

Conservative Christian men aren't the tyrants they're made out to be. Yes they believe in headship, but they've not dictators, they've more like...

Soft Patriarchs

reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder

Over the last number of years fathers, especially the Christian, conservative kind, have been getting a bad rap.

Promise Keepers, a group that encourages Christian men to be better husbands and fathers, was denounced by Patricia Ireland, past president of NOW, as "a feel-good form of male supremacy" designed to "keep women in the back seat."

When the Southern Baptists issued a statement in 1998 affirming the father's headship of the family they were denounced as well. Journalists Cokie Roberts and Steve Roberts warned Americans that this sort of thing could lead "to abuse, both physical and emotional."

In a provocatively titled 1991 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion called *Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together*, Donald Capps argued that conservative Protestant parenting is abusive and authoritarian. He said that children are "betrayed, exploited, and abused in the name of religion" – a religion that draws on the notion of divine sovereignty and human sinfulness to prescribe corporal punishment as a valuable form of parental discipline.

But as W. Bradford Wilcox shows in his book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, the critics of Christian-conservative fathers have got it all wrong. His conclusions are based on an in-depth study of the surveyed attitudes and practices of married men of the so-called "religious right." This University of Virginia associate professor of sociology doesn't have an axe to grind – his book is not some religious or political polemic but, rather, a scrupulously balanced analysis of three large-scale American surveys conducted from the late 1980's through the '90s.

Wilcox focused in on men's attitudes and behaviors towards the family. He examined three particular groups of men: conservative Protestant men, mainline Protestant men, as well as men who were not affiliated with any denomination. Conservative Protestant fathers – at least the ones who attend church frequently – turn out to be far more affectionate with and emotionally invested in their wives and children than are their counterparts among either mainline Protestants or the unchurched.

The Sexual Revolution changes everything

Before the 1960's and 70's men were very sure of their role in society – it was a patriarchal society and they understood what was expected of them. But the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and the rise of feminism changed all that.

This revolution ushered in a rush of change: easy divorce, the gay rights movement, relaxed attitudes toward premarital sex, and ready access to contraception and abortion. It also created an expectation for more and more married women to have careers outside of the home. A host of movements – for civil rights, against the Vietnam War, for women's liberation – appeared on the scene, calling into question the legitimacy of the traditional American way of life. And organized religion lost

much of its privileged status as a central player in American society and key arbiter of the nation's spiritual and moral life.

Mainline churches capitulate

The mainline liberal churches quickly embraced the spirit of this cultural revolution. Wilcox describes these churches as simply “accommodationists,” espousing what he calls “Golden Rule Christianity.” Sermons in these mainline churches depicted God not as judge or disciplinarian, but as a father who befriends, comforts, and loves his flock in an unconditional fashion. One liberal pastor said: “Perhaps all of us can cease to see ourselves as sinners in the hands of an angry God and know that we are children held in the arms of a loving Father – a Father who seeks to throw a party in our honor.”

Under the influence of feminism, mainline churches are now much more likely to use gender-neutral language and to incorporate images of God as mother into Sunday worship and everyday spirituality. According to Wilcox, the liberal leadership quickly adopted a positive view of the new morality of the 60s and 70s. They, by and large, capitulated to secular-elitists acceptance of extramarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, and other practices conservative Christians view as detrimental to moral life and family health. Since the early 1980s, mainline churches have made a determined effort to be inclusive of all family types and have accordingly become more hesitant about offering prescriptive advice on appropriate conduct regarding the family. For example, one national survey found that 73 percent of mainline Presbyterian pastors think that the church should be “tolerant of family changes (divorce, remarriage, same-sex couples) now taking place.” In *Christian Marriage and Family* (1988) pastoral theologians John Patton and Brian Childs argue that the structure of a family is not important; instead, they embrace a pluralistic model of family life, writing that “there is no ideal form for the Christian family toward which we should strive...The stress on the structure of the nuclear family...contributes to the ignoring of others in less traditional family structures.” Mainline churches are usually also pro-abortion or as they call it, “pro-choice.” Their “pro-choice” orientation is seen in the numerous denominational pronouncements on the issue of abortion, as well as in the generally pro-choice attitudes reported by their clergy and laity. These liberal leaders do not derive their teachings from the infallible Scripture but, rather, from the insights derived from the contemporary world.

