the darkness of the world with the light of Christ. Households that are laser focused on these priorities can be formidable. They are doing something good. They are producing something eternal. (159)

I don't deny there is eternal spiritual significance to raising a family in Christ, or even that there is spiritual warfare targeted at the home. But precisely in what way are households "producing something eternal"? By raising covenant children (on a paedobaptist theology)? By homesteading? By engaging in classical education? I can imagine a number of different takes on how the household "exercises dominion and pushes back the darkness," and a lot of them represent (at best) majoring on a minor theme in Scripture. I suspect this household framework is also tied to the way Clary sounds a similar note to Foster and Tennent in his chapter on marriage, when he places "understand[ing] his mission" above finding "a godly mate who wants to join him and help him fulfill his mission" (170). I'm not against household productivity; neither am I against men living their lives and leading their families with initiative – but I am concerned that this "mission/dominion" masculinity framework when applied to marriage makes wives merely instrumental. I find it difficult *on that framework* to account for a B.B. Warfield sacrificing productivity in his "mission" to care for his invalid wife for decades. That's not to accuse Clary, or Foster and Tennent, of advocating for abandonment of one's wife in those circumstances – it's just that their framework makes accounting for sacrificial care for one's wife much harder. "Mission" sounds the dominant note; self-sacrificial love becomes correspondingly less plausible.

It's unfortunate that this "household" theme runs through Clary's work, because there is so much otherwise to commend throughout it. But the distortions present with that theme make this book not the hoped-for manual on complementarity.

The Household and the War for the Cosmos. C.R. Wiley. Moscow: Canon Press, 2019.

I turned to this book after reading Clary's work to see what has influenced that volume in its theology of the household. Wiley's book is short, written at a popular level (though not shallow

by any means), and seems to betray the same imbalance of priorities that emerged in Clary's appropriation of the household theme.

Wiley begins with a discussion of piety, drawing on classical sources, and especially the image in Roman memory of Aeneas carrying his father on his back from the ruin of Troy (from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the image of which found its way into Roman iconography). Wiley contrasts this with the decaffeinated version of "piety" in contemporary evangelicalism, where piety is (at best) merely a synonym for "good quiet-times." Wiley prefers the robust definition summarized in the picture of Aeneas physically carrying his father from danger: "Piety paid its debts" (26). He then uses the stories of Aeneas and Abraham to both compare and contrast a robust definition of biblical piety with the classical model (both of which he prefers to the absence of piety in modern discourse).

Wiley then moves to a discussion of the cosmos, beginning with Ephesians 6:10-20, back-tracing references to the cosmos in Ephesians, and moving to the location of the household codes in Ephesians 5:22-6:9. His point is that the household is situated in a realm of spiritual warfare, and that well-ordered households are part of the "war for the cosmos" (to use the phrase from the title). The exegesis is rather strained, is based in part on several etymological fallacies (using a word's etymology to define its meaning, rather than careful attention to context), but is still making a useful point about the unity of Ephesians 5-6.

But Wiley's next chapter becomes rather sporadic, making large jumps that are not sustained by actual argument. His title, "Lost and Found in the Cosmos," plays off Carl Sagan's work and makes the early claim that "household piety is as big as the cosmos" (70). Then he gives an description (which has clearly influenced Clary's work) about the changes in the household brought about by the Industrial Revolution, moving the household from "an authority structure" (70) to a "recreation center" (71). He then discusses Xenophon's *Oikonomikos*, links it with the right kind of patriarchy, and says we need to recover the older, classical/biblical vision of the household in the cosmos, rather than adapting to modernity. The chapter ends with this startling claim. We don't have to adapt to the modern vision of households, but instead can return to the alternative older vision, and "if we try, Christianity can do more than survive. It can thrive, and it can even win" (76). I say this is startling because, in context, it *appears* that the "if we try," is not tied to a robust ecclesiology or missiology, but to Wiley's vision of the household. It's implicit, and perhaps Wiley doesn't mean it this way, but it sounds as though the mechanism by which the gates of Hell shall not prevail against the church...rests entirely on the household. That's a misplaced priority.

There are two more chapters to the book, which look at Ephesians again (with a similar mixed bag of good points and inconsistent exegesis), and a good chapter on the picture of the church as the bride of Christ in the eschatological marriage (my phrase, not Wiley's, though the idea is there throughout). Then the epilogue, "Guerilla Piety Made Plain," gives two strategies for living now with guerilla piety: "the household of God" (115) and "the household, fulcrum of the cosmos" (117). I don't know what to make of the phrasing and order of those two stratagems. Beginning with the household of God (i.e., churches) is a strong move...which is then mitigated by adding "fulcrum of the cosmos" to the familial household. We have an inconsistency here that seems to be throughout the work: churches are the household of God, but the real work of the

kingdom appears to be in the familial household. If Wiley had simply said, “The local church is central to God’s plans, but in this book I want to focus on helping recover stronger families and households as a subset of that plan,” the book would have been a decent contribution to the conversation. But I don’t know if Wiley (and the varying networks of influence represented by his work, Canon Press, Clary, and Reformation Zion Publishing) would actually agree with the “subset” portion of that statement. At times they appear to, but the bulk of their work seems to be most excited about a particular vision of the family.

