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## Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands

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**JENNIFER A. MARSHALL:** Back in 1997, more than half a million men came to the National Mall for the Promise Keepers gathering. Their stated purpose was to rededicate themselves to God in order to better fulfill their roles as husbands, fathers, workers, and community members.

This gathering alarmed feminists at groups like the National Organization for Women. Patricia Ireland, who was the president of that group at that time, accused Promise Keepers of being promoters of “a feel-good forum of male supremacy intent on keeping women in the back seat.” Some feminist activists even gathered outside of Union Station to heckle the men arriving at the rally. They taunted, jeered, and even threatened to disrobe themselves.

Which of these, I ask, is the greater disruption to civility: thousands of men gathering on the Mall with Bibles to pray or angry women flashing passers-by? Of course, the feminists had every right to protest, but the question is, did they have *reason* to protest? Many other women, myself included, said that they did not, and we gathered also outside of Union Station to encourage the men gathering for Promise Keepers and to show our support for it. It was our opinion that a man praying on the Mall is nothing to be afraid of.

Dr. Bradford Wilcox, a sociologist at the University of Virginia, has now provided us with the social science reasons why modern women have nothing to fear in movements like Promise Keepers. In his book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes*

### Talking Points

- Religious orthodoxy appears to be one answer to the male problematic: the process whereby men are more likely to be distant from their families and to be preoccupied with work and leisure at the expense of their families.
- Religious groups are succeeding because they endow fatherhood with transcendent significance; because they provide a range of social support and social controls that strengthen family ties; and because they consider their families to be threatened by the secular world that they view as both debased and debasing.
- The paradox is that, as we continue to see cultural battles fought over family-related issues, it may motivate these religiously orthodox men to continue to devote themselves to their families in ways that often approximate the new-man ideal. These cultural battles may be motivating religiously orthodox men to become, in some ways, more progressive in their approach to marriage and parenting.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/family/h1880.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/family/h1880.cfm)

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*Fathers and Husbands*, he compares two groups of Protestants, mainline Protestants and conservative Protestants, with unaffiliated men. All of the men he studies are married with children. It turns out that the active religious men are actually coming closer to the popular ideal of the new man, that 1990s man who's more sensitive and connected to his wife and children.

Dr. Wilcox holds a Ph.D. from Princeton University. Prior to joining the University of Virginia, he held research fellowships at Princeton, Yale, and the Brookings Institution. Dr. Wilcox's research focuses on the influence of religious belief and practice on marriage, cohabitation, parenting, and fatherhood. He has published articles in several peer reviewed journals, and his research has also been featured in the popular press.

His book *Soft Patriarchs* is excellent in social science quality, and also for its application to our current debates in the popular mainstream. I want to thank him for writing it and for being with us here today. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Wilcox.

—Jennifer A. Marshall is Director of Domestic Policy Studies and directs the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation.

**W. BRADFORD WILCOX:** I'd like to begin, appropriately enough, with a quote from Tony Evans, a black Evangelical pastor from Dallas. In 1994, he gave versions of this speech to Promise Keepers events around the country, so it's apropos given Jennifer's comments:

The primary cause of this national crisis, that is the decline of the family, is the feminization of the American male. The first thing you need to do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: "Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role. Don't misunderstand what I am saying here. I'm not suggesting that you ask to be given your role back. I'm urging you to take it back."

If you simply ask for it, your wife is likely to say: "Look, the last ten years I've had to raise these kids, look after the house and pay the bills. I've had to do my job and yours. You think I'm just going to turn everything back over to you?"

Your wife's concerns might be justified. Unfortunately, however, there can be no compromise here. Treat the lady gently and lovingly, but lead. To you ladies who may be reading this, give it back. For the sake of your family and the survival of our culture, let your man be a man if he's willing.

