

“This is one of the best Christian books I have read in the past five years. Matt Fuller has the courage to speak to a vital question and to do so with refreshing boldness, enviable clarity, loving warmth, and some delicious humour. His practical pastoral experience breathes through every chapter. Every man—and woman too—will benefit from reading it, and it will make a superb volume for a book group.”

CHRISTOPHER ASH, Writer-in-Residence, Tyndale House;
Author, *Zeal without Burnout* and *Trusting God in the Darkness*

“This is such an important and significant book for our current culture. With superb skill, Matt opens up the Scriptures in a way that engages with and challenges cultural norms. My heart was warmed, my spirit stirred and my mind stretched. It’s so relevant for men and women of every stage. I just loved it!”

PAUL DALE, Senior Pastor, The Bridge Church, Sydney

“*Reclaiming Masculinity* is a radical book—radical because it’s biblical. We live in a time when masculinity gets an eye roll and is diluted and blurred, but Matt Fuller gives readers an inviting, full-strength, 4K vision of what it means to be a man who follows the Son of Man.”

J.A. MEDDERS, Director of Assessment for Acts 29;
Author, *Humble Calvinism*

“We desperately need wisdom to live out God’s vision for masculinity. We need it in a way that steers clear of stereotypes yet seeks to take Scripture seriously. And we need to hear it from teachers who model that vision with humility, care and grace. Matt is such a man. This thought-provoking and practical volume will challenge and encourage you in equal measure.”

JASON ROACH, Director of Ministries, London City Mission;
Author, *Healing the Divides*

“I loved this book. It warmed my heart and encouraged my soul. The chapter on ambition had me praying with tears in my eyes.”

WILL STILEMAN, Associate Rector, All Souls Langham Place,
London

“Biblically rooted and practically illustrated, Matt Fuller’s excellent book comes like a breath of fresh air into the current confusion surrounding modern manhood. Kind and gracious yet incisive and courageous, he not only honours Christian truth but also provides practical and accessible steps that we can follow. Here is a book that many have been waiting for and will be grateful to have.”

TERRY VIRGO, Founder of Newfrontiers; Author, *God’s Treasured Possession*

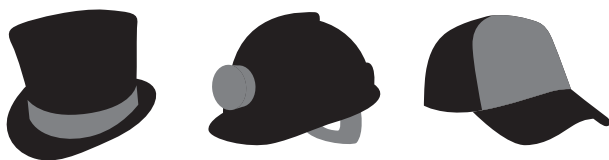
“Matt Fuller provides a much-needed voice of calm to the often-heated discussion of what it means to be masculine. Without sidestepping difficult issues, Matt pushes beyond simplistic and often negative caricatures of masculinity to present a positive biblical vision of what it means to thrive as a man created in God’s image. Through judicious examination of the Scriptures and nuanced theological reflection, and driven by pastoral warmth, Matt provides hope and encouragement to all of us who are seeking to live as godly men in this age of confusion. I’m so pleased to have such an excellent resource to be able to commend to others.”

MALCOLM GILL, Lead Pastor, Multicultural Bible Ministry,
Sydney

“A brave and timely gem, packed with fresh and thought-provoking biblical insights and wholesome practical applications, and peppered with gripping stories and illustrations. Matt Fuller gives us a compelling vision of masculinity from God’s word, for today’s confused world.”

RICHARD COEKIN, Senior Pastor, Dundonald Church,
SW London; CEO, Co-Mission Church-Planting Network

RECLAIMING MASCULINITY



MATT FULLER

the goodbook
COMPANY

For Andy and Jody:

Godly men, dear friends and epic godfathers

*You have made an enormous difference to my life and
to that of your godson*

Reclaiming Masculinity

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Published by:

The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk

thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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ISBN: 9781784988647 | Printed in the UK

Cover design by André Parker

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INTRODUCTION: TO BE A MAN MEANS... WHAT, EXACTLY?

If you had to grab a pen now, how would you finish this sentence?

“To be a man means...”

No, really. Try to finish the sentence before you read any further. Don't feel awkward if you're uncertain what to say—most people struggle. It's actually pretty difficult, isn't it?

