

Book Review: *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood*

By Nate Pyle (Zondervan, 2015)

REVIEWED BY TAYLOR JAMES MURRAY

Nate Pyle is a pastor in Fishers, Indiana. His recent book, *Man Enough*, tackles the question of biblical gender roles from a fresh perspective. His offering is the latest in the recent influx of gender studies in the “spiritual memoir” genre. While authors like Rachel Held Evans (*A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, 2012) or Sarah Bessey (*Jesus Feminist*, 2013) have provided important insights on the ongoing complementarian versus egalitarian debate, they have commented largely on how this debate has affected women. This focus is, of course, understandable, given the alarming ways the church has mistreated women for hundreds of years; however, this is only half of the discussion. Pyle focuses on the often-ignored role of men and asks the question, “What makes a man?” Pyle’s study answers this question by demonstrating that Christ’s teaching and example set men (and women) free from the traditional stereotypes.

Pyle’s study hinges on the idea that cultural context informs how one defines “manhood.” Simply put, according to one popular version of society, men should enjoy cars and sports, and they should be warriors, pumping with testosterone. Those who do not fit this mold, or who are unable to participate, are considered “less than.” Additionally, within this definition of manhood is the prerequisite that men must suppress their emotions. Anything that one might construe as weakness is disallowed, lest one’s contemporaries label him “a girl” (32ff.).

According to Pyle, the church has largely endorsed these stereotypes with little to no pushback. Undoubtedly, this cultural depiction of manhood fits some of the men in today’s churches, but it does not fit every man. For some who already feel ostracized, these are impossible standards. This raises a number of important questions: What if the husband is not the primary breadwinner in the family? Do stay-at-home dads fail as men? Pyle argues that one’s definition of manhood should not rest on such standards, rather on one’s identity in Christ. Those who are adopted as children of God should feel free from the pressure to prove that they are “real men”—Christ frees believers from these unattainable standards (42–43; cf. Gal 3:28).

In his assessment of the church, Pyle addresses major biblical passages that deal with purported gender roles. He observes that the qualifications found in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1 should be benchmarks for all believers—not simply men. Moreover, he notes that 1 Tim 5:8, where believers are called to “provide” for their families, is not ascribed to men specifically, but to “anyone,” meaning man or woman. He concludes his exegesis with this important thought: “Maybe the separation of spheres between men and women and their role in home and society are [sic] marked more by cultural ideals than biblical commands” (59).

Pyle pivots to a different authority: the example of Jesus Christ. If one defines masculinity through Jesus’s example, it creates an atmosphere that permits men to rest when they feel weary, and allows them to feel more in-tune with their emotions.

This, according to Pyle, does not make one any less of a man, but makes one “fully human.” As Pyle concludes, “In Christ, we do not see the distinctions between men and women emphasized; rather, gender takes second place to imitating Christ” (156). What makes one “man enough” is not culturally stipulated; rather, it is based on how one follows Jesus’s example.

Pyle reveals a church subculture that holds men hostage to an impossible standard. In the same breath that Christians observe that not all women are homemakers, one needs also to admit that not all men are rugged breadwinners. While one would not wish to diminish the plight that women have suffered at the hand of the church, Pyle does present an important perspective that needs to be taken into account.

Pyle’s most pertinent observations revolve around the obligation for men to act “manly.” As mentioned above, in this cultural (and perhaps artificial) definition, men are silently encouraged to suppress their emotions and adopt a kind of neo-stoicism. Unfortunately, many conservative evangelicals often look to the Jesus in the temple with the whip at the expense of the Jesus who weeps (70). Accordingly, their perspective suggests that men must be strong—even when there are times when they are unable to be strong. Yet, if Christians subscribe to this definition of masculinity, they must reject the lyrics they are taught to sing from infancy: “We are weak, but he is strong.” Men should be allowed to admit that they are weak, or that they cannot carry the load by themselves.

Pyle has produced a fine study that necessitates only a few criticisms. There is an uneven balance between personal anecdotes and interaction with the Bible—the latter of which feels secondary in a number of places. Similarly, this study could have benefitted from a more thorough look into church history: Pyle rarely mentions important historical figures who could have buttressed his thesis. With these minor criticisms in mind, as a popular rather than academic study, this book certainly accomplishes its goal. It presents an important perspective that is frequently ignored within the church today.

This volume—like those of Evans and Bessey before it—is attractive for a variety of reasons: its thought-provoking subject matter is matched with a perfect cocktail of wit and honesty. There is little doubt that the church would benefit were it seriously to consider Pyle’s study.



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