# Parenting and Politics: The Personal and the Political in the Evangelical Family Values Movement

**Hilde Løvdal Stephens**
Independent scholar

***Abstract:*** *Today, evangelical Christians in the U.S. are known for their passion for the so-called traditional family and engagement in political and cultural battles over children and child rearing. That has not always been the case. This article examines how parenting became a cultural and political battleground for evangelicals in the last decades of the 20th century. Conservative Protestants have engaged with politics and culture in the past. They supported the Prohibition movement; they opposed Darwin's theory of evolution; they worried about the decadent culture of the 1920s. In the late 1900s, however, child rearing and parenting became a catch-all framework for all their concerns. Parenting took on new, profound meaning. Preachers like Billy Graham would reject his former notions that he was called to preach, saying he was first and foremost called to father. Evangelical Christian family experts like James Dobson and Larry Christenson linked parenting to social order. Family experts guided evangelicals in their political and cultural activism, telling them that the personal is political and that political issues can be solved one family at a time.*

***Keywords****: Evangelicalism—family values—parenting—the New Right—religion and gender—religion and politics—culture wars—children*

It was a privilege to pray with Gov. Romney—for his family and our country. I will turn 94 the day after the upcoming election, and I believe America is at a crossroads. I hope millions of Americans will join me in praying for our nation and to vote for candidates who will support the

biblical definition of marriage, protect the sanctity of life and defend our religious freedoms.[1]

These words came from evangelist Billy Graham when he endorsed the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney after a closed-door meeting. Graham urged fellow evangelicals to vote for a devout Mormon who holds beliefs that many conservative Christians see as a false religion and a twisted faith— even Graham's own organization listed Mormonism as a cult before pulling the statement down after the meeting.[2] Old hostilities faded as Graham and Romney could join forces in the name of faith and family. Graham's endorsement of the Mormon Romney is indicative of how the traditional family serves as a key symbol for the New Right. Under the banner of being "pro-family," evangelicals of the New Right have joined forces with other religious and social conservatives to fight for the values they believe in since they emerged as political force in the 1970s. Evangelical Christians have proudly taken on the badge of being America's foremost defenders of family values. Many evangelical parents have taken to the streets, used modern media, and cast their votes to make their voices heard and to make sure they do what they can so their children grow up in a safe world.

The evangelical New Right is not alone in calling for political action on behalf of the family. Cultural and political activism on family, and children in particular, is a common trope of political movements. Children, after all, embody a longing for a simple past, bring out anxieties of today, and reveal hopes for the future. Beliefs about child rearing also point to the ideal society and express views on the role of government in regulating or not regulating private lives. Looking into how political coalitions discuss parenting and childcare, then, is a useful route to explore the cultural logic behind political activism. In this article, I explore these shifts and the basic views that drive the evangelical Right. In short, I propose that family values and child rearing became key political and cultural symbols for evangelical Christians parallel to the emergence of a new culture of evangelical parenting expertise

1 Billy Graham, "Billy Graham, Mitt Romney Meet," billygraham.org, Oct. 11, 2012, accessed Jan. 14, 2014 http://www.billygraham.org/articlepage.asp?articleid=8983

2 Jon Ostendorff, "Article calling Mormonism 'cult' disappears from Graham website. Change on Graham page comes after Romney meeting." *Citizen Times,* Oct 15, 2012, accessed October 23, 2012 http://www.citizen-times.com/article/20121016/NEWS/310160022/Article-calling-Mormonism-cult-disappears-from-Graham-website?nclick_check=1.

that gave evangelicals new ways of thinking about parenting. Moreover, the evangelical movement became politicized as the political interfered with the private and as private choices were framed as political acts.