One journalist recently spent a few weeks asking 16-year-old boys in the UK that question. The responses varied:

“You mean Yorkie bars and steel factories, that sort of thing?” Joel

“Doing what you believe to be right.” Jesiah

“You stand up for yourself, but you also stand up for others.” Sonny

“It's mainly about fitness and strength.” Matt

“The stereotype’s been put in our heads that we’re supposed to be strong, not meant to allow any emotions, but I don’t agree with that.” Corrin

“The feeling of a lot of people my age is that to be a man, you have to be able to fight.” Ty

“I think many boys my age are stuck, unsure.” Clement

“I think a lot of mainstream politicians are afraid to really touch on masculinity, in case of maybe saying the wrong thing. And I can understand that. It’s a very difficult thing to talk on. But I think there does need to be a place to be able to say that masculinity’s a good thing. That masculinity can be admirable. Otherwise, we’re just, sort of, just stranded.” Joel¹

SORT OF STRANDED

That’s a shrewd comment from 16-year-old Joel! A lot of young men are indeed “sort of stranded”. In a recent survey, only 2% of men aged 18-24 said they felt completely masculine.² Among those over 65 it was 56%. Yes, it’s only a survey, in which “masculinity”

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/09/a-lot-of-us-are-in-the-dark-what-teenage-boys-really-think-about-being-a-man> (accessed November 28, 2022).

2 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/05/13/low-young-masculinity-britain>. Other research suggests a similar generational gap exists in the US, although it is complicated by other divides there: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/31/masculinity-study-america-men-united-kingdom-yougov> (both accessed November 28, 2022).

was not defined, and so it was a highly subjective self-evaluation. But clearly there are a lot of young men who, like Clement, are “stuck, unsure” about what it means to be a man.

That’s quite a change in a few generations. Back in 1956, for instance, Professor Henry Higgins sang these words in *My Fair Lady* (and to be clear, the song was poking fun at the pompous Higgins and his inability to understand women):

*Why can't a woman be more like a man?
Men are so honest, so thoroughly square;
Eternally noble, historically fair;
Who, when you win, will always give your back a pat.
Why can't a woman be like that?*

My point is not (*at all*) that Higgins was right, or that things were better in the fifties. But in the fifties there was a clear idea of what it meant to be a man. In the 21st-century West, there simply isn’t, and our culture is far more likely to ask, “Why can’t a man be more like a woman?” “Traditional” male attributes such as competitiveness, stoicism (that is, bearing difficulties without complaint or displaying much emotion) and risk-taking are discouraged in classrooms and derided in sitcoms and films. The language of business management has shifted to emphasise “traditional” feminine virtues of empathy, co-operation and emotional intelligence. Women do better at school and a higher percentage go to university. Men are far more likely (to

an alarming extent) to go to prison, become homeless or commit suicide.

Perhaps really we need to ask, “Why can’t a man be more like a woman?”

Yet, in actual fact, probably more common is the claim that there is no difference between men and women at all. This becomes a rallying cry to ensure that we change the fact that men disproportionately hold places in boardrooms, in government and in industry. We’re told that glass ceilings must be smashed and barriers broken down; women must “lean in” and men must make room. Anything men can do women can, should and must be doing too.

I keep hearing these two opinions, expressed in a variety of ways but basically boiling down to “Men and women are the same” and “Men should be more like women”. The upshot is that we’re getting a bit confused about what it means to be a man. No wonder only 2% of young men think they are completely masculine.

IS MASCULINITY TOXIC?

In the last decade, the cultural mood music of the West has increasingly argued that masculinity is basically bad. A lot of people—men and women—have been hurt by or are angry about their own experience of masculinity. Enter “toxic masculinity” into the search box on Amazon and over 1,000 books will come up with that as a title or theme. In researching for this book, I’ve read a few

of these books, and they often contain a sad story of an abusive or absent father and a distant or unemotional or violent form of masculinity. Often there's anger at the model of masculinity that has been presented to the author. It is clear that something *has* gone wrong, and a lot of men *have* abused their strength, leaving a lot of emotionally wounded wives and children, colleagues and friends. It's in that context that the American Psychological Association has also now declared that "traditional masculinity"—defined as stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression—can be "psychologically harmful".³

I'm sure that a "traditional masculinity" can sometimes be harmful, and I am certainly not here to defend the abuses of the past. And I also want to argue that there's a difference between that definition of "traditional masculinity" and what we could call "biblical masculinity." But the type of masculinity the APA defines as traditional and harmful deserves defending for a moment. To say that some traits can be harmful if indulged excessively is not the same as saying that they always are. As I write this, we're approaching November 11th: Remembrance Day. In the UK, the majority of the population are wearing poppies to commemorate the sacrifice of those people who gave their lives to defend our country and its values. Chiefly, those people were men, and we honour and give thanks for their

³ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/ce-corner> (accessed November 28, 2022).

stoicism and aggression during armed conflict. Clearly, then, these traits are not always bad. Competitiveness can be useful in driving innovation. If I'm in a building that's on fire, I'd like the firefighter to assert some dominance and order me around. So-called "masculine traits" can surely be good *or* bad, beneficial *or* abused, depending upon the context and how they are used.