Statements like this, which combine an assertion of patriarchal authority and heightened attention to the family on the part of men, have garnered enormous interest, concern, and controversy in the last decade or so. And this concern and controversy were only heightened when, in 1998, the Southern Baptist Convention released a statement on the family that declared the family is "The foundational institution of human society" and that a woman should "submit herself graciously" to her husband's leadership and that a husband should "provide for, protect and lead his family."

Basically, there are two questions that these types of comments present to those of us in the public square and academic world who are interested in the role of religion in American life. The first question—and this is the question that many feminists and academics have posed—is whether religion, particularly Evangelical Protestantism in the U.S., is a force for gender reaction in the family. The second question is, does religion domesticate men in ways that make them attentive to the ideals and aspirations of their wife and children?

All of you know that we've seen more egalitarian attitudes and labor force participation in the U.S. in the last 40 years. Just to give you a brief picture of attitudes in the U.S., in 1977, about 76 percent of Americans supported a gendered division of labor, where the ideal was that the husband was the breadwinner and the wife was the homemaker. In 1993, this number had fallen to just 37 percent.

This is just one indication of how much more egalitarian our society has become with respect to

gender; but, as many scholars and feminists have noted, we do not yet see men equally invested in family life. For instance, they don't perform an equal share of household and parental labor. On average, men do about 33 percent of the household labor in their families. They also are not equally attentive to the emotional dynamics of their marriages in most American families.

Some scholars and feminists have talked about a stalled revolution in the family when it comes to gender equality, and some feminists and journalists have speculated that religion, especially Evangelicalism, is a key factor in stalling the gender revolution at home. A few quotes illustrate this perspective.

- Sociologists Julia McClellan and Myra Marx Ferree argue that “Evangelicalism is an influential force” pushing men toward authoritarian and stereotypical forms of masculinity and attempting to renew patriarchal relations.
- In 1998, in the wake of the Southern Baptist convention, journalists Steve and Cokie Roberts claimed that the conservative Protestant gender ideology “can clearly lead to abuse both physical and emotional.”
- John Gottmann, who is one of the leading psychologists of the family at the University of Washington, has argued that the religious right is pushing “fathers toward authoritarian parenting in child-rearing.”

So there's this perspective that religion, particularly Evangelicalism, is a force for reaction in American families. One of the questions that I think about today is whether this concern is justified.

But I also want to think about a different question that tends particularly to concern family advocates who are more concerned about the breakdown of the American family than they are about what feminists would view as a patriarchal approach to family life. They point out that the decline in the family is linked in part to men's failure to take an active role in families. If you look around the world, you can see that men are more and more distant from the family in many cases. From New York to Nairobi, from San Francisco to Stockholm, more and more men are living apart from the children that they helped to bring into this world.

Theologian Don Browning at the University of Chicago has talked about a “male problematic.” The basic idea here is that men have weaker ties to the families, for both biological and cultural reasons, than do women, so the challenge that every society faces is how to bring men into a closer relationship both with the mother of their kids and with their kids.

Don Browning also argues that the modern world, with its individualism, its changing gender roles, and its service economy, is associated with declining family functions and family-oriented values, and that only accentuates the male problematic. The concern is whether or not a religion is playing a role in mitigating this male problematic. One indication of this problematic is that we've seen the number of kids living in fatherless homes more than double, from 11 percent in 1960 to 27 percent in 2000.

Some scholars think that religion really can't do much to reduce the male problematic in the modern world. For instance:

- Scott Coltrane, a scholar at the University of California Riverside, says that religious efforts “to promote idealized, father-headed families will have little influence on marriage rates or fathering practices.”
- Larry Bumpass, a scholar at the University of Wisconsin, says that current family trends “do not make a return of conservative values seem at all likely.”
- David Popenoe and others have expressed skepticism that religion can strengthen the family.

Bear in mind that these scholars span the ideology spectrum. Scott Coltrane and Larry Bumpass would be largely accepting of current family trends, while David Popenoe is more concerned about these trends. Scholars like this will, among other things, point to figures we've seen a lot in the press lately, in *The New York Times*, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, which report that born-again Christians divorce at rates that are slightly higher than the population at large; and they'll say this is just one example of the way in which religion really can't do much to mitigate the effects of modernity on the family.

