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Protestantism and the European-American Family: Like Oil and Water

Distinct from the often relentless stream of pro-family rhetoric in evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism, old-line liberal Protestant Christianity has molded family life silently, subtly, and most important—ambiguously. When I was asked to write about the religion I “know best” and “what it does” in terms of the family, I have to admit that no clear outline came to mind. Unlike those schooled in conservative evangelical James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family*, I have little conscious memory of anything explicitly taught about the family per se in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in which I grew up. Today, neither my denomination nor old-line Protestantism in general has made the family a central topic of discussion, despite recent political fervor surrounding related issues such as homosexuality and abortion.

I include this instance of writer’s block not to warn to the topic but because it is important to the theses on religion and the European-American family that eventually emerged. The murky relationship between old-line Protestant Christianity and the family is not just a personal conundrum. Ambiguity, paradoxical commands, and conflict between faith claims and family claims lie at the heart of Christianity both today and in the past. Furthermore, to a greater extent than Catholic theologians, old-line Protestant theologians have been hesitant to delimit the place of the family in their understanding of the whole of the Christian life.

Ultimately, these and other abiding convictions allowed me to proceed. The Protestantism I know exerts a powerful influence over family life, sometimes endorsing and protecting and sometimes seriously undercutting it. Protestant women, moreover, traditionally relegated to a secondary status and often caught between conflicting commitments of fam-

ily, work, and faith, have thus far experienced the ambiguities of the Christian family tradition to a far greater extent than most men have.

PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY AND FAMILY: A DOUBLE MESSAGE

Christianity has been the source of two, often diverging forces. On the one hand, it has functioned to build and sustain conventional, socially established relational structures and dynamics, whether in the form of the medieval sanction of celibacy and monastic life or the more recent influential image of the "traditional" family of breadwinner husband and homemaker wife. Indeed, it was precisely Christian endorsement of white, patriarchal, bourgeois family and economic structures that led many people in both feminist and black liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s to attack Christian belief as an oppressive ideology.

On the other hand, Christianity has served to undermine and transform conventional understandings of family life through other ideals internal to the Christian gospel—justice, the kingdom of God, baptism in Christ, *imago dei* (image of God). We can find equally powerful countermovements of feminist theologians, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and civil rights activists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who have seen Christianity as a source of revolutionary, liberational commands for love, equality, and justice in family and society.

With regard to the family, then, as well as to other issues, Christianity has been a complacent, sometimes moderate, and sometimes militant force. This divergent agenda of both building and breaking orthodox ideals of the "good family" is partially covert, because Christianity exerts its influence not just through its theology and Holy Scriptures but through religious traditions and practices and, more exactly, through congregational and familial life. Beliefs are embodied not just in formal religious dogmas and institutions but in the interactions around the communion table and around the hearth. This chapter illustrates these generalizations, both through historical material and through some of my own life experiences.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROTESTANTISM AND THE FAMILY: A CASE STUDY IN AMBIGUITY

From its beginnings, Christianity was not merely ambivalent about the social institutions of marriage and family; in some ways, it was hostile to them. In this it is distinct from other ancient religious practices. In the

Hellenistic era, both Jewish and Greco-Roman religions sanctioned the family and home as a site for daily and weekly prayers and for celebration of annual religious festivals. In Greco-Roman culture, this included worship of ancestors, gods, and goddesses, who protected the home. In Israelite religion, the extended family unit played an important role. Religious traditions were handed down from generation to generation; hence, religious education was located at the heart of home life. By contrast, Christian beliefs have often compelled family members to put their hearts in loyalties beyond the homestead.

In the Gospel narratives and in the early Christian community, biblical and theological claims about the kingdom, the "household of God," and the "new life in Christ" shift the locus of religious life from hearth to extrafamilial relationships. In vigorous, vivid hyperbole, Jesus declares in the Gospel of Luke, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26; cf. Matt. 10:37).¹ In another scene recounted in three Gospels, a crowd around Jesus tells him his mother and brothers are asking for him. Repudiating the claims of biological kinship, Jesus declares, "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3:33–35; cf. Luke 8:19–21 and Matt. 12:46–50). Later, from the height of the cross, Jesus creates new postfamilial bonds, telling the "disciple whom he loved" and his mother, "Woman, here is your son"; "Here is your mother" (John 19:26–27).