For simplicity, I will use the terms *evangelical*, *Christian*, and *conservative Protestant* interchangeably. Not all evangelical Christians are necessarily conservative in their political outlook. Some have progressive political ideals and ideas, but the vast majority has a conservative political standpoint that aligns well with the New Right. The evangelical left remains on a marginal phenomenon in American evangelicalism. The Right dominates evangelical political and cultural discourse. Conservative voices control a vast network of publishing houses, para-church ministries, and media outlets that shape evangelical identity around faith, family values, and limited government.[3]

The evangelical family movement is part of increased attention to parenting experts among the American middle class. At the turn of the 20th century, educational activist Ellen Key launched the century as *The Century of the Child*. She might as well have called it the century of the family expert. Early 20th century middle class parents started to turn to family experts like Dr. G. Stanley Hall and Dr. L. Emmett Holt. The faith in scientific expertise surged during the Cold War. Suburban mothers followed the advice of Dr. Benjamin Spock whose 1946 *Baby and Child Care* remained a bestseller for decades.[4] The trend only increased as baby boomers grew up and started to raise children of their own. No generation of parents has seen a larger growth of parenting books than the baby boomer generation that came of parenting age in the 1970s. American parents of the mid-1990s had five times as many manuals to choose from as parents of the mid-1970s did. In addition to books, parents could turn to a vast array of multi-media material to find ways to best raise their children.[5]

Evangelical America followed suit. Evangelical parents could turn to parenting manuals like *The Christian Family* (1970) by Larry Christenson,

3 On conservative dominance in evangelical culture, see e.g. Randall J. Stephens and Karl Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). On the struggling evangelical left, see e.g. David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

4 Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 19-40. See also Nancy Pottishman Weiss, "Mother, the Invention of Necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*," *American Quarterly* (29: 5), 519-546.

5 Hulbert, 2003, 334.

*Dare to Discipline* (1970) and *Hide or Seek* (1974) by James Dobson, *How to Really Love Your Child* (1977) by Ross Campbell, and *How to Develop Your Child's Temperament* (1977) by Beverly LaHaye— books that provided evangelical parents across the country advice on how to raise their children according to biblical principles. An increasingly professionalized and growing Christian publishing industry catered to the needs of middle class evangelical families looking for a Christian alternative to secular and more religiously liberal parenting books. The number of Christian bookstores soared in the early 1970s, with twice as many stores in 1975 as in 1965. The evangelical media industry mushroomed into a vast industry of Christian alternatives to secular products. Christian parents could turn on the radio and listen to the advice from Dobson who made his debut as a radio host in 1977. They could go to the local Christian bookstore and get the latest magazine for their teenaged children. They could buy sanitized versions of the latest popular culture craze. Christian children could watch movies like *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1970), *Time to Run* (1972), and a string of other movies made with a biblical message. As Christian rock emerged, they could buy Christian rock albums. The Christian media culture continued to grow in the 1980s and 1990s and provided important sites for the dissemination of family values and advice for Christian parents.[6]

The wave of evangelical family advice represents a shift in the American religious and political landscape in the decades after World War II. While mainliners experienced problems attracting new members, evangelicals underwent massive institution building as American economy blossomed in the postwar years. Membership in conservative Protestant denominations and para-church groups grew immensely. Interdenominational groups such as Youth for Christ and Campus Crusade for Christ; magazines like *Christianity Today*, *Eternity*, and *Moody Monthly*, publishing houses such as Tyndale, Word, and Zondervan; and institutions of higher education like Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary created an imagined community of believers from a cross section of conservative Protestant groups. The sense of unity across the country was also a testimony of the great number of

6 For a history of the development of evangelical publishing industry, see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 246-256. See also Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

migrants from the rural South who populated the suburban Sunbelt and Midwest. These new arrivals brought southern style Protestantism to other regions that profited from a growing post-war economy.[7] Generous federal grants and mortgages made the suburban middle class lifestyle available to a higher number of working and middle class white Americans. Many evangelicals entered the ranks of the middle class during the Cold War, helped by a federal policy that defined the nuclear family as the backbone of American democracy and the place to find personal happiness. Conservative Protestant families found themselves living in suburban houses built for a hyper-family oriented lifestyle where mothers and fathers raised their children to be upright citizens.[8]