So, once again, we have two questions: “Is religion a force for gender reaction?” and “Does religion domesticate men in ways that make them attentive to the ideals and aspirations of their families?”

My study focuses on 67 percent of married fathers in the United States. I look at Evangelical Protestant family men, mainline Protestant family men, and unaffiliated family men. As Jennifer pointed out, these are all married men with kids: 15 percent of family men are active Evangelical Protestants, 15 percent of family men are nominal Evangelical Protestants, 10 percent of family men are active mainline Protestants, 15 percent of family men are nominal mainline Protestants, and 12 percent of family men are religiously unaffiliated.

Note that when I talk about “active,” I’m talking about attending religious services three times a month or more. As we’ll see, especially for the Evangelicals, there’s a big difference between active and nominal Evangelical Protestants in their approach to family life—a very big difference.

The data that I’m working with for this particular book come from three surveys, all of which have large samples of American adults. I’m primarily drawing most of my research from the National Survey of Families and Households, which was actually conducted in part by Larry Bumpass and is a survey that represents American adults across the entire country (taken from 3,366 respondents). I also used data from the General Social Survey (24,099 respondents) and the Survey of Adults and Youth (2,309 respondents).

For today, I’m going to talk about four different sets of outcomes for married men with kids: their ideological view of the world, their approach to fatherhood, their approach to household labor, and their approach to marriage.

I used Logistic, Ordinary Least Squares, and Tobit models for exploring the associations between religion and the family, and all the effects I’m going to talk about today are adjusting for differences in income, education, race, ethnicity, region, and family structure. This means that some of the married men with kids that I’m talking about are going to be stepdads, and that makes a difference, as probably

many of you are aware, in their involvement and their style of interaction with kids.

I focus in the book on two different ideological concepts. The first is *familism*. This is the idea that the family is a paramount institution in our society, and individuals have responsibilities to the family and to their family members. It’s based upon questions, tapping things like attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and the care of elderly parents. Fathers who report higher-level familism are fathers who are more likely to oppose divorce, more likely to view marriage as the ideal site for childbearing, and more likely to report an affirming idea that they should take care of their elderly and infirm parents.

To give you a sense of how these things break out, what we see is that familism is higher among attending mainline Evangelical fathers and, particularly, attending Evangelical Protestant family men. For instance, we can see that 57 percent of active Evangelical Protestant family men oppose divorce for unhappy couples who have kids. This compares to 42 percent of active mainline Protestant family men and just 30 percent of men who are not affiliated.

I also look at *gender traditionalism*. This is based upon questions that tap things like whether or not they think it’s best for men to focus on breadwinning and women to focus on homemaking. Once again, we see that gender traditionalism is higher among attending men across the board, particularly for attending Evangelical Protestant family men. For instance, 58 percent of active Evangelicals embrace this gendered approach of household labor compared to 44 percent of active mainline Protestant family men and 37 percent of unaffiliated family men.

I also should make the point here that religion, both attendance and the Evangelical affiliation, is one of the strongest predictors of both of these ideological measures. Factors such as education, region, etc. are not as strong as the effect of religion. In this domain, religion is a pretty powerful force. With this particular outcome, you could make an argument that religion is a force both for the domestication of men and for gender reaction or for gender inequality.

What about fatherhood? We see, once again, a pretty similar pattern where attending fathers and attending Evangelical Protestant dads, in particular, are more involved; they're more affectionate, and they're stricter with their kids. We can see, for instance, in youth-related activities that active Evangelical dads spend about 3.5 hours more per week compared to unaffiliated dads and that active mainline Protestant dads spend about two hours more per week in such activities.

With affection, described as hugging and praising kids very often, we see that it's attendance that's the driving force rather than tradition, where both active mainline (43 percent) and Evangelical (44 percent) dads are very affectionate with their kids and more so than unaffiliated dads (32 percent).