The focus here and elsewhere in Jesus' teachings is not on familial ties per se but on a personal relationship of an analogous but transcending sort. In early Christianity, the Christian congregation itself was treated as a larger family-type community, organized into "house churches" and sometimes assemblies of radical equality, with women in important leadership roles (Rom. 16:3). As recorded in Acts 4:32, "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." When Ananias and Sapphira deviated and Peter declared their deceit before God, they "fell down and died" (Acts 5:5, 10).

The antifamily sentiment and egalitarian counterculture of early Christianity created and, I argue in this chapter, continues to create certain social tensions. Over the centuries, Christian faith has asked people to "'hate' father, mother, spouse, children, to 'forget' wives or husbands they had married, to leave all things in pursuit of something greater than ordinary family life."² New Testament passages and the early church itself

functioned to subvert the patriarchal households of Jewish and Greco-Roman societies. Both Christian martyrdom and the later monastic movement are examples of the rejection of family responsibilities for the sake of a more radical testimony. In Roman Catholicism, marriage has almost always been a lesser calling. Although this judgment is largely a result of the connection between marriage and the long-standing negative evaluation of sexuality, the secondary station of the family in the Christian life has served to decrease further its role and value.

Then and now, the Christian community, not the family, is essential to Christian life. In theory at least, people do not think of faith as transferred from generation to generation. Believers are created anew through conversion to Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit, regardless of family history and situation. Today, congregations continue to create a different kind of familial community, which often stands in partial tension with the biological family or kinship group.

Yet also from the beginning, countermovements sought to reconnect social customs and Christianity. Next to the rejection of his original kindred we find Jesus helping his mother and blessing wedding wine and children. Unique among religious figures, he rebukes his disciples when they try to prevent people from bringing their children to him, telling them, "It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14). His comments on family-related matters such as divorce and adultery reflect an opposition not to the family per se but to conditions that violate divine laws of creation, such as the joining of husband and wife as one flesh. When asked about divorce, Jesus registered his opposition by remarking, "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' . . . Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:6, 9). Rather than rejecting family, he is intent on putting family claims in proper order and perspective.

In addition, the pseudo-Pauline authors of the household codes (epistles attributed to Paul but written by others in his style), concerned about the acceptability of Christianity within the Roman Empire, hoped to mitigate the socially disruptive effects of the egalitarian, antifamily trends within the early Christian community. Ephesians 5:21-6:9, equating male headship with Christ's headship of the church and requiring female submission, is among the most representative and influential of these codes. It mixes fresh, vivid ideals of husbands loving wives "as they do their own bodies"—becoming "one flesh"—with the hierarchical family order familiar to antiquity. On the one hand, rather than ruling over his domestic household as the designated autocrat of Jewish, Greek, and Roman patriarchy, the

husband is admonished to imitate the cherishing, protecting love of Christ. Yet, on the other hand, he is required to serve as the head. Here, side by side, we find at once a challenge to the patriarchies of the ancient world in the high ideal of husbandly benevolence and a concession to them with the return of the language of male headship and female submission. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether calls this "love patriarchy" because, at one and the same time, it "modifies traditional patriarchy" yet "nevertheless fundamentally discards the original Christian vision of equality in Christ."³

The patriarchal model of male headship perhaps triumphed above all when it became the family model so enthusiastically affirmed by the Protestant Reformers. Reformation theologians took the household codes as a definitive Pauline statement on the relationship between church and family. Embracing this particular, limited model as *the* biblical family was part of a dramatic divergence from the Roman Catholic Church that, in a more positive vein, reclaimed the value of family. The family, previously relegated to a secondary, profane status, was given a new, sacred role within the Christian life. Martin Luther categorically rejected celibacy and embraced family life as a font of religious inspiration. In his theology, there is no higher social calling than marriage. He himself left monastic life and raised a large and boisterous family. In his view, raising children was the "noblest and most precious work of them all."⁴

The family became "*an ecclesiola in ecclesia*," a "little church," with the father as household minister gathering his flock—his wife, children, and servants—around the hearth for scripture reading and prayer. Notably, while the wife became the "religious companion to her husband," women also lost the significant alternative avenues of religious fulfillment, education, and relative independence provided by monastic life.⁵ Women were to keep silent in church, to abstain from public teaching and preaching, and to seek godliness through the roles of mother and wife—avenues that proved limited, given the changes over the next several centuries.

For various, complicated reasons external and internal to church life, the Reformed Protestant effort to redeem family life has had trouble succeeding. External to the church, the public world of material production and the private world of domestic reproduction were severed from each other in the industrialization of the nineteenth century. The domicile was designated as the women's sphere, subordinate to the men's sphere and to the public worlds of church and society. In this century, technology, science, and political separation of church and state relegated religious piety and the church itself to the private realm. The marginalization of the fam-

ily and the church as secondary, "feminine" institutions deeply undercuts a theology built on their essential value.

