

DETAILS



Non-Toxic Masculinity *Recovering Healthy Male Sexuality*

April 18, 2023 | \$18, 208 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0502-6

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We Need to Rethink Masculinity

Dismissals such as “boys will be boys” and “not all men” are ingrained in our world. And the purity culture of our youth sold the same excuses with a spiritual spin. Can we break the toxic cycle and recover a healthy identity for men?

In *Non-Toxic Masculinity*, Zachary Wagner tells men, “If you are in Christ, this is your problem—and you should be part of the solution.”

Wagner explores what has gone wrong with the conservative American church’s vision of masculinity, with particular attention to purity culture and its assumptions about male sexual desire. Part cultural commentary, part biblical study, and part personal reflection, *Non-Toxic Masculinity*

- Explores the roots of purity culture and its assumptions about masculinity
- Presents a renewed, biblical picture of masculinity and male sexuality
- Addresses specific aspects of masculinity, including adolescence, sex, marriage, and fatherhood
- Places the conversation in the context of the current #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements

Reflecting on his own coming of age in the purity culture movement and ongoing recovery from sexual shame, Wagner confronts harmful teaching from the American church that has distorted desire, sex, relationships, and responsibility. For those—both men and women—who feel disillusioned and adrift, this book offers a renewed vision for Christian male sexuality founded in empathy and selflessness.

Gerald Hiestand, senior pastor of Calvary Memorial Church and cofounder of The Center for Pastor Theologians, said, “In a world awash in toxic masculinity, Zach Wagner’s book accomplishes two important things. First, it unmask the pitfalls of ‘purity culture’ and its implicit prosperity-gospel assumptions about sex, virginity, and marriage. Second, it reminds men that male sexuality preaches the embodied gospel truth that ‘every man is called to be a father to the world in his own way.’ Both of these truths are vital to healthy male sexuality. I commend *Non-Toxic Masculinity* to all the jaded Christian men who have been burned by purity culture and who are looking for a new yet distinctly Christian way forward.”

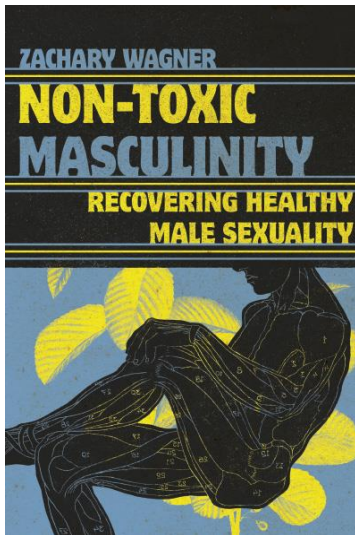


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The Problem of Toxic Masculinity

The problem of toxic masculinity is much bigger than contemporary expressions of Christian faith. Mistreatment of women and men's routine dehumanization of others have been features of every culture in human history (Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: The Survivor of the Stanford Sexual Assault Case Tells Her Story*). If Christianity ceased to exist tomorrow, toxic masculinity would remain. The problem is not, in its essence, a Christian problem. Rather, it is a problem of human nature.

Part of the issue stems from the biological differences between male and female bodies. Generally speaking, adult male bodies have a raw advantage of physical size and strength when compared to female bodies. We might call this pattern "embodied male advantage," and it is, like it or not, a fact of nature. This doesn't mean that male bodies are better for performing *all* physical tasks or that male embodiment is somehow superior to female embodiment, but it should not be controversial to say there are biological patterns of difference.

Differences in physical strength matter a lot when it comes to injustice. For instance, my five-year-old daughter has a clear embodied physical advantage over my three-year-old son. She often uses this advantage to create an unjust system of play. She's bigger, stronger, and more practiced in appealing to the authority structure of the home (her parents). The fact that she's a girl and he's a boy is irrelevant. If she chooses, she can push him around, grab toys out of his hand, and assert her will over his.

Something similar has happened with men and women in human society. Embodied male advantage gives men power to pursue their own selfish ends if they so choose. They can assert their will on both individual women and women as a group. These physical advantages have formed the foundation for what is sometimes called *male privilege*. Not every aspect of male privilege is about physical strength, but that strength formed its starting point.

Male embodied advantage leads to male privilege.

Is this embodied advantage itself wrong or evil? Is it sinful to be a man or to have a male body? Does male advantage necessarily turn into toxic masculinity? The answer to all three of these questions is no.

The expression of maleness becomes toxic when men leverage their embodied advantage to harm and dehumanize others. Oxford Dictionaries Online gives the following definition for toxic masculinity: "a set of attitudes and ways of behaving stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on men and on society as a whole." I listed some of these attitudes and behaviors in the introduction: emotional repression, entitlement, aggression, and so on. What people associate with toxic masculinity can be largely summed up in a single word: *dehumanization*.

Here is my working definition: *toxic masculinity is a way of thinking, living, and acting as a male that dehumanizes self and others*. To put it another way, toxic masculinity involves men leveraging embodied male advantage for selfish ends, thus dehumanizing others and men themselves.

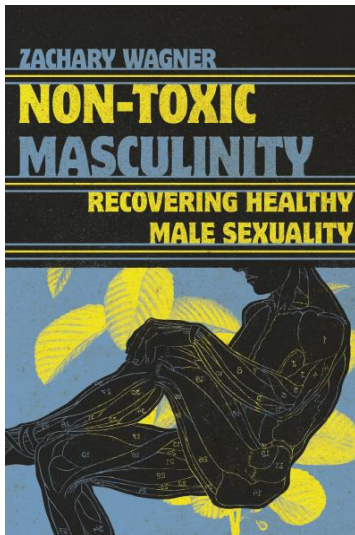


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Though we might want to, we can't wish away women's physical disadvantages. Instead, we should acknowledge the differences between male and female bodies and think together about how to build a safe and equitable society (and church) where both men and women can flourish. When men allow their embodied advantage to morph into dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors, they become complicit in the fracturing of the world and society. Christians call this breaking of the world *sin*. Thus, for Christians, a good way to understand toxic masculinity is, simply, the distinct way that sin has broken and fractured the expression of male embodiment.

Maybe you believe Christianity is oppressive, patriarchal, and violent at its core. Maybe you believe toxic masculinity cannot be separated from the Christian faith. I understand why you might. Too often Christians are at the center of abuse scandals. Too often professing Christians defend and protect abusers, not the abused. Even worse, "Christian" abusers use their spiritual influence as a weapon against their victims. In one sense, the Christian faith cannot be separated from the long history of misogyny including ongoing, even egregious examples. In another sense, I believe oppression and violence against women is contrary to the true spirit of the Christian faith. Christians should both address the manifestations of toxic masculinity in our own communities and oppose toxic masculinity in broader society. The church should be a place of healing and resurrection, not abuse and dehumanization.

—Taken from chapter three, "The Dehumanization of Men: What Is Toxic Masculinity and Where Do We See It in the Church?"

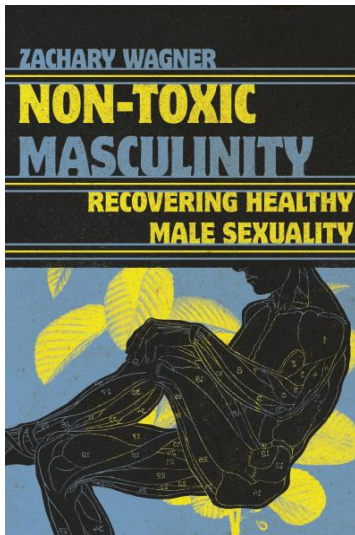


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Zachary Wagner Unmasks Pitfalls of “Purity Culture”

“In a world awash in toxic masculinity, Zach Wagner’s book accomplishes two important things. First, it unmasks the pitfalls of ‘purity culture’ and its implicit prosperity-gospel assumptions about sex, virginity, and marriage. Second, it reminds men that male sexuality preaches the embodied gospel truth that ‘every man is called to be a father to the world in his own way.’ Both of these truths are vital to healthy male sexuality. I commend Non-Toxic Masculinity to all the jaded Christian men who have been burned by purity culture and who are looking for a new yet distinctly Christian way forward.”

—Gerald Hiestand, senior pastor of Calvary Memorial Church and cofounder of The Center for Pastor Theologians

“Finally, a book that treats men like they can actually be full followers of Jesus! Zachary Wagner doesn’t berate men, blame men, or condescend to men. He just tells the truth. The church has told a story of manhood that is toxic and looks nothing like Jesus, and the fruit has been rotten—broken, shame-filled men. Ruined relationships. Shattered women. But it doesn’t need to be this way. By rediscovering what Christic manhood looks like, we can aim for emotional wholeness and health, especially in our sexuality. I’m excited to see men and women embrace this message!”

—Sheila Wray Gregoire, podcaster at Bare Marriage and author of *The Great Sex Rescue*

“Boldly vulnerable, Zachary Wagner gives voice to the brokenness of male sexuality within contemporary Christianity, and in so doing, points the way toward healing. Because he is dogmatic only about the goodness of the gospel, readers from a broad spectrum are invited to join him as he continues to process the complexity of these issues. As one who advocates for the value of women in the Christian story, I am thrilled to recommend this book as one that restores and cultivates the God-given value of men.”

—Amy Peeler, associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and associate rector at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

“For millions of men shaped by evangelical purity culture, Non-Toxic Masculinity will be a breath of fresh air. Rather than offer lists of prohibitions and idealistic expectations, Zachary Wagner situates the conversation within a broader redemptive narrative—one that allows for imperfection while rejecting the dehumanization of women and men, one that decenters sexual morality without abandoning biblical guidance, and one that is filled with humility and grace.”

—Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*

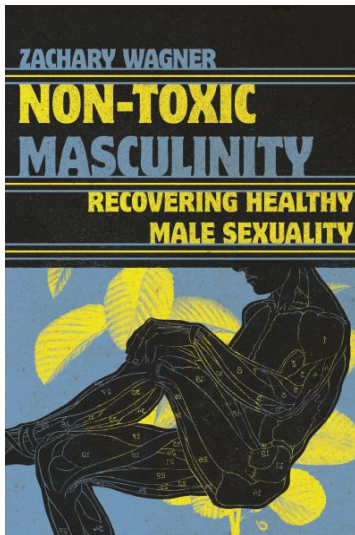


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"Zachary Wagner has written a book with perceptive insights about pop-evangelical cultures of sex and sexuality. Wagner writes from the cauldron of experience—his own and his wife's—to tackle topics of church abuse, ideologies of purity, and unwholesome habits of porn and promiscuity. Wagner gets to the heart of the evangelical 'sex problem' and offers an alternative vision of masculinity rooted in love rather than lust management. This is truly a Christian vision of masculinity that is desperately needed in a #MeToo and #ChurchToo era."

—Michael F. Bird, academic dean and lecturer in New Testament at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia

"I am so glad to see this topic being addressed with the necessary frankness, common sense, personal insights, and biblical wisdom that Zachary Wagner brings to these pages. I've no doubt that Non-Toxic Masculinity will generate fruitful and much-needed conversations that will serve the church and people for generations to come."

—Karen Swallow Prior, research professor of English and Christianity and culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books*

"Personal, vulnerable, well-researched, compassionately argued, and affirming of a grand biblical vision of manhood as the Lord intended, Zach Wagner's Non-Toxic Masculinity is a welcome gift to the church. Wagner de-weaponizes male embodied advantage and human sexuality so that we might have a vision of masculinity that honors the human dignity of all persons. Any man with a hopeful vision for exemplifying Christ as single or married, in any season of life, should consider Wagner's presentation of God-fearing, fully male manliness. Any believer who hopes to promote healthy, Spirit-empowered manhood to the generations to come should soak up the portrayal of God's redemptive vision for manhood in the pages of this work."

—Eric C. Redmond, professor of Bible at Moody Bible Institute



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