America's favorite evangelist Billy Graham represented the new-gained social status and family focus among evangelicals in postwar America. Graham blended American patriotism and evangelical zeal, and portrayed the nuclear, middle-class family as the backbone of a Christian nation. A confidant of a string of presidents and a highly influential institution builder, Graham efficiently built on his role as husband and father when he claimed authority to speak on God's behalf. After gaining national attention in the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade and embarking on national and international crusades, Graham became the primary spokesman for a socially and culturally engaged evangelical movement that unified conservative Protestants in a joint effort to save America from ungodly influences. He established himself as a national and international leader who preached not only the salvation of souls, but also warned against Communism and promoted the traditional family. Promotional material from the 1950s depicts Graham as the ideal American middle class father and husband. Indeed, Graham's PR people effectively built on his family life and his affectionate side as a family man to lay claim to his authority to preach the gospel.[9]

7 See e.g. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) and Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

8 See e.g. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) and David Harrington Watt, "The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975," *Religion and American Culture* (1:2).

9 Books and leaflets brim with images of a proud father reading for his wife and children or playing with his kids. See e.g. George Burnham and Lee Fischer, *Billy Graham and the New York Crusade* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957). On Graham's role in evangelical cultural and political development, see Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

Graham may have built an image as a family man in the 1950s, but child rearing and family life remained primarily a mainline Protestant concern until the 1960s. Mainline Protestants were the more or less self-appointed defenders of children in public and political debates in the early 1900s. But by the 1960s, members of mainline churches started to doubt the Christian family as the foundation of a happy life and a good society. Instead of worshiping God together as a family, some mainline churches feared that American families had actually turned to worshiping the nuclear family. Moreover, mainline Protestants embraced a progressive family ideal that emerged out of the 1960s while supporting gender equality, greater autonomy for children, and a wide range of family options.[10] Evangelicals went the other way, from showing little concern for parenting to focus on the family. Although conservative Protestants of the early 20th century were concerned about the collapse of the Victorian family, they devoted little energy on parenting. They were more worried about teenagers and young, unmarried adults, who they warned against engaging in worldly activities—dancing, going to the movies, and having sex before marriage.[11] But now, family life and child rearing received increasing attention from flagship evangelical magazines like *Christianity Today* and *Moody Monthly*. The shifting subtitles of *Moody Monthly* illustrate the drastic change in evangelical understanding of what the essence of Christian life should be. In 1960 *Moody Monthly*: *The Christian Service Magazine* became *Moody Monthly: The Christian Magazine for All the Family*. And in 1975, it morphed into *Moody Monthly: The Christian Family Magazine*.[12]

Evangelicals turned to the family as they saw that the America they knew was rapidly changing. The public school was one place where evangelicals

10 Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Growing up Protestant: Parents, Children, and Mainline Churches* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 119-134 and Bradford W. Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. 21-73.

11 Bendroth, 2002, 134-143. See also Bendroth's "Fundamentalism and the Family: Gender, Culture, and the American Pro-Family Movement," *Journal of Women's History* (10:4). A number of historians have traced the origins of the values system of today's evangelicals to the early 20th century. See e.g. Betty DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 1990) Barry Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today's Culture Wars* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), Matthew Avery Sutton *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), and Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party. God's Own Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

12 Watt, "The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975," 164.

came to feel they were threatened by un-Christian and un-American forces. Children's education became an important battleground for evangelical parents as they took their cultural concerns out of homes and churches and into the public sphere. Evangelicals are not alone in seeing the public school as a critical battleground. The public school has long been a front in the fight for America's soul, and American parents have been concerned about what kind of values and beliefs their children learn under the guidance of teachers. Nineteenth-century Catholic parents worried about the Protestant tone of public schools. Early 20th century fundamentalists rallied against the teaching of evolution in schools.[13] The civil rights movement challenged segregation in public schools in the 1950s and 1960s. The school is important because the American story is defined and told in classrooms across the country. It is here that new generations of Americans are socialized into the fabric of American life. It is here that public values are shaped and reshaped. And it is here that parental authority is ultimately tested.