#SHAME

Nevertheless, there have without doubt been exposed in recent years some ugly expressions of masculinity that we should recoil from. There are indeed many men who should be ashamed of their behaviour. Perhaps we need to be slow to assume that we should not be included among them in some way and to some extent.

In the West, the #metoo movement has shone a spotlight on utterly unacceptable and disgraceful forms of sexual assault and harassment by dominant males. Many of the stories that have emerged have been appalling. In the UK, the *Everyone's Invited* website, which hit public consciousness in March 2021, presents a vast collection of stories about teenage girls being sexually assaulted and abused by teenage boys. It is genuinely shocking (an overused term, but appropriate here), with, at the time of writing, over 50,000 testimonies of abuse. It's an emotionally traumatic website to read. It led to accusations of "rape culture" in numerous schools, with some schools being mentioned in 170 testimonies

of abuse.⁴ It led to many parents wondering how on earth “their boys” could have behaved in such a way. Understandably, a vast amount was written about what men should not be like, and the cry went up, “We need to educate men how to behave”. The problem was, I didn’t read much by way of positive curriculum.

I did, however, read of one school assembly in Victoria, Australia, in which all male students were told to stand up and apologise for the behaviours of their sex that have hurt or offended girls and women.⁵ Although the school principal later admitted that this was inappropriate, it reveals a cultural climate in which it can seem like a good idea to get a whole room of boys aged 11-18 to apologise, simply for being a male. They were essentially being told, “All men are culpable, all men are responsible, and all of you are potential offenders”. No wonder so many men are stuck and unsure about what masculinity should look like. Are we meant to strive for masculinity at all?

I was struck by the humorous honesty of one middle-aged male journalist, who wrote:

“What does it mean, then, to say we should educate men? ... With my daughters I know what the positive

4 “Rape normal at private school, says dossier of 170 testimonies” <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/c000d75a-8c16-11eb-a1a3-928d43a3bbc1?shareToken=38e0dd53617d7a6e4e614d27930da910> (accessed November 28, 2022).

5 <https://news.sky.com/story/amp/schoolboys-made-to-apologise-for-stuff-we-didnt-do-during-assembly-about-sexual-assault-12260783> (accessed November 28, 2022).

*message is. 'You can do whatever boys can do and more.' With boys though? I'd be lost. And I've been one for a while now. You'd have thought I'd have figured it out.'*⁶

How would you advise him? Should we be telling our sons, and ourselves:

1. "Be more like girls"
2. "There is no difference between boys and girls"

Or can we find an ending to the sentence, "*To be a man means...*"?

My argument is that it's not enough to say to young men, "Stop acting like that". We need a positive vision of masculinity. The lack of such a positive vision of being male is now increasingly being recognised as a problem in secular studies. A recent study by the UK-based group Hope not Hate found that half of young men believe that feminism "has gone too far and makes it harder for men to succeed". Hope not Hate campaigns against extremism. They commissioned the research because it fears that aggressive anti-feminism is appealing to young men feeling emasculated in an age of changing norms. They need a positive vision of what it means to be a man. Similarly, there is increased awareness that the horrific misogyny (contempt for women) on "incel" (involuntary celibate men) websites, and the popularity of misogynists

⁶ Hugo Rifkind, "How should men behave in age of #MeToo?" <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/d7c71134-85ad-11eb-9186-403d3ffc3950?shareToken=8f128df6b04f267466f60a547cd5791d> (accessed November 28, 2022)

such as Andrew Tate (who owns and glories in the idea that his is a “toxic” masculinity) flows from the lack of a positive vision for masculinity.⁷ Whatever you make of Jordan Peterson, the psychology professor, he is adored by many young men for telling them not much more than that being male means taking responsibility and living for a purpose. He is one of the few voices in mainstream culture giving young men a positive message.⁸

LET’S GET POSITIVE

I want to reclaim the notion of masculinity from always being paired with the words “toxic” or “problematic”. Equally, I want to do so without resorting to the negative aspects of the kind of masculinity which led to #metoo being necessary, which was expressed in a multitude of less extreme ways by so many of us, and which went virtually unchallenged for so long. I’m not here to argue for a return to the 1950s, as though that was some golden age for both men and women. What I want to briefly do in the next few chapters is outline a positive picture of biblical masculinity. What kind of man does *God* want you to be?