Both women and men were misled by increasingly impossible vocational ideals and roles. Women received a double message. Unlike men, they were called both to transcend family life and to sacrifice almost everything for its sake. And many did so, losing sense of their own worth and rightful needs. Under the auspices of the Protestant work ethic, a religious value system in which hard work and prosperity were seen as reflecting God's blessing, men were called to transcend family life through vocational labor, and they did, but not as originally understood. The work ethic degenerated from a communal dedication to the creation of God's elect kingdom to the individualistic pursuit of personal achievement and material wealth of capitalist societies. Family duties held importance only insofar as they supported the ultimate cause of economic prosperity and success in the workplace.

Internal to Reformation theology, the very emphasis on freedom in Christ and the priesthood of all believers stained family loyalty. This Protestant principle subjects all human commitments to prophetic rebellion in the name of a righteous God. In the Anabaptist tradition, for example, in the covenantal relationship of marriage, the primary commitment is to God rather than to one another or to any human community.⁶ Practical theologian Janet Fishburn's *Confronting the Idolatry of Family* reminds contemporary Protestants of this heritage: "If love of family is stronger and deeper than love for Jesus Christ, this is family idolatry."⁷ When Christians link happy, churchgoing families with the prosperity of a Christian nation, they commit the blatant error of "religious familism" grossly misusing religious language and rituals to serve family and national needs, rather than for the glory of God.

Ultimately, the Protestant restoration of the family also collapsed because it was built on a precarious model of male headship and human sexuality that has come under attack from both within and without the Christian tradition. In the very process of reclaiming the import of the family as a sacred realm alongside other realms of human and Christian life, Reformation theology gave a diminished religious role to women and instituted social subordination as a divinely mandated order of creation. Moreover, while the Reformers affirmed marriage and children, they did little to change the negative evaluation of sexuality as shameful and unruly. As a result, despite women's proximity to the family and children, upheld by Luther and others as noble callings, the fate of women, perceived as closer to nature, childbearing, and the temptations of the flesh and the devil,

changed very little. In some cases, like that of the Puritan witch-hunts of New England or today's isolated housewife or abused spouse, female destiny deteriorated.

Nonetheless, a Christian trajectory present from the start, emphasizing not hierarchy but equality, collaboration, and the vitality of human embodiment in family, faith, and church, has had a steady, albeit silenced, influence and has acquired more prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Over against social convention, in recent years liberal Protestants have harkened to a revolutionary creed at the center of life in Christ: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28). Some have struggled to embody this imperative for the coequal discipleship of women and men in families and churches.

While an ethic of male dominance stands behind Protestantism and is alive and well in much of recent evangelical fundamentalism, old-line denominations have struggled to alter such definitions of the family. The 1980 United Methodist Church *Book of Discipline* (p. 89), for example, states this:

We understand the family as encompassing a wider range of options than that of the two-generational unit of parents and children (the nuclear family), single parents, couples without children. We affirm shared responsibility for parenting by men and women and encourage social, economic, and religious efforts to maintain and strengthen relationships within families in order that every member may be assisted toward complete personhood.

This emphasis on fostering the personhood of all humans, on social and religious justice, and on the equal claim of all persons to the love and acceptance of the church has pervaded denominational statements on the family from the liberal branch of Protestant Christianity in the last two decades. On related family issues, such as divorce, abortion, and homosexuality, statements of the Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Church of Christ, Methodists, and so forth reflect the need for greater openness and relative legitimation—however cautious, ambiguous, and anguish-ridden.⁸

Beyond that, however, overt controversy surrounds many related family matters, such as the use of abortion as an acceptable contraceptive method, the chastity and ordination of homosexuals, women as senior pastors of affluent and influential congregations, and female god imagery, to name a few issues. Across the board, such debates have led to the development of conservative caucuses within many denominations, often with separate, well-organized gatherings, mailings, and magazines.

Groups such as Disciple Renewal, Methodist Good News Movement, and Episcopalians United for Revelation, Renewal and Reformation often make family-related causes a central part of their protest of liberal church tenets, policies, and hirings. As of yet, however, none of these parties has led members in a mass exit to join denominations such as the Nazarenes or the Southern Baptists, who adamantly advocate male headship and female submission as the God-given family pattern and who oppose divorce, abortion, and homosexuality.

