**How Then Should Men Live?**

Our culture won’t say what a man should be. The church can.

Mike Cosper|August 31, 2023



Image: Rhett Noonan / Unsplash

Johnny Manziel doesn’t mention the gun until the third act of [*Untold: Johnny Football*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQHOWnoExSs), the Netflix documentary, released this month, about his brief career as an NFL quarterback. But when he does, he’s aiming it at himself. By that point, his career had flamed out, and all bridges to family, friends, teammates, and coaches had been burned.

“I had planned to do everything that I wanted to do at that point in my life,” Manziel says, as images flash by of Johnny Football waving stacks of cash and partying in Vegas. “And then my plan was to take my life,” he continues. “I still to this day don’t know what happened, but the gun just clicked.”

*Untold* is an anthology, focused on sports past and present. But the series title is almost too on the nose for the Manziel chapter: It’s more revelatory in what it doesn’t say than what it does, coming right to the edge of an uncomfortable reality at the heart of the story but flinching every time.

The documentary has plenty of space for Manziel’s dissolution and plenty of furrowed brows lamenting his collapse. But it doesn’t reckon with how people who should have cared for him enabled his “$5 million bender.” Nor does it present an alternative vision, even at the end, of who Johnny Football could have been. Johnny survived, and thank God—but what now? What kind of man will he become?

*Untold* isn’t alone in its unwillingness to face that question. What a man is, what he should be, what roles men may fill—these all seem to be beyond the scope of our culture’s current conversations about masculinity. We increasingly [know how to](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/july-august/wagner-purity-culture-non-toxic-masculinity.html) recognize and condemn “toxic masculinity,” and rightly so. But what about nontoxic ways to be a man? Better yet, what about going beyond merely avoiding toxicity to bring a constructive vision of masculine virtue to men in crisis?

Because we *are* in crisis, even if not so visibly as Manziel. The gap in his story is reflective of a larger gap in our cultural imagination. Richard Reeves, author of [*Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/february-web-only/richard-reeves-boys-men-gender-struggles.html)*,* describes it in terms of “social scripts.” In decades past, he says, the social script for men was fairly straightforward: Be a breadwinner, be a protector and guardian, and instill the values in your family that were handed down to you from your own father. It’s a script loaded with responsibility and purpose, and that was a burden most men felt eager to carry.

But the accompanying social script for women had serious flaws. The mid-century ideal gave women no sense of agency to choose a vocation outside the home, and women lacked the economic freedom to leave abusive and unfaithful marriages.

As women won economic independence, they not only rose to the challenge of equality but blew right past it. [By almost every conceivable measure](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/boys-left-behind-education-gender-gaps-across-the-us/#:~:text=The%20education%20gender%20gap%20emerges,about%20as%20well%20in%20math).), women and girls are outperforming men and boys in education. And while the pay gap has been slower to close, [evidence suggests it is indeed closing](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/04/13/in-a-growing-share-of-u-s-marriages-husbands-and-wives-earn-about-the-same/). (According to Reeves, [when you adjust the numbers](https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/11/11/richard-reeves-gender-equality-boys-school-men) to account for women taking unpaid leave to care for children, men and women are paid about equally.)

The new social script for women is at once purposeful and libertarian. Girls can do anything, as the slogan goes, including—if they want—pursuing a traditional model of marriage and family. Meanwhile, Reeves says, men have yet to find our new social script. The old role of breadwinner, protector, and spiritual head of the household isn’t merely viewed as quaint; it’s often seen as paternalistic or worse.

For some progressives, the best social script for men seems to be the role of ally—someone who uses his privilege to lift up others. Director Greta Gerwig envisions this role in *Barbie* with the character of Allan. Played by Michael Cera, Allan is the remarkably forgettable friend of Ken, deliberately—as with many of Cera’s best roles—a bland nonentity.

Allan isn’t really a hero. He’s not a love interest for Barbie, and we don’t know what happens to him in the end. Barbie herself embraces embodied, gendered humanity as the gift that it was meant to be. Ken recognizes the failure of his own “Kendom” and the absurdity of his utopia, but we’re left wondering what he’ll do next. With Allan, we don’t really care—but that’s the point. He’s just Allan the ally, and his only job is to support Barbie.

Forgive me if this sounds harsh, but no man wants to be Allan. No man wants to go to war to help Barbie reclaim her kingdom and end up forgotten in the friend zone. Allyship alone is simply not a compelling vision of masculinity.