It’s not hard to imagine where this vision goes among its followers who import their own definitions of what makes a “true” household. We end up with a biblical picture of . . . the local church AND HOMESCHOOLING. The local church AND CLASSICAL EDUCATION. The local church AND HOMESTEADING (plus homeschooling with classical education, which we might call “beekeeping plus Beowulf”). It’s not a heretical teaching or complete falsehood – there really is something to be said about the changes in the way we think about families that is tied to our conversations about masculinity, femininity, and marriage. But it’s an error of priorities and emphases, and one that is distinctly *American* in its concerns. The whole conversation ignores the global church, and makes central what is in reality a rather parochial concern with changes in Western culture (and really American culture) in the last century or two. For those of us living in that world, the battle is important – but a sense of proportion is necessary. Either we must make the world classical/Western/Christian in order for the church to thrive . . . or the church is a truly trans-cultural institution that is capable of taking root and thriving in any culture, both correcting and building off of multiple familial, societal, or cultural visions of the household without sacrificing the fundamental and basic definition of man and woman in relation to marriage and the church.

There *is* a link between the family (i.e., households) and the church as the household of God. But I would put the relationship this way. The commonality is that both are based on a covenant that is (at least in part) *marital* in nature. Human marriage has *historical* priority in the order of creation, but the eschatological marriage has *theological* priority in the eschatological order. Holding those two horizons (creation and eschaton) together requires theological precision, but done rightly it gives us reason to affirm what we might call the “marital inclusios” of human history: “Male and female he created them . . . and it was very good,” and “Blessed are all who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” Wiley’s book, and those he is influencing or influenced by, have distorted the relationship between the created institution of marriage and the new creation institution of the church.

Embracing Complementarianism: Turning Biblical Convictions into Positive Church Culture.
Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher. The Good Book Company, 2022.

This book’s premise is that we need to not merely apologize for complementarianism, but embrace it – despite the cultural pushback and the disagreements even within the church. I support that premise! But the book doesn’t deliver, and has some real weaknesses. One, there is really no statement that I could find about *how* men and women are different. It just says that they are different, and that those differences matter in church life. But that really contributes nothing to the discussion, and leaves an egalitarian-leaning person wondering, “But *why* do they matter, and how?”

Second, and this is my larger concern, the book often presents “two danger” approaches to embracing complementarianism: one the one side this danger, on the other side this danger. But then the “resolution” is merely “try to be somewhere in between.” Again, this is weak and contributes nothing to advance the discussion. It also positions the authors (unintentionally, I presume) as the arbiter of a dispute they themselves rise above. Most dangerously, what if one pole is an error because it represents a compromise with unbiblical assumptions, while the other “error” is a straw man caricature of a real biblical conviction? In that case, the prescription amounts to “Make sure you water down your poison before you take it.” That’s wholly inadequate, and I think makes this book potentially weakening of genuine complementarian convictions in a cultural age that questions their very foundations.

In conclusion: this is not my recommended book on complementarianism.

Masculine Christianity. Zachary M. Garris. Ann Arbor: Reformation Zion Publishing, 2020-2021.

This book had a very weak beginning and closing, and some stronger central exegetical chapters. First, points of agreement: on exegesis of texts regarding male headship in marriage, and male-ordination in the church, Garris is solid. The central chapters of his book on these topics were good (even though I have differences with him on his reading of 1 Cor 14 in ch. 9). And I agree culture is no guide at all on these matters! We are in agreement in our rejection of prevailing cultural norms for any coherent guide to masculinity and femininity. But the larger project Garris attempts to pursue is flawed.

Garris is out to defend “masculine Christianity,” by which he means “biblical patriarchy,” in which men rule in home, church, and society (see the introduction, xiii, and chapter 4, especially 100-102). He accuses complementarianism of being “compromised” from its very beginnings, and makes sweeping statements about the church and society that he labels “grape-juice Christianity” (235-236) and “an age of effeminacy” (269). Garris’ interaction with actual theological literature on political philosophy (the subject of ch. 11, and the basis for his inclusion of society as the third sphere in which men must rule) is almost non-existent, and his online review of Reformed Two Kingdom theology, referenced in a footnote, only cites the most popular level condensation of David VanDrunen’s work (the most proponent current advocate for this view). That’s unfortunate, because VanDrunen has written a massive corpus of careful exegetical, theological, and historical work on the topic, which Garris ignores. By doing so, he can make sweeping statements about complementarianism’s compromise being linked to “apostasy in the West” (29), or imply that any attempt to speak with nuance about what roles the Bible prohibits for women in society comes from cowardice (see the dismissive comments of Grudem and others in ch. 11). The overall tone and content of Garris’ chapter on society, and the aside comments he makes throughout the work about this realm, seem to imply that the West’s apostasy is due to effeminate pastors failing to speak of the evils of women ruling in society and serving in combat (“It is rare to hear pastors speak out against women soldiers...This is an embarrassment to Christianity,” 258; or the provocative subsection “female rule destroys civilization,” 265-66). To raise these to the level that Garris does is to become imbalanced in biblical priority.