In one way or another, most North American Protestant families are caught in the age-old, still unresolved tensions between ideals of equality and ideals of male responsibility and between the claims of faith and the claims of family. Indeed, determining *the* Christian view of the family is currently at the center of a hot debate or "culture war," as sociologist James Davison Hunter contends. When he uses this term, he means a conflict that is not simply over public policies or the politics of, say, abortion, homosexuality, values in schools, and sexual harassment but is over "*how we as Americans will order our lives together.*" It is a debate over some very basic, nonnegotiable moral convictions and deeply embedded religious worldviews. And the family is, in Hunter's words, "the most conspicuous field of conflict."⁹ In fact, the way people answer the most intimate questions of how authority, power, responsibility, obligation, and sexuality are ordered in family life may be pivotal to the outcome of these other more political battles mentioned above.

Although old-line Protestantism is reluctant to enter the fray, the battle will continue to determine North American images of the "good family" and the "good life," and religious belief will make a difference. In the culture war, the influence of religious traditions on the family is quite a bit like the air we breathe and the gravity beneath our feet; we sometimes fail to notice how much we rely on them and how much force they really exert.

In the battle over who defines *the* Christian view, the sides are not equally well organized and represented. Liberals are far more concerned with respecting diversity—racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and so forth—than with arriving at a uniform family platform and theology. The press consistently gives greater coverage to conservative rhetoric on patriarchal family forms as representative of "Christian family values" than to the apparently out-of-fashion old-line Christian rhetoric of equality, justice, and acceptance as equally important Christian family values.

Fair or not, the culture war over the definition of the Christian family continues. As sociologist Judith Stacey observes, we are living in the very

midst of a "transitional and contested period of family history, a period *after* the modern family order, but before what we cannot foretell."¹⁰ We have come to a stage when the "logical progression of stages breaks down." No wonder my mind went blank. These are perplexing times for Protestantism and family. However, if this quick reading of the diversity of views of the family in Christian history shows anything, it is that old-line, liberal Protestantism continues to have an important role to play.

AN AMBIVALENCE LIVED: A PERSONAL CASE STUDY

Protestant heritage has undoubtedly shaped my convictions about the elements of a faithful generative life.¹¹ I can readily identify four premises that have crept into my living and being: (1) family and parenthood are valued as vocations in their own right, as worthy as celibate religious life; (2) love and children are signs of God's gift and blessing; (3) work is valued as a way people sustain themselves, provide for others, and otherwise collaborate with the living community—never simply as a means for making money; and at the very same time, (4) the call to follow God relativizes all familial and vocational commitments as secondary to the reign of God, the coming of the kingdom, and the new ecclesia (new church), with its reconstituted family of another sort.

As powerful as these ideals are, I know them as much from my academic study of religion as from any graphic memory of lessons taught and learned in worship or Christian education. And there is little in current old-line Protestant practice that offers guidance to the way these ideals are best embodied in the midst of contemporary conflicts. Even worse, a great deal I have learned about exhaustive self-sacrifice, sinful self-assertion, the dangers of sexual, bodily pleasure, and the secondary place of women and mothers in biblical stories and religious traditions serves me very poorly indeed.

As a white feminist mother with Protestant convictions, I stand upon several thresholds, caught between cultures. I am neither inside nor wholly outside the traditions and cultures that have held me and those that have liberated me. On the one hand, despite my best intentions, I still wrestle with the resilient cultural ideals of the "father-knows-best" family that gripped the heart of American Protestantism in the 1950s with a fierce tenacity. On the other hand, I live, albeit uneasily, with the new, still sketchily drawn ideals of equality and working women. I feel caught in a vicious circle that the women's movement identified: women's stories

have not been told and have not shaped cultural myths; without them, a woman is lost; women need stories that value their experiences.

For the most part, the task of arbitrating the contradictions between cultures has been up to individuals. My own efforts have been strained at several points. Daily, I get entangled in the so-called oppositions between public and private life. On the one hand, my "private" vocation as devoted mother collides head-on with my religious and feminist hopes for justice and equality in a "public" world not structured for, and even hostile to, children. On the other hand, my "public" vocation as professor clashes with my religious and maternal desires for creation, nurturing, and sustenance in the "private" world of child-play and domestic routine. My life refuses to fall into the traditional dichotomy between private and public arenas that Western society has fostered.

I face a double bind. My heritage as a Christian feminist mother involves a forceful dual disinheritance. First I question marriage and motherhood and fear the entrapping snares of domesticity, and then I find myself questioning tactics for success in a male-defined economy and materialistic society. Coming of age in the 1970s, I was acutely aware of the entrapments of home and children. But the birth of children and the admission of Christian faith reinforced my disinclination to become an "honorary man" in a world organized and run by men, the power of money, and the lure of status. Both the conventional "marriage plot," which assigns women the script of taking care of the private world, and the "quest plot," with its scripts of heroic adventure in public life, have valid appeal but serious flaws. Yet if neither of these narratives fits today's world, what's the new plot, for women and for men alike?

Resolution of the daily conflicts leads inevitably to contradictions, frustrations, ambiguous solutions, and hard choices. I recall one day, while trying to revise a manuscript during the nap time of one of my sons, feeling torn between my desire for total, uninterrupted silence and horror at my fantasy that a capricious god might grant me my impulsive wish and I would lose my children forever. This moment, indelibly stamped on my memory, illustrates vividly the dilemmas of creativity and procreativity that I seek to portray: one moment, I want to drop the whole project to turn to household matters of grave importance; the next, I want to see the project through, for its own value and for the love of my vocation. A hundred times—and not for the last time, by any means—I have wondered, Am I attempting a self-defeating task, trying to "conceive" in professional and familial ways at the same time? No matter how a mother designs her life—whether she stays home, works at home, works outside the home—most

would admit that conflicts plague their resolutions to questions of family and vocation.

Family role distinctions, however distorted and unjust, remain a backbone of social order, undergirding not just society's reproductive arrangements but, more plainly, how people see and understand the world. People and institutions have a heavy investment in perpetuating these distinctions. Ambiguity in gender identity, from the dilemma of mothers who work to the ambiguity of transsexuality, is amazingly "difficult to tolerate," observes feminist sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein in *Deceptive Distinctions*. As the movie *The Crying Game* proves so powerfully, people are terribly disturbed when known gender categories are disrupted. They are uncomfortable with the inconsistency, the lack of clarity, and the impossibility of closure. Although adults learn far more sophisticated ways than do children to camouflage their uneasiness when a young father arrives at a preschool tea and his wife comes and talks about her profession, or when an unmarried woman talks about her child-rearing plans, they are just as uncomfortable. In the end, Epstein remarks, society tends to "punish those who deviate" from general practices.¹²

Almost immediately between my husband Mark and me, the physiological disparities of bearing and nursing children necessitated a re-appraisal of the mutuality internal to our relationship. However, these differences did not lessen our religious and cultural commitment to partnership. Nor did the differences lessen my desire or need for my own work. Rather, they intensified my vocational pursuit and began to teach us the complicated lessons of the arduous practice of a mutuality that embodies more fully the tension inherent in the biblical commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). In retrospect, the period of acute physical difference was relatively brief and gave way to the trickier problems of socialized gender differences. This phase proved a worthy testing ground for the breadth and depth of our commitment to a joint participation in parenting.

We discovered that the mutuality we wanted to maintain could not be spelled out as easily as kitchen duty (and that wasn't easy), but it required a measured and steady response to the constantly emerging, evolving needs of our children for love and our need to love ourselves, as parents and otherwise. Actualizing this mutuality amid the flux and disparities between us required compensation for the person who had given too much. It required flexibility, improvisation, and support. Daily, we tried to find ways to balance the inequities of the demands that my physical proximity to the children created for both of us and to build avenues for

common participation, often with little outside encouragement and few supportive structures. This sometimes meant intentionally inverting and overriding what seemed our natural impulses. When it seemed right and necessary, it even meant overriding the real, physical inclinations of the "gut" with an affirmation of the deeper realities that our socialization had denied us—Mark's physical experience of the lure of our children and my experience of a desire for creative work.

In other words, something more than a "revision of household rules and the alternation of household roles" is required for equality in contemporary families. Biblical scholar William Countryman argues that complex moral and religious shifts are necessary:

It involves new understandings of manliness and womanliness that can come about only with some pain and anxiety as well as some sense of liberation and joy. If the husband gives up the image of himself as sole ruler . . . he must also give up its spiritual equivalent—the image of himself as the family's unique sacrificial sustainer, isolated in his moral strength and grandeur. If the wife gives up being the servant of all . . . she must also give up the spiritual vision of herself as the one who gives all for others' good. . . . None of this will be easy.¹³

Learning new moral and religious values and virtues is never easy.