Conservative evangelical parents worried that liberal activists were using public schools to indoctrinate children and to take away parental rights and responsibilities. Many believers thought America had been a decent Christian country with decent Christian schools until the 1960s when a host of un-American and anti-religious forces used public schools to tear America apart from within. Conservative parents who had been proud patriots in the faith-driven 1950s were shocked by a host of changes in the public school system in the 1960s. The Supreme Court declared school prayer and devotional Bible reading in class unconstitutional. Evolution came to be more common in public schools, while creationist theories were gradually downplayed.[14] Sex education sparked a debate about what should be taught in public schools. The New Right's battle over sex education started in the 1960s when people like the ultra-right wing Reverend Billy James Hargis and his organization Christian Crusade published pamphlets with titles like *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?* that blended hostility toward new sexual standards with fear of Communism. Hargis and others feared the downfall of America, as he knew it, should children be

13 See e.g. Tracy Fessenden, "The Nineteenth Century Bible Wars and the Separation of Church and State," *Church History* (74:4) and Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (New York: HarperLuxe, 2007), esp. 73-154.

14 See e.g. William Martin, *With God on Our Side: the Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

taught about sex by any but their parents. Hargis' concern was shared by conservative mothers in Anaheim, California, who formed a grass-roots movement to end comprehensive sex education and demanded the right to have a say in what their children learned about sex. Women in other parts of the country followed. To them, this was not just about sex. It was about a school's right to inform students about things their parents do not necessarily agree with and ultimately about the role of government in raising children.[15] Conservative Protestants also worried about race issues and a growing federal government. Certain evangelical parents established Christian academies to gain control over their children's education in the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* and the move to integrate schools. The conflict only intensified in the 1970s as the Internal Revenue Services went after private schools that did not actively seek to integrate. Christian parents saw the federally mandated policies as an intrusion of the sanctity of the home and an attempt to undermine parental authority.[16]

Evangelical political activism went largely unnoticed by major national new outlets, but evangelicals gained attention like never before when the born again Jimmy Carter of Georgia was elected President in 1976. A Baptist Southerner who spoke of having Christ in his heart may have seemed alien to many journalists, but Carter's language echoed the concerns and beliefs of millions of Americans. Many evangelicals believed they now had a man in the White House who would work for their cause. His presidential campaign presented him as a typical family man in contrast to the Republican President Gerard Ford, whose family life seemed far less traditional. The First Lady openly supported feminist issues like the Equal Rights Amendment and *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Not only that, Betty Ford noted in an interview on *60 Minutes,* that she was not too concerned about whether her teenaged daughter was a virgin or not.[17] Compared to this, Carter's southern religious sentiments and family values seemed far more attractive to conservative religious believers across the U.S. But Carter was not the con-

15 Janice M. Irvine, *Talk About Sex: The Battle over Sex Education in America* (Berkely, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 35-62.

16 Some historians even explain the origin of the New Christian Right with the battle over racial issues in relation to Christian schools. See e.g. Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 59-76.

17 Leo P. Ribuffo, "Family Policy Past As Prologue: Jimmy Carter, the White House Conference on Families, and the Mobilization of the New Christian Right," *Review of Policy Research* (23:2), 319-320.

servative family man evangelicals hoped he would be. The former governor of Georgia would enrage rather than comfort fellow believers. He was a deeply polarizing president, a factor that led many evangelicals into the ranks of Republican Party.[18]

A Carter initiated event played a key role in establishing evangelicals as a conservative force to be reckoned with in American politics: the 1980 White House Conference on Families (WHCF). During the WHCF, seasoned and new representatives of the evangelical right made their mark in an ideological and political struggle over the future of American families. In fact, evangelical activists made a mark as perhaps the best organized group at the conference.[19] Connaught (Connie) Marshner was one of the most vocal representatives of the New Right at the WHCF. She was an experienced political activist and had worked to promote traditional family values since the early 1970s. Now, she staged a highly publicized walkout of the second session. Together with thirty other conservatives, she protested against the perceived liberal bias of the conference and against what she saw as a lack of credibility.[20]

Marshner's activism and the grass-roots work by conservative women may have surprised the organizers of the WHCF, but the walkout was indicative of a growing concern among conservative women over the policies of the Carter administration. A series of conferences and national events put gender roles, family values, and the relationship between state and family on the agenda, summoning evangelicals to take action. The 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston appalled conservative women who saw the feminist movement as an attack on motherhood. And although President Carter revealed ambivalent attitudes toward the feminist demands declared at the conference, he failed to convince evangelicals that he was on their side in the battle over the family. To make matters worse, conservative Christians were similarly dismayed by Carter's support of the United Nations' "International Year of the Child," which they believed was nothing

18 See e.g. Williams, 2010, 187-212.

19 White House Conference on Families, "Listening to America's Families: Action for the 80's. The Report to The President, Congress, and the Families of the Nation," 157-164. Ribuffo, "Family Policy Past As Prologue: Jimmy Carter, the White House Conference on Families, and the Mobilization of the New Christian Right." For an extensive account of conservative revolt against Carter and the WHCF, see J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

20 See Martin, 1996, 168-190.

more than part of an international, socialist, government plan to strip parents of their rights.[21] Thus, when the WHCF commenced, evangelicals were already alarmed and ready to make their voices heard.

One of these was James Dobson, the founder and then-leader of Focus on the Family. In April 1980, Dobson was part of a WHCF research panel that was asked to set a framework for the conference. Split between liberals and conservatives, the panel could not land on a unified statement on the state of the family in modern America. Instead, it revealed a deep-seated disagreement over what the state of the family actually was and what role the government should have in securing stable families. Dobson questioned whether the American family would survive what he saw as a moral collapse of the American nation. He lambasted a growing government that put itself between parents and children as well as husband and wife. By contrast, his opponent Urie Bronfenbrenner from Cornell University held an optimistic view of the family and called for a wider support system beyond the family. To Bronfenbrenner, the federal government was a tool to promote family harmony; to Dobson, it was a threat.[22]

At the time, Dobson was largely unfamiliar to the wider American public, but he had established a career as an evangelical family expert through a series of books, educational videos, and radio broadcasts. Helped by highly profitable book sales in an expanding evangelical publishing industry, Dobson had established his media based organization Focus on the Family in 1977. This organization grew to become a major voice on behalf of evangelical parents alarmed by the aftermath of the 1960s. Dobson's immensely popular *Dare to Discipline* (1970) attacked permissive techniques from the 1940s and 1950s such as Dr. Benjamin Spock's bestseller *Baby and Child Care*, which had urged parents not to force their children to act and behave in certain ways. Instead, a good mother would shower the child with unconditional love and make sure the child wanted to behave well and grow up into a well-adjusted adult.[23] Dobson saw things differently. From his office

21 Williams, 2010, 143-146; Bendroth, 2002, 134; Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 80; and Linda Kintz, "Clarity, Mothers, and the Mass-Mediated Soul: A Defense of Ambiguity" in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage, (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 132-133.

22 White House Conference on Families, "Listening to America's Families: Action for the 80's. The Report to The President, Congress, and the Families of the Nation," 157-164.

23 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor Books: 2005), 231-391.

on a Southern California university campus where he worked as a college professor in child development, Dobson had seen the student movement of the 1960s challenge traditional authority and sexual morality. A new generation of American youth turned to sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll and warned against trusting anyone over thirty. This, Dobson insisted was thanks to bad advice from permissive parenting experts of the 1950s. "Permissiveness," he believed, "has not just been a failure; it's been a disaster!" According to Dobson, "the central cause of the turmoil among the young must again be found in the tender years of childhood: we demanded neither respect nor responsible behavior from our children, and it is now demonstrating the absence of these virtues." Parents, he argued, must learn how to balance love and discipline in a way that the child learns that he or she is loved, but also that there are boundaries that need to be respected. Where permissive parenting experts had insisted that children who grow up in a loving environment will want to learn and behave well, Dobson insisted that children were not naturally inclined to do good, but needed to learn self-discipline and to be disciplined, should they disobey their parents.[24]

Lutheran minister Larry Christenson expressed similar views in his widely read *The Christian Family* (1970). "Our country has never before experienced such flagrant disregard for law and order," he wrote. "Teen-agers have no respect for authority. They fear no one." Christenson blamed parents, whom he claimed had neglected "their responsibilities to their children, to society, and to one another." The family, he explained, is the foundation of society, and society struggles because the family is in crisis. Christenson put the Christian family at the center of the battle for morality and social order. God can use Christian families, Christenson contended, by modeling "examples of good family life." By being faithful to their calling to care for their families, Christian men and women could witness to the world about God's plan for humanity.[25] Gender roles were a key concern to Christenson. Writing in the midst of second wave feminist activism, Christenson emphasized that man and woman are created with unique characteristics that give them different roles in the family and in society. God created a gendered order for the family that is the best foundation for a harmonious family life, he believed. *The Christian Family* started with a scheme that neatly described the chain of command he believed God ordered for the family. Each member of

24 James C. Dobson, *Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 23.

25 Larry Christenson, *The Christian Family* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1970), 198.

the family has his or her place. Christ is the head of the family. The husband and father has authority over the wife and the children. And finally, the wife has authority over her children through her husband.[26] Christenson, then, and many other evangelical family experts with him, did not really talk about *parenting*, but about *fathering* and *mothering* where husband and wife have different roles and responsibilities in the family.[27]

This was not just a male project. Conservative women such as the WHCF activist Connie Marshner defended a gendered order in the family. They believed they were to take a submissive role in the family and saw it as part of their mandate to work for a traditional role distribution within the family. As second wave feminism challenged patriarchy as the root of oppression, evangelical women argued that true patriarchy was the source of happy families and stable societies. A wave of literature written by women on how to maintain these clearly defined gender roles appeared. Marabel Morgan's 1973 bestseller *The Total Woman* is primarily known as a book that teaches women to be submissive yet sexually active wives, but the book is also ultimately about mothering. A good mother, Morgan wrote, is first a good wife. When a wife and mother lives out the tasks God has created her for and she respects her husband, Morgan contended, the mother provides her children a wonderful role model.[28] Morgan and other evangelical writers such as Elizabeth Elliot and Beverly LaHaye embraced motherhood as the core of their femininity and as God's plan for their lives. Good evangelical mothers were believed to contribute to familial happiness and the health of the nation. This version of motherhood was a drastic shift from the early 1900s. Early 20th century conservative Protestant institutions offered a wide range of possibilities for women to serve despite rigid gender roles on paper. But after World War II, in tandem with the family-oriented Cold War culture that mimicked 19th-century Victorian family ideals, motherhood became the ultimate form of ministry.[29]

26 Christenson, 1970, 17.

27 Some pushed for egalitarian parenting from an evangelical feminist perspective. See e.g. Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1974).

28 Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), 36.

29 See: Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 73-96; Watt, "The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals," 1925-1975, and Michael S. Hamilton, "Women, Public Ministry, and American Fundamentalism, 1920-1950," *Religion and American Culture* (3:2).

Fatherhood also took on a new meaning. Family experts like Dobson and Christenson called on fathers to be engaged in their children's upbringing in a new way. Fathering became, like mothering, a form of ministry. James Dobson's *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives* (1980) is one of the best examples of the shift in evangelical thinking about fatherhood. After having celebrated mothers' role in raising children in his previous books, Dobson turned the attention to fatherhood. He wrote *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives* in response to a revelation he believed God gave him at a moment of personal crisis. After having asked God for advice on what to focus on in his seminars and books, Dobson recalled hearing God tell him that "'If America is going to survive the incredible stresses and dangers it now faces, it will be because husbands and fathers again place their families at the highest level on their system of priorities, reserving a portion of their time and energy for leadership within their homes!'"[30] Family life, Dobson declared, is at the heart of biblical masculinity, a special commandment God has given to men with clear instructions. He wrote:

> God has charged men with the responsibility for providing leadership in their homes and families: leadership in the form of loving authority; leadership in the form of financial management; leadership in the form of spiritual training; and leadership in maintaining the marital relationship. Husbands are instructed to "love [their] wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25, NIV). That is not a casual suggestion to Christian men; it is God's *commandment* to husbands and fathers.[31]