Like many other recent writers on masculinity, Garris has bound up a political and cultural project with his vision of masculinity and the home, but has not supported this larger project. He would have been better served to simply critique a narrow complementarian exegesis and then apply the same care to justifying his societal and cultural vision (probably in another book). Ironically, by dogmatically linking “real” complementarianism (e.g. patriarchy), with the rule of men in society, Garris makes it hard for the church to preserve a distinct identity counter to the world, especially in the home and church. To use Augustinian language, to divide our efforts between reforming the City of God and the City of Man will never succeed. I fear that, by the stridency and carelessness of these aspects of his work, Garris has actually weakened the church’s ability to faithfully live out a biblical vision of masculinity and femininity.

The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes. Nancy Pearcey. Grand Rapids, Baker Books: 2023.

Overall a good book, with a few unfortunate weaknesses. Pearcey’s basic thesis is that there is a divide between the “Real Man” script and the “Good Man” script in society. Men receive conflicting messages about what healthy masculinity is, and too often the “Real Man” (dominate, sexually aggressive, risk-taking, etc.) wins out over the “Good Man” script (self-sacrificial, assuming responsibility, protecting the weak). She argues strongly that the Bible gives us a clear vision of good masculinity, which should be celebrated and affirmed. The world *needs* men like this. Pearcey sounds this theme repeatedly and well. It’s especially poignant that she would do so given her own personal experience of abuse from her father, which she recounts in the opening and closing of the book.

The central part of the book is a cultural history of American views of masculinity from colonial times to the present. The primary “villain” here is the Industrial Revolution, which took men away from the home and introduced a sacred/secular, private-personal divide into society. Overall she makes some good points here, but the narrative is weakened by what seem to me some unwarranted leaps. Is an economically integrated, pre-industrial household really the *sine qua non* of healthy masculinity? I think this is somewhat reductionistic, and the danger of an imprecise diagnosis is that it leads to imprecise solutions – hence the weakness of Chapter 12, arguing exclusively for economic, work-from-home changes to foster engaged fatherhood. That may be a very good thing, but it ties this vision of masculinity with a very narrow slice of human experience.

Pearcey’s affinities with the “faith and work” segment of evangelicalism (not a bad thing in itself) appear throughout in her applications and solutions. There’s a weakness here as well, though, leading to a selective appeal to the creation mandate. Pearcey uses this to justify human civilization, arts, economics, etc., but she is also critical of industrialization for its pernicious effects on the home, and of the reactionary “frontier masculinity” period of American culture. Yet “dominion masculinity” theology (e.g. Garris, Foster and Tennent, et al) appeals to the same creation mandate to justify the outward focused, frontier-settling, economic-and-marketplace-developing parts of masculinity and society that Pearcey critiques. In general, I’m more sympathetic to Pearcey’s arguments than this latter group; but that both can appeal to an imprecisely defined “creation mandate” is evidence of an inadequate theology. An

adequate biblical theology has to at least *attempt* to reconcile the cultural mandate with the Great Commission, and address something of an Augustinian City of God/City of Man distinction. Otherwise we are simply appealing to the “creation mandate” to justify whatever cultural pursuits we happen to prefer. And often, in so doing, the church as the household of God gets sidelined.

Lastly, I think Pearcey’s leanings are towards a theological or exegetical egalitarianism. While she doesn’t address it directly, there are hints in Chapter 10 that make me wonder if she is against male-only ordination. (The weak trope about “a woman can do anything an unordained man can do” appears in p.187, n46.) And in her description of biblical marriages, she cites only egalitarian authors (though these would probably disagree with her repeated insistence that men are the heads of their households). But these apparent biases towards egalitarianism make it difficult to actually affirm a robust biblical vision of masculinity, since egalitarianism is ideologically tilted to a gender-neutral vision of humanity. If you buy those arguments, it is more difficult (though not impossible) to argue for something distinct called masculinity.

So, while I’m grateful for Pearcey’s clear advocacy for masculinity here, I wonder if the theological underpinnings of the vision are robust enough to withstand the corrosive gender-neutrality of egalitarianism and even more radical secular theories.