Our choices have assumed a basic responsiveness on the part of our respective employing institutions—the church in Mark's case and the seminary in mine—that does not prevail in most working institutions. While seldom articulated, this responsiveness has something to do with our employers' identities as religious institutions. While valuing family and work, Protestantism recognizes the limits of earthly devotions and the dangers of idolatry, whether it be excessive concern with material wealth, workaholism, or even excessive familism. Church teachings juxtapose the "treasures on earth," which moths and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, with the "treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19–20). One cannot "serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24b). One ought not be solely loyal or even heavily committed to the limited, albeit worthy, values of one's own work or one's family. In this vein, religiously committed people with whom we have worked have understood our mutual commitment to the less tangible, less material rewards of family life.

At the same time, there have been limits to this understanding. There have been times when the institutions did not want to budge, as with certain requests for paternity leave and reduced time, and we simply had to live with our frustrations. More profoundly, I have found the practices of old-line churches in general peculiarly less receptive to the struggles of

people in their midst and more resistant to challenging the status quo than I anticipated. While national denominational meetings may use inclusive language and elect women officials, when women arrive at the communion table as elders in local congregations, they often still pray to a "Father God." When my first son reached age three, he insisted that God is male. Who could blame him for claiming what he had inevitably heard and seen? Sociologist David Heller's study of *The Children's God* reveals that my son is not unique.¹⁴

Old-line Protestant traditions have been especially quiet about generative responsibilities. In contrast to more conservative traditions, many people in old-line congregations now admit that fathers do not always know best. But they have not determined who does if fathers don't or, more precisely, they no longer know exactly what is best. Many people in the pews, especially those under age fifty, consider theological doctrines of male headship and female submission, narrowly extrapolated from Ephesians 5:22, to be wrong. When these household codes appear as part of the worship lectionary, if they are read at all, one can practically feel the dissent as telling looks between mothers, daughters, and, sometimes, husbands and fathers ripple through the congregation. Women and men, most seem to agree, are equal before God.

Exactly what this means, however, for the common life of work and love in churches, in families, and in jobs is less clear. In contrast to early feminist efforts, the ambiguous meanings of equality surface not so much around still unresolved questions about inclusive God language or even female leadership but most explicitly when concrete chores arise, whether within the home or within the church community itself. Women are elders, even ministers, and we may have fewer prayers directed to "Our Father," but who runs the Sunday school program now?

The caring demands of the institutional church, from nursery duty to funeral meals, assume a woman's active participation. Most women under fifty now work. In the next decade, 80 percent of these working women will be of childbearing age, and 90 percent of those will become pregnant. Most continue to take on major responsibilities with their families. Yet the traditional expectations of women in churches have not adapted to changes in women's lives. Women still usually fix the funeral meals, staff the nursery, cook the potlucks, clean up, teach Sunday school, run rummage sales, and now, in addition, take on new roles of leadership.

One male minister, who identifies the "changing role of women" as a "convenient" point of entry into his discussion of the major changes he has witnessed in a few decades of parish life, sees the problem from the other

side. Sadly, he is not particularly concerned about the reconstruction of a healthy theology of the family and its practice or, for that matter, about the fact that feminism has not had much impact on liturgical language or women's groups in his congregation. What bothers him is the decline of "numerous, reliable, and ambitious" volunteers and the difficulty of church attendance on Sundays when parents work.¹⁵ There are no bodies to run the programs. A female minister displays the same blindness to the need to reconceive Protestant views on the family in her recent article "Serving Potlucks and Pulpits."¹⁶ Contrary to the impression left by the title, she voices no concern at all about the implications of this double load for women and focuses entirely on the ways in which the women ministers can now get along with the women in pews. She, too, overlooks the nature of the conflicts.

Many ministers and old-line congregations have lost touch with the women and men in their midst who have felt the impact of the revolutions in family life of the past two decades. Mary Guerrero Congo, feminist Roman Catholic and mother of two, connects her crisis of faith directly to her new powers and burdens as a laboring, caring mother:

It would gradually become painful and then intolerable for me to sit in church and watch robed men, who had cooks and housekeepers running the rectory for them, playing out the supposedly sacred roles of giving "new life" to children in baptism, children they had never labored to birth, and feeding such children with sacred bread they had never labored to bake.¹⁷

This robbed her of any sense of her own essential place as a mother in the church and in religion.