With regard to spanking, we see a similar pattern, where active Evangelical dads have the highest rates of spanking followed by active mainline Protestants and then finally by unaffiliated dads. When I measure monitoring of children, we see once again this kind of distinct active Evangelical effect: 95 percent of active Evangelical dads know where their adolescents are in the afternoon and evenings, as do 89 percent of active mainline dads and 86 percent of unaffiliated dads.

My argument is, in general, when it comes to fatherhood, that religion promotes what I would call a neotraditional approach to parenting that comes close in many ways to approximating the new-father idea insofar as it's associated with more engagement and affection; but, of course, on this issue it takes a more traditional line. I should say, too, that my argument would be that most of my findings lend greater support to the idea that religion is domesticating men when it comes to fatherhood.

When we turn to housework, we see a little more evidence for what might be called "inequality" or "gender reaction," but it's a fairly nuanced set of findings. Active Evangelical dads do about 72 minutes less compared to unaffiliated family men, and active mainline Protestant men do about six minutes more than unaffiliated family men, although this effect is not statistically significant. So there is, in terms of the actual division of house-

hold labor, more inequality among active Evangelical households.

But if you look at wives' reports of appreciation for housework, you see that wives of active Evangelical Protestants report higher levels of appreciation for their housework, and they're followed closely by wives of active mainline Protestant men, whereas wives of unaffiliated men report comparative low levels of appreciation. So it's important to note that, if you look at which of these things is more predictive of women's marital happiness and their sense that things are basically fairly distributed in their home, it's a complicated picture in terms of what we think about how religion is shaping women's experience of household labor.

Finally, I want to touch on three sets of findings, two of which are in the book and one of which I've done recently, to speak to this issue of divorce. Wives of active Evangelical Protestant family men report the highest levels of happiness with the affection and the understanding that they receive from husbands, and they are followed fairly closely by wives of active mainline Protestant family men. Wives of unaffiliated family men report the lower levels of happiness.

Of course, these are based on wife reports, and there could be some differences in their expectations of what kinds of affection and understanding they expect from their husbands, so part of these effects could be differences in expectations between those who are actively engaged in religion and those who are not. But it's still the case that women who are married to these religious men are basically happier with their marriages.

We then turn to a more concrete marker of the quality of marriage, and that is domestic violence. Both the husband and the wife were asked to report incidences of violence in their home in the previous year before the survey was conducted, and these measures are based upon both the wife's report of the husband's violence and the husband's report of his own violence in the marriage.

What I find is that the wives of active Evangelical Protestant family men report the lowest levels of violence (2.8 percent), followed by the wives of unaffiliated men (3.2 percent) and the wives of

active mainline men (5.4 percent). In this case, there's at least some evidence that the active Evangelical Protestant men are the least violent in their marriages compared to other men in the book, but we see that the highest levels of violence (7.2 percent) are reported in the nominal Evangelical Protestant homes. We're talking about a nominal Southern Baptist who attends church maybe once or twice a year; this is the kind of guy who's going to be more violent with his wife compared to other men in the U.S.

We see a similar pattern when you turn to divorce, where both active Evangelical and mainline Protestant men are 35 percent less likely to divorce compared to unaffiliated family men, but the nominal Evangelical Protestant family men are 20 percent more likely to divorce. I think a lot of the effects we've been reading about in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere about born-again Christians having, for instance, a higher divorce rate is related to these nominal Evangelicals who claim the "born-again" experience or claim an "Evangelical affliction" but do not regularly attend church and bring up the rates for this particular subculture.

The bottom line is that religion appears to domesticate men when it comes to marriage, and I don't see any evidence of a gender reaction for the marriage relationship itself.

What about the generic effect that religion has on family life? The first point to note is that religious institutions can rely upon family-oriented rituals and discourse that endow fatherhood and marriage with a sacred character. One thinks, for instance, of the ritual of baptism where, at a certain point in the baptismal rite, fathers are given specific advice and counsel and a blessing that endows their role as fathