

BOOK AND RESOURCE REVIEWS

Nancy R. Pearcey. *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*. A review.

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Pearcey's book engages biblically with the current idea of toxic masculinity in two main ways. First, she charts expressions of, and attitudes towards, masculinity and manhood from the American colonial era to the present day. Second, she holds onto the larger picture of sin and grace - both men and women are sinners and in need of redemption.

Nancy R. Pearcey. *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023. 352 pp. \$24.99 USD.

The script for biblical manhood has been lost, but instead of seeking to recover it, Western society has decided to obliterate manhood altogether. Such is Nancy Pearcey's thesis in her latest book, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, and it's a convincing one. Given that terms like 'biblical manhood' and 'masculinity' come with a fair amount of cultural and social baggage, this is no mean achievement.

Pearcey convinces in two main ways. First, she chooses to 'present' rather than 'preach'. Her book is heavy, but by no means encumbered, with sociological and historical research. Charting expressions of, and attitudes towards, masculinity and manhood from the American colonial era to the present day. Second, she refuses to lose sight of the larger picture of sin and grace. Men are sinful, just as women are sinful, and while masculinity is not inherently toxic, there *are* toxic presentations of it, and these must not be glossed over (p. 15). Pearcey is particularly in touch with this latter reality, resulting from her experience of physical and emotional abuse at the hand of her 'Christian' father; her chapter on marital abuse is exceptionally sensitive and nuanced.

The book begins with an examination of masculinity in the Church. Pearcey describes and interprets the sociological data and concludes that "sociological studies find that committed Christian men make the most loving and engaged husbands and fathers," independent of their beliefs on gender roles or male headship (p. 32). These findings repudiate the popular belief that evangelical or conservative Christian views breed situations or households which are ripe for abuse and oppression. In fact, Pearcey finds that it is men who regularly attend church who are most likely to fit the ideal archetype of the modern father—one who is emotionally intelligent, actively involved with raising his children and capable of displaying affection (pp. 40–42). Pearcey goes on to demonstrate that this is not because men who already align with this archetype are also

drawn to the Christian faith, rather, that the biblical script for manhood is one involving emotion, self-sacrifice and deeply committed fatherhood—emulating the ultimate model of God himself. Sadly, however, it appears that there is no smoke without fire. For while committed Christians as a group are in the clear when it comes to ‘toxic masculinity,’ nominal Christians are not. In fact, according to the sociological data, “men who claim the Christian label often exhibit worse behaviour than men who are outright secular,” and “have the highest rates of divorce and domestic violence” (p. 15). Pearcey argues that this is because they “are prone to pick up terms like headship and submission but interpret them through a secular lens of power and control” (p. 15). This leads into part two of the book, where Pearcey attempts to outline exactly what this secular lens is and how it became so toxic, utilising literary and historical research to chart the ‘secular’ script of masculinity from the founding of America to today. While the Puritan pilgrims were not perfect representations of Christ, Pearcey points out that the colonial era was a time when biblical manhood flourished. This is firstly because survival in the New World (and, Pearcey assumes, in every pre-industrial revolution ‘world’) largely depended on physical labour centred around an economically productive household. Men and women needed to work together alongside their children in order to till the land. Men were required to be family-focussed and were culturally expected to both parent and lead their families in religious tasks. Pearcey argues that this is not a generalisation of an ideal: during the colonial age, “literature on parenting—such as sermons and childrearing manuals—typically addressed fathers instead of mothers” (p. 75). Curiously, she uses this chapter to discuss and defend a biblical view of womanhood, particularly the Genesis 2 account of woman’s creation as man’s helper. While her exegesis is sound, and a useful addition to the book as a whole, including it in this chapter casts an undeserved ‘glow’ over the colonial account. This leaves an impression, if unintentional, that the colonial era was a sort of second Eden; a place where biblical manhood and womanhood couldn’t help but flourish. Given that the founders of America were not ‘mushroom men’ springing up untainted by culture or history (as Thomas Hobbs would suggest), this section would have benefited from a more thorough nod to the conceptions of masculinity and femininity pre-1770 (p. 98).

For Pearcey, the industrial revolution is where the secular script turned ‘toxic’ and, on the whole, her argument is convincing. She writes that the movement of the locus of work from the home to the factory changed not only familial relationships, but also developed a “mindset of personal ambition and individual advancement,” as men became cogs in the industrial machine (p. 88). Men now spent most of their day away from their wives and children, and that time was driven by very different values. Workers must be efficient, competitive and task-orientated—characteristics which are worlds apart from those required by (or even feasible for!) parents. As a result, Pearcey argues, men

began to struggle to relate to their families, while their families often elevated their returning member for the “sacrifices he made and the risks he took in the public realm,” thus creating further distance (p. 92).

Yet men were not the only ones whose ‘script’ was irrevocably altered by the industrial revolution. In chapter 6, Pearcey charts the sentimentalisation of the home in the nineteenth century (p. 105). With men working outside the home, and thus the character traits required to get ahead in this sphere beginning to be described as ‘masculine,’ women and femininity were becoming linked with homelife and domesticity. Not only so, but as the dangers and perils of the workplace and industrialisation became evident, the divide became even greater. Literature of the time depicted women as the ‘angels’ of the home, with morality, virtue, religion and refining influence on their side, while men were left with science, rationality, degradation and inherent wildness in their ‘script’ (pp. 106–8). This ‘male, secular, public’ versus ‘female, sacred, private’ split was largely accepted by the Church (p. 107). No wonder many of the great reform movements were spearheaded by women. Society had told them that this was their social role, and while many used this for the good of the vulnerable and the oppressed, it also “freed up [men] to become less responsible” (p. 117). Furthermore, it implied that “men could no longer be relied on to champion family values,” an assumption that to this day has benefited no one, least of all women (p. 130).

Such cultural shifts could not help but impact the next generation. Pearcey reports that as the sons of the industrial revolution grew up apart from their fathers’ influence, “American culture grew worried that men were becoming over-civilized—soft and emasculated” (p. 177). The Church responded to this by emphasising military language and physical prowess in the Christian life, as well as the importance of business and work. Fundamentalism took this to the extreme by tying liberal theology to the rising feminist movement, and thus arguing that “Christianity as a spiritual battle [requires] a special kind of masculine bravery” (p. 182). The tables had turned: men were now the protectors of morality, women the debauched ones (p. 186). Work in the home (‘women’s work’) became less valued as the home itself was no longer seen as a refuge from the dangers of society (p. 189). Newspapers and comics began depicting housewives as nagging, gossiping women engaged in trivial chores (p. 189).

In time, of course, men (and especially fathers) were not excluded from caricature either. Turn to the Disney Channel, for example, and the two most popular tween family shows depict an incompetent father who acts like a buffoon every 3.24 minutes (p. 198). Why? Because, Pearcey suggests, as men spend less time with their families, they have become relegated to the role of a ‘secondary parent’; the time they spend with their children has become understood as their leisure time, not their ‘working’ time (p. 197).

Reflecting and reinforcing these developments, parenting literature in the twentieth century was directed primarily to mothers, who were seen as the experts, while fathers were relegated to giving gifts and paying for holidays (p. 197). It is little wonder that in various forms of popular media fathers began to occupy a primarily comedic role, one that the viewer is encouraged to eye (as they are the nagging housewives) with contempt (pp. 198–99).

Having brought the reader up to the modern day, Pearcey spends a chapter discussing how men can reintegrate into family life, thereby fighting back against the changes wrought by the industrial revolution. While she states clearly that it is neither viable nor desirable for American society to return to the colonial era, this chapter seems to presuppose that the pre-industrial family is the ideal and, in fact, biblical model. Pearcey argues that, with few exceptions, the biblical writers “spent the entire day with their wives and children” (p. 224). Therefore, she writes:

When people talk about restoring the ‘traditional’ family, typically they are not being traditional enough. Often they are thinking back to the 1950s. But they should think back to the pre-industrial age (which includes most of human history)—a time when both fathers and mothers combined childrearing with economically productive work. (p. 225)

Integral as it is to the foundation of her thesis, this claim demands further historical exploration, demonstration and nuance. It seems to suggest that for thousands of years pre-industrial revolution life was culturally static and socially stable. It also ignores the important distinctions of class and race. I have no doubt that “restoring stronger family ties” may be a “pressing imperative for addressing the problem of toxic behaviour in men”(p. 225), but this restoration must be flexible enough to be applicable to fathers everywhere, regardless of how much time they are able to spend with their families. As such, several of her suggestions, while acknowledging that ‘family time’ demands sacrifice, seem rather unsatisfying and perhaps place too much emphasis on ‘clocked hours’ (p. 215). What does a son really think when he sees his dad working on his laptop during his soccer game? Will a daughter actually feel cherished as she spies her father taking a business call while watching her karate class?

The book concludes with two nuanced and sensitive chapters on how both well-intentioned and ill-intentioned men may hurt their wives and harm their marriages. It is here that Pearcey returns to her own abusive childhood, drawing on the current literature on abuse and biochemistry to encourage both men and women to be self-aware, to stand up for what is right, and not to condone evil. These are introductory, though necessary, chapters to a large and complex topic.

Pearcey ends the books with a short epilogue stating that self-sacrifice is a principle that “seems to be built into men’s created nature,” that men know what it is to be a ‘Good Man’, and so must resist the culture which longs to force them into a different mould (p. 270). I felt this was rather a weak conclusion in comparison to the expansive nature of the book itself and would have preferred a summary of her point and a restatement of her main thesis. It is also a questionable point to make when one considers the depth of human sin, attested to in the Bible. Is the solution to the problems that Pearcey has identified simply a matter of removing the socio-cultural obstacles that prevent men from embracing the biblical script? This is surely too generous a view. Pearcey, of course, is attempting to reinstate masculinity in a culture that has begun to malign it as inherently evil, and yet in doing so seems at times to gloss over the fallen nature of humanity at large. As I’m sure Pearcey would agree, ultimately a deeper, gospel-based solution is needed.

I have one further, though minor, criticism of the book: many of Pearcey’s chapters end with an examination of a theological point adjacent to the chapter’s theme. While these are handled well exegetically, their placement disorients and at times reduces the force of her argument. In my view, it would have been better for these to be integrated into her central argument or, alternatively, collected into a concluding chapter.

Overall, *The Toxic War on Masculinity* is an illuminating book, and delivers exactly what our current, claustrophobic, cultural climate requires. It slows down, takes a step back, and attempts to widen our perspective on embodied gender. In doing so, it reassures and reminds us that God made men good, that sin has corrupted that good, but that there is a way back again for all of us, because two-thousand years ago a truly Good Man lived, died and rose again to save us from our sins.

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