Although on one level I knew that it is God who gives new life and new hope in baptism and communion, on another level I experienced a disenchantment similar to Guerrero Congo's when I looked upon a crèche scene of kings, shepherds, and father, absent of women except for Mary, who in Protestant sanctuaries fades away into the shadows. Carrying thirty extra pounds of baby, and later, bearing the sticky weight of nursing, told me I knew something about the giving of one's body and blood that did not seem reflected in the way the rituals of communion and baptism are enacted. It seemed as if in its most powerful rituals and stories, a male church had forsaken women and then wrongly appropriated the bounty of female bodily knowledge.

Conservative churches clearly advocate a return to the so-called traditional family. Old-line churches stand in the cross fire between the feminist revolution and conservative trends. When all is said and done, they

pay little heed to the transformations of the former and to the hazardous retrenchments of the latter. The moral majority claims the image of Eden as home, while radical feminism claims the exodus story. In this scenario, a woman must either return home to save the family from decline, observes theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, or she must abandon the oppressive confines of home and church as hopelessly corrupt.¹⁸ Most women in old-line congregations are caught somewhere in between.

A "conspiracy of silence," in Janet Fishburn's words, enshrouds what happens in the family lives¹⁹ and, I must add, in the work lives of church members. Many old-line clergy and members have relegated family and work problems to the private realm. They seldom question deeply entrenched conventions about family privacy and unwritten rules about what can and cannot be discussed. During the "Joys and Concerns" segment in the small church worship service I attend, certain events such as anniversaries, deaths, acceptable illness, and hospitalizations are mentioned, but many authentic concerns such as divorce, infertility, abortion, domestic stress and violence, teen-parent conflicts, and vocational conflicts and choices are taboo.

Immense anxieties surround these issues, especially when changes in images of family mean giving women new voice and authority and diminishing the assumed priority and prerogatives of men and men's work. If nothing else, for many men, women's equal participation in life remains an intrusion and a hassle. The intrapsychic discomfort of changes in family role expectations runs far deeper than most people anticipate. Some of the apprehension is also intergenerational. Since most congregations are communities of many generations, members are most resistant to changes of any kind that expose generational differences. And changes in family relations today do just that.

Two different groups characterize my congregation: those born after and those born prior to World War II. By and large, the latter group assumes, even if its members do not practice, a homogeneous, unified moral code. Among other things, this moral code prohibits masturbation, premarital intercourse, extramarital intercourse, and homosexuality and discourages interracial marriages, divorce, and even discussion of suicide, adultery, children out of wedlock, and other misfortunes. The younger generation is less likely to be imbued with most of the same moral ideals, professing a relative acceptance for many, if not all, of the behaviors that those born before World War II forbid or dispute. For most people born after World War II, "no moral issue has the kind of black-and-white clarity . . . that it had for those who came of age before 1960."²⁰

People across the generations may not fully understand or accept one another's worldview. Usually, people prefer to operate as if nothing has changed. But a great deal has changed. Younger members' work and family lives follow new moral codes, in which sexual relations have changed, the woman is no longer the "keeper of the springs," the man has more responsibilities than "bringing home the bacon," and unexpected, unheard-of complications arise. Pure rational discussion is inadequate to the task of intellectual and practical change. Change requires a new level of engagement, conflict, and empathy that many old-line congregations and families are bound to find most trying.

Going to church was what my mother called a "good habit." Although I remember few explicit church teachings on the family, beliefs were enacted. I recall vividly my ten-year-old cognitive dissonance when the church voted to allow women as deacons and then elders. To young eyes adapted to only men marching down the aisles in dark suits, these women looked starkly out of place. Now this memory simply serves to remind me of the extent to which resistance to gender inclusivity and the equal status of women and men is deeply embedded in the human psyche and social systems, including religious traditions.

In contrast, although Fishburn derides the "family pew" as a sign of the "domestic captivity" of the church, that we—my mother, father, brothers, myself—sat together honored the value of human vulnerability and connection within the family fold. Going to church was one of the primary activities we did together as a whole family, with few other parallels. My parents' care for my brothers and me, however limited by their own foibles, was an essential context in which they practiced what they believed and I learned about the love of God. The rites of passage of church education, youth Sunday, church camp, communion, and, most significantly, adult baptism were offered to me equally, as to my brothers, with no distinction based on my sex, thus verifying my place as a child of God within life and within the kingdom. Our congregation created a new and different kind of familial community oriented toward looking beyond individual, familial well-being and toward working together in the wider community for the common good. Different from school and neighborhood, in church I made friends and commitments I might not have otherwise.

CHANGING OLD HABITS

This excursion into Protestant history and my own case illustrate the ambiguous relationship between family ideals and Christian faith. The tension

between family claims and faith claims is influenced both by cultural pressures and by theological interpretations of original doctrines and beliefs.