The mainliners show a basic confidence in human nature, believing that man is basically good. In keeping with this optimistic view of human nature, children are encouraged to think of themselves as autonomous moral agents. Since it is assumed that children are naturally good, they should be reasoned with in ways that respect their autonomy; they need not to defer to the authority of adults. Consequently, parenting programs in mainline churches stress non-authoritarian, democratic parenting practices. There is also a low level of support for corporal punishment.

Mainline churches favor the therapeutic ethic of self-realization, as well as the therapeutic ideals of personal growth, interpersonal authenticity, and emotional support. Their model of pastoral care stresses personal fulfillment over adherence to traditional moral standards. The capitulation to the spirit of the age, and the stress on therapeutic model of pastoral care have greatly contributed to the inability to articulate a clearly defined vision of what family life should look like or even to focus much at all on the family itself.

Conservative churches push back

Conservative Protestants viewed the social unrest of the 1960s and 1970s – war protests, drug use, race riots, and so on – as portents of the potential collapse of American civilization. And to the great surprise of the liberal media and the mainline pundits, these conservative Christians did not hoist the white flag of surrender.

Instead, they made an aggressive counter cultural push to shore up the traditional family. One indication of this concern is the large number of organizations that emerged in the late 1970s to defend the traditional family – from political organizations like Jerry Falwell's *Moral Majority* and Beverly LaHaye's *Concerned Women for America* to pastoral organizations like Dr. James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*, which has since grown into a \$100-million Christian family ministry. Dobson offers as an antidote to parental permissiveness his own blunt, homespun advice about parenting in general, and the need for strict discipline in particular. He claims that conformity to an ethic of lifelong marriage is not only best for the children, but also for the psychological well being of adults. He asserts that the larger conflicts dividing the nation are rooted in part in lax and inattentive parenting styles.

The vitality of conservative Protestant organizational life is without parallel in American religion. Wilcox observes that these conservative pro-family organizations pursue strategies that can be viewed as innovative in important respects. They put a wide range of contemporary media – from radio to the Internet – in the service of their family agenda. They also embrace therapeutic and more broadly expressive approaches to marriage and parenting. They also push home schooling.

Conservative Protestants

Wilcox observes that theological conservative Protestants are shaped by a commitment to a morality rooted in the absolute truth of the Bible, an ardent desire to return America to its Christian foundations through righteous family living, concern about social disorder and disrespect for authority, worry about secular humanism, and the threat it poses to the faith. Their focus on biblical authority and divine sovereignty translates into a concern for order and authority in society. Conservative Protestant leaders feel duty bound to uphold patriarchal authority in order to signal their willingness to submit themselves to the principle of biblical inerrancy and to the broader principle of divine authority. The Bible, which has much to say about parenting, is depicted as a primer for authority-minded parenting among virtually all conservative Protestants. After describing the family as "the foundational institution of human society," the Southern Baptist Convention argued in 1998 that marriage is a "covenant commitment for a lifetime" and that husbands and wives have unique roles in the family: the husband has a "God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family," and the wife has a "God-given responsibility" to submit graciously to her husband and "to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation." A guest editorial in the *New York Times* written by R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to defend the Southern Baptist Convention's stands on male headship, homosexuality, and abortion put it this way:

Southern Baptists are engaged in a battle against modernity, earnestly contending for the truth and authority of an ancient faith. To the cultured

critics of religion, we are the cantankerous holdouts against the inevitable. But so far as the Southern Baptist Convention is concerned, the future is in God's hands. If faithfulness requires the slings and arrow of outraged opponents, so be it.

Wilcox clearly shows that the positive effects of high levels of theological conservatism and church attendance among conservative Protestant men more than offset the negative effects of the so-called gender-role traditionalism. They are associated with heightened levels of paternal and marital expressiveness, as well as a strong commitment to parental supervision.

Therapeutic Culture

Although conservative Protestants vehemently oppose the anti-family agenda of the sexual revolution, they have not entirely escaped its impact. They too largely embrace its therapeutic culture. An increasing number of wives are now working outside the home. Husbands as well as wives were expected to involve themselves emotionally in home life and the well being of the children. By a desire to strengthen the Christian family, therapeutic techniques and goals are adopted in the hope that they will increase marital happiness and stability.