7 Libby Purves, “One lesson for schools is recruit male teachers” <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/one-lesson-for-schools-is-recruit-male-teachers-9w9rj3cp2> (accessed November 28, 2022). Nick Staunton, “Andrew Tate: Selling masculinity to young men,” <https://brightonjournal.co.uk/andrew-tate-selling-masculinity-to-young-men/> (accessed January 11, 2022).

8 To clarify, I am not supporting everything he says. Jordan Peterson does not claim to be presenting a biblical view of manhood. He does, by God’s common grace, get some things right and has clearly helped a lot of men.

The Bible teaches that there is more in common between the human sexes than there are differences. The Bible also teaches that men and women are different, and supports the idea that there are some traits which are more broadly male and some more broadly female and that there are some roles which are a better fit for men and some which are a better fit for women.

At this point, I want to frontload a few clarifications to help you read me kindly:

- I want to repeat that I am *not* arguing for a return to the past. I'm not simply hankering back to medieval times when men would ride to war on horses and sweep damsels off their feet. I don't think reclaiming masculinity is a zero-sum game in which men have to fight back against women. I would hope that female readers would be pleased about what they'll read in these chapters.
- A number of the differences between men and women are generalities. Men are *in general* taller than women. That does not mean that every man is taller than every woman. Men are *in general* stronger than women, but not every man is stronger than every woman. We will talk about male traits *in general* but shouldn't be thrown by the fact that some men don't demonstrate all of these traits, any more than we are thrown by meeting a man who is 5 feet

tall or a woman who is 6 feet 6 inches. We can speak of generalities knowing that there are exceptions to every rule.

- I don't want to define men purely by taking biblical descriptions of husbands and wives and then using those to produce definitions of men and women. I think we can learn as much from looking at descriptions of "fathers", "brothers" and "friends". And these categories have something to say to all men, whether or not we're actually fathers or brothers. If a single man such as the apostle Paul can describe himself as a father to younger guys or whole churches, there must be something to learn about being a male from that.
- This is not a book about pornography. That is a huge topic on its own—and there will be many reading this whose next thing to read is a book that will help you in this area. I will only mention porn at a couple of points, but it is worth saying at the start that it is one hugely significant factor that is preventing Christian men living out a biblical masculinity.⁹

⁹ If you're someone who uses porn, or who is dealing with the effects of doing so in the past or wanting to help another guy who is struggling in this area, a good book to start with is Tim Chester, *Closing the Window: Steps to Living Porn-Free* (IVP, 2010). If you prefer audio, I know that people have found this talk by Winston Smith very helpful: <https://www.ccef.org/shop/product/solo-sex-1/> (accessed January 26, 2023).

- I'm not here to beat you up. I've read enough books and listened to enough talks telling me that I'm not a "real man" and that I'm failing as a father and a husband. I know I am—I certainly don't get all of this right. You have my permission to throw the book across the room if you read any phrase that starts with "Real men..."
- I imagine this book will irritate everyone. Some will think that I'm far too specific on what it means to be male. Others will think me too vague. I'll be disagreeing with some of my close friends. But as long as we're not ignoring the clear teaching of Scripture, that's ok. As we'll see, quite a lot of heat comes from the fact that some of what it means to be masculine is culturally expressed and a matter of wisdom. I don't mind if you disagree with some of my conclusions as long as you've wrestled with the biblical model of what it means to live as a godly man.

(Of course, in the end, if you *really* disagree with me, we could retreat into a sulky stoic silence or perhaps get competitive and have an aggressive fight. We could duke it out. That's what real men do. Oh. Sorry.)

That's the caveats out of the way. Let me return to where this chapter started. How would you finish the sentence "To be a man means..."?

More crucially, in fact, how would you finish the sentence...

*“To be a **godly** man means...”?*

My hope for you as you read this book is that you’ll be able to complete that sentence. As you read this book, you’ll find seven principles that describe a biblical, healthy, confident, helpful masculinity.

There will be complexities and nuances to wrestle with, as well as some more simple and straightforward things. You’ll need, of course, to apply the principles to your own character, opportunities and circumstances. I’m really hoping that there will be many women reading this book, and I want to thank you for being here and to apologise in advance for the fact that whenever I say “you” from now on, I’m imagining a male reader.

So let’s get on to Principle One: men really are different from women.