By framing fatherhood as the center of biblical masculinity and a man's highest calling in life, Dobson and other family experts at the time parted ways with the ways evangelical stars like Billy Graham had acted when they had young children. Graham had interpreted his call to preach as more important than his responsibility as a husband and father. Faced with conflicting demands from his family and from his ministry, Graham decided that he had to follow God's call to spread the gospel. "If God has called you, you obey God," he stated.[32] Graham would later regret the choices he made

30 James Dobson, *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives* (Waco: Word, 1980), 21.

31 Dobson, 1980, 22-23.

32 "There were times when I was called to preach in some foreign country that was going to take me away a long time, and Ruth thought that I ought to be home, or the children thought the same thing. And I made the choice to go and do what I thought God wanted me to do. And then the moment I make that choice, Ruth

early in his career. In his 1997 autobiography *Just as I Am*, Graham urged new generations of fathers not to follow his example.[33]

Framing fatherhood as a calling was, and is, not simply a concern for right-wing evangelicals. Progressive evangelicals John and Letha Scanzoni addressed fatherhood and calling already in the May 1967 issue of *Eternity* with a piece entitled "The Minister and His Family." The Scanzonis argued against the prevailing idea that that the young Graham represented. In short, they rejected the notion that family life had to be sacrificed in order to follow the call to minister. Rather, they urged pastors to see family life as their primary calling. "The pastor need not feel he is stealing time and energy from God if he takes time for his family. There is no cause for guilt feelings when he looks upon his family as a very important area in the work of the Lord," they wrote and concluded: "The ministry, like charity, begins at home."[34] Letha Scanzoni would later push for egalitarian marriages where fathers and mothers take on equal responsibilities for their families through her involvement in the evangelical feminist movement.[35]

But the right-wing version of biblical fatherhood would take a strong hold on the evangelical movement. The focus on fathering received national attention like never before in the 1990s when the evangelical men's movement the Promise Keepers gathered hundreds of thousands of fathers and husbands in homes, churches, and sports stadiums to celebrate masculine leadership in the family. In the collection *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, a handful of evangelical family experts and church leaders shared their wisdom with other men. Names like James Dobson, Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ, author Gary Smalley, evangelist Lois Palau, and pastor Tony Evans testified of a strong movement with plenty of capital and a strong network behind them to spread the word about godly masculinity mixed with right-wing ideology. In a piece called "Spiritual Purity,"

is backing me 100 percent. I've never known her one time to say, 'Don't go . . .' If God has called you, you obey God." Quoted in David Frost, *Billy Graham: Personal Thought of a Public Man* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1997), 39.

33 Billy Graham, *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: Harper Collins and Zondervan, 1997), 702–4.

34 John and Letha Scanzoni, "The Minister and His Family," *Eternity*, May 1967, 16.

35 See e.g. Letha Scanzoni, "Elevate Marriage to Partnership," *Eternity*, July 1968, 11-14. Her ideas of gender, marriage, and family life were further examined in Hardesty and Scanzoni, 1974, which would be updated and revised in 1986 and 1992. For a history of evangelical feminism, see Pamela D. H. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism: a History* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Tony Evans argued that "the feminization of the American male" was the main reason for the woes of the family. He explained: "When I say feminization, I am not talking about sexual preference. I'm trying to describe a misunderstanding of manhood that has produced a nation of 'sissified' men who abdicate their role as spiritually pure leaders, thus forcing women to fill the vacuum."[36] As a prominent African American representative of the New Right, Evans was especially concerned with black inner city culture—a culture he described as plagued by crime and teenage pregnancies. In line with right-wing policies at the time, Evans attacked governmental efforts to alleviate such problems and championed individual responsibility as the solution to the social problems African Americans faced in urban America. He argued that even though one may rightly criticize the "criminal justice system, an unfair economy, and persistent racism," the root of the problem was in the family. "Let's face it," he exclaimed, "Economics is no excuse for promiscuity and irresponsibility. And racism doesn't get teenage girls pregnant." Only with a turn to biblical manhood will the problems be solved, he argued, "The fact is, if Dad doesn't provide spiritually responsible leadership in the home, baby is in big trouble."[37] Conservative evangelicals argued for a biblical masculinity that gave men the ultimate responsibility for raising children right. Raising children became a godly pursuit— a pursuit that they believed would also affect the nation.

Patriarchal authority did not mean authoritarian fathering. Evans and other Promise Keepers stressed the need of "servant leadership" or "soft patriarchy." The basic premise for this was that a man is to serve and protect his family not only in financial and material ways, but also contribute to the emotional stability of the family.[38] Soft patriarchy was a symptom of a significant shift in evangelical culture—the embrace of modern psychology and focus on relationships. Parallel to the New Right's call for order and respect for authority, there was a distinct discursive shift in evangelical media. Whereas former generations of evangelical preachers had warned against sin and called sinners to repent, the new generation of evangelicals

36 Tony Evans, "Spiritual Purity" in Al Janssen, ed., *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 1994), 73.

37 Evans, 1994, 75.

38 Wilcox, 2004; John P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004); and John P. Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

turned to their version of therapy talk with a focus on self-esteem and relationships. Key evangelical powerbrokers like Dobson promoted an evangelical version of therapy talk that blended modern psychology with evangelical sensibilities and theology.[39] This also affected ideas about child rearing. In addition to the call for order in the family, a host of family experts and counselors turned attention to the emotional stability and mental health of parents and children. Dobson, for instance, did not only encourage parents to discipline their children, but to pay attention to the emotion needs of each child. Self-esteem was and is a recurring theme in his parenting books. *Hide or Seek*, for instance, addressed "The Epidemic of Inferiority" and instructed parents to teach children to believe in themselves.[40] Ross Campbell's *How to Really Love Your Child* wholeheartedly supported therapeutic and empathetic parenting. Children, Campbell explained, have an "emotional tank" that needs to be filled on a daily basis with new portions of unconditional love. Campbell later teamed up with Gary Chapman to write *The Five Love Languages of Children* that promoted that children are to be met by love according to the "love language" they have. A child whose love language is physical touch, the logic goes, may not feel loved if they receive a gift. Parents are supposed to closely examine how their children feel loved and make sure they demonstrate the right love language.[41] The therapeutic turn of evangelical parenting culture told parents that they had the responsibility for the emotional health of their children. Only then, can they raise children who can carry on the values and beliefs they learn at home.

The evangelical right with its passion for the family combines the personal and the political in a number of ways. The personal and the political meet as Christian parents are called to exert loving leadership in raising their children to be Christian witnesses and responsible citizens. Parental

39 Eithne Johnson, "The Emergence of Christian Video and the Cultivation of Videovangelism," in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

40 James Dobson, *Hide or Seek: How to Build Self-Esteem in Your Child* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1974).

41 Discipline was still important. Although evangelicals left behind what Margaret Bendroth describes as a largely wooden approach to parenting that ruled in early 20th century conservative Protestant culture, evangelical family experts continued to call for corporal punishment in order to not spoil the child. Some were quite explicit, like Larry Tomczak's *God, the Rod, and Your Child's Bod: The Art of Loving Correction for Christian Parents*. Even Ross Campbell's *How to Really Love Your Child* favored spanking children should the need arise to re-establish parental authority in the family. In the widely read *Dare to Discipline*, James Dobson urged his readers to spank their children only if they knowingly defied their parents. See Bendroth, 2002, 134-143.

rights and child welfare became the concern that called evangelical parents to engage with politics. With the family and the child as a unifying symbol, evangelicals gained a language to defend a multitude of positions they had taken in the past—anti-government ideals, personal responsibility, strict sexual mores, etc. The solid evangelical subculture provided the network for a host of family experts to reach parents across the nation and across denominational lines to join the ranks of politically aware parents. Evangelical family experts told their readers that the everyday choices parents make, can have practical consequences for a world running out of control. Parenting manuals and parenting experts provided a framework for understanding the role of mothers and fathers in shaping a safe society and securing moral order. Raising children became a political act in itself. Evangelical parents were told that America can be saved, one ordered and loving Christian family at a time.