But good luck finding an acceptable alternative in progressive spaces. Describe other attributes men long embraced as marks of masculinity—desire for competition, aggression, or strength—and you’ll discover that they’re [often treated as pathologies,](https://breakpoint.org/breakpoint-pathologizing-masculinity/#:~:text=Faced%20with%20all%20of%20these,%2C%20risk%2C%20and%20violence.%E2%80%9D) indistinguishable from a [toxic desire for sexual conquest](https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2020/1/21/21075528/boys-peggy-orenstein-masculinity-sex-hookup-culturehttps%3A/www.vox.com/the-highlight/2020/1/21/21075528/boys-peggy-orenstein-masculinity-sex-hookup-culture). It seems the only acceptable masculinity is one that historically would not be recognized as masculine at all.

The problem is different on the right, especially the very online right, where transgression against progressive pieties is sometimes half the fun (and most of the clicks). But here, the social script doesn’t look like the old one either.

Instead, you’ll find arguments about prepping for economic apocalypse, avoiding seed oils, and determining whether a new father should [ever change a single diaper](https://twitter.com/isabellarileyus/status/1693388687806284165). (He should change thousands, and if he’s a Christian, [he almost certainly will](https://twitter.com/BradWilcoxIFS/status/1694339178270441511).)

Unlike that of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, this masculinity is performative and reactionary, interested in aesthetics and display on social media more than the serious, lifelong work of being a good and faithful man. To the extent that it’s meant to be taken seriously (and mostly it’s not), it doesn’t seem interested in the formation of virtues that would make masculinity distinctly Christlike—such as gentleness, self-control, sobriety, compassion, and generosity.

Evangelicals have sometimes tried to provide an alternative script, with varying degrees of success. While [silly examples](https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/flamethrower-and-assault-rifle-prizes-in-us-church-raffle) of hypermasculinity abound, movements like [Promise Keepers](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/july-august/promise-keepers-racial-reconciliation-reconsidered.html) or the work of writers [like John Eldredge](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/novemberweb-only/11-10-21.0.html) struck a chord with a broad group of men—particularly when they spoke biblically about the attributes of masculinity that relate to fatherhood and the Fatherhood of God.

These movements come and go, and I suspect that has as much to do with consumer cycles as any deeper cultural shift. But the core idea of a biblical, fatherhood-based vision of masculine virtue could resonate regardless of the cultural milieu. While not all of us will be fathers, and far too many of us grew up without fathers, we all share a universal longing for a father—and even the shape of that absence can inform a vision of masculinity. We long for a presence who watches over us, providing and protecting when we feel weak or vulnerable, blessing and filling us with courage when we face conflict or obstacles. The doctrine of adoption informs that vision too, wherein we find ourselves claimed as sons and daughters by God our Father (Rom. 8:14-17).

Evangelicals could articulate a social script for our moment that accounts for the economic realities of a post-feminist world without ceding ground on our theological commitments about the meaning of marriage, the nature of men and women, and the goodness of being made in the image of God. We could celebrate the mysterious ways men and women are similar and different without indulging in stereotypes or enshrining a single, midcentury household economic arrangement as a supposedly divine ideal.

We could tell a story about men’s unique responsibility to shape Christians’ understanding of God as Father. We could recognize that men’s strength is a gift meant to be used in service and protection of others and that gender differences—seen in our contrast with the feminine attributes of our wives and daughters—are likewise a means of grace to be dignified, not belittled or diminished in either direction.

This kind of masculinity could empower men without authorizing us to become tyrants. It could honor our strength while recognizing that it exists to serve others. It could inspire hard work and ambition without fostering the illusion that a man must always fit shallow ideals of productivity and success.

Johnny Manziel achieved that success as very few men do, but he still found himself facing a gun. And his story is hardly unique. In the absence of a meaningful script for our lives, men are in crisis. In the past 30 years, men have [dramatically outpaced women](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8579049/) in deaths of despair. Last year, nearly [40,000 men committed suicide](https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/a-look-at-the-latest-suicide-data-and-change-over-the-last-decade/) in the US, four times the number of women who did so. A [growing portion of them](https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html) were in midlife, a season when many men are especially starved for purpose.

These deaths aren’t solely attributable to a missing social script, of course. But it should be no surprise that men starved for a constructive vision of masculinity would come to despair. Like preaching the message of the gospel, communicating a vision of embodied Christlikeness as men is necessary and regularly requires renewal. We need fresh language and new metaphors that are resonant with the longings of our moment and communicate to men not only who we can be but also who we are as bearers of God’s image.

Our culture is flinching away from this question. The church must not.

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