On the one hand, Protestantism has honored children as models of righteousness and the family as a place where other-centered love can be learned and practiced. Over against the pressures of a fast-paced, product-oriented, technological society, Christian rituals, symbols, and stories point to divergent values about life's priorities and ultimate meaning. Captured in key scripture verses, these values strengthen families as they negotiate the demands of contemporary life—"Love one another" (John 13:34); "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13); "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matt. 20:16); "Let the little children come . . . for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matt. 19:14). More general beliefs about justice, kindness, and walking humbly with God and about the kingdom and Christian baptism validate the worth of all of human creation and the equal engagement of both men and women in securing human fulfillment. Beliefs about divine creation, sustenance, and redemption sustain families through normal life-cycle transitions and through unexpected disruptions and tragedies. Christian tradition provides human connection, stability, and meaning, within families and between families.

Yet Christian ideals and structures of stability have also lent themselves to exploitation, oppression, and violence. Over the course of its history, Christianity has reinforced a culturally inherited patriarchal structure for the family. This model rears its ugly head in the New Testament household codes. It comes to fruition in Reformation Christianity and ripens in conservative circles today. Unfortunately, ideals of male headship and female submission have served as a reinforcement of, rather than a challenge to, violent behavior in families. Church affiliation has been correlated with statistics for wife abuse and father-daughter incest.²¹ In the end, the church as family and the models of family that Christianity has endorsed over the past two thousand years remain flawed and limited institutions, as Christ himself knew and proclaimed.

In a real sense, although family life and family churchgoing can be important avenues for learning about and practicing Christian faith, rigid, religiously ordained family structures and "family pews," when unreflected on and approaching idolatry, are not good habits. Changing old habits to bring in the kingdom remains an arduous task. Within Christianity, however, there remains an important liberating precedent for breaking the ties of bondage, whether of kings or fathers, and creating new households of freedom.

NOTES

1. All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

2. Margaret Farley, "The Church and the Family: An Ethical Task," *Horizons* 10, 1 (1983): 50–71, esp. 53.

3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "An Unrealized Revolution: Searching Scripture for a Model of the Family," *Christianity and Crisis* (October 31, 1983): 399–404, esp. 403.

4. William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 220.

5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Church and Family II: Church and Family in the Medieval and Reformation Periods," *New Blackfriars* (February 1984): 77–86, esp. 84.

6. See Barbara Hargrove, "Family in the White American Protestant Experience," in *Families and Religions: Conflict and Change in Modern Society*, eds. William Y. D'Antonio and Joan Aldores (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983), 113–16.

7. Janet Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family: A New Vision for the Household of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 50.

8. See Hargrove, "Family in the White American Protestant Experience," 120–33.

9. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 42; his emphasis above.

10. Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaveal in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 18, emphasis added.

11. Most of the material in this section is based on selections from chapters 1, 5, and 8 of my book *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). Reprinted by permission.

12. Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender, and the Social Order* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 13.

13. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 260.

14. David Heller, *The Children's God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

15. Robert G. Kemper, "Where Have All the Assumptions Gone?" *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 77, 1 (1987): 5–6.

16. Sharon Watkins, "Disciples Women in 1993: Serving Potlucks and Pulpits," *The Disciple: Journal of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* 131, 5 (May 1993): 8–11.

17. Mary Guerrera Congo, "The Truth Will Set You Free, but First It Will Make You Crazy," in *Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience*, ed. Elizabeth Dodson Gray (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable, 1988), 76-84, esp. 78.

18. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 347-48.

19. Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family*, 141.

20. *Ibid.*, 30.

21. Lenore E. Walker, *The Battered Woman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); Marie H. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the two diverging forces in Protestant Christianity? What are the implications of such forces for the family? Be specific.
2. What New Testament teachings shift Christianity's emphasis from family ties to personal relations? Is a similar emphasis at work in Protestant Christianity today? Is Protestant Christianity a New Testament church? Explain your answer. Use examples.
3. What does the author mean when she describes the family as "an ecclesiola in ecclesia"? Do you agree? Why? Why not?
4. Describe the diminishing role of women in the Protestant Reformation. What are two reasons for this negative evaluation of women during the Protestant Reformation? Can you think of other reasons for the decline of women's power that occurred as a result of the Protestant Reformation?
5. From the author's personal experiences, what are four premises that show her understanding of the Protestant heritage and notions of family? List and describe.