Many of the conservative experts present themselves as Christian guides to family living who rely only on the timeless wisdom of the Bible; their extensive use of therapeutic techniques and terminology, however, reveals that in important respects they are quite modern. Their marital advice is that if men and women properly perform their roles in marriage, they will secure for themselves a happier, more fulfilling relationship. For example, James Dobson advises men to strengthen their marriage through the "provision of emotional support...of conversation...of making her feeling like a lady...of building her ego."

Soft Patriarchy

Wilcox observes that since the feminist challenge of the 1970s, conservative Protestant supporters of male headship have increasingly stressed that male leadership is oriented toward service – hence, the near universal use of the term *servant-leadership* in conjunction with discussions of male authority. They pursue a neo-traditional model of fatherhood that combines a moderate providership ethic with a strong commitment to family life. Motivated by a desire to both transmit their faith to the next generation and protect their children from a society they see degraded and degrading, these soft patriarchs will combine involvement and vigilant oversight. Wilcox also notes that their theological assumptions about the nature of God the Father and of Jesus Christ give shape to a model of human fatherhood that encompasses, on the one hand, love, abiding concern, and mercy, and on the other, authority, justice, and sufficient severity to engender fear in a child. And Wilcox concludes his interpretation of the statistics that the new model of emotionally involved fatherhood is paying off.

Husband and Wife Relations

Wilcox suggests that by the 1990s conservative Protestants were clearly more concerned about working mothers of preschoolers than were their mainline and

unaffiliated peers. He says that one of the reasons traditional family men do a substantially smaller share of the household labor is that their wives work outside the home for fewer hours and earn a smaller share of the family's income than the wives of egalitarian family men. Furthermore, he states that churchgoing conservative Protestant husbands surpass every other kind of Protestant husband, from mainline to nominal, in making their wives happy in every way, not only showing more love and affection but also socializing more with their wives and understanding them better. Wilcox argues that schooled by organizations such *Focus on the Family*, conservative Protestant men evidently appreciate their wives highly and find ways to communicate that appreciation. He believes that the "economy of gratitude" – the exchange of material and symbolic gifts fosters solidarity within marriage. Many wives expect a sign of gratitude from their husbands in return for their household labor. Women are significantly more likely to report that the division of household labor is fair if they believe that their household labor is appreciated. The husband's expression of appreciation for his wife's work counts more than totaling up who takes out the garbage and when.

Involvement in the Family

For conservative Protestants the family is a social pattern that is original and inherent in human nature itself. They view the family as the foundational institution of society and the repository of faith and virtue; it is the crucial arena where affection and support are most readily given and received. Studies show that conservative fathers are more likely than their mainline and unaffiliated fathers to discipline their children by spanking them. Because they view children as inherently sinful, the conservative Protestant experts view discipline as a positive process that teaches children to develop a respect for divine justice, to learn about the consequences for misbehavior, and to turn away from sin. The conservative family experts tell parents not to punish their children in an angry or abusive manner. They teach that controlled corporal punishment administered promptly in the face of willful child disobedience is a more effective alternative than yelling.

They urge fathers not to relinquish their parental authority and to set rules (such as supervising children's television-viewing and monitoring their whereabouts) to counter the morally negative aspects of the secular culture. Furthermore, conservative Protestant fathers praise and hug their children more than the other men studied. Contrary to the established opinion of the secular media, therefore, Wilcox's study shows that a conservative Protestant affiliation is not related to domestic violence and that weekly church attendance is associated with lower levels of such violence.

Conclusion

Wilcox's welcome study makes a strong case that a commitment to Jesus as personal Savior and Lord, as well as faithful church attendance, is the best indicator of marital and family happiness. Married men and women are called to cultivate the virtues of self-sacrifice, fidelity, charity, and religious devotion in their marriages. Wilcox points out that churchgoing conservative Protestant men are soft patriarchs. They will abide by a view of the family that they believe to be divinely ordained and that attempts to articulate universal moral principles that govern it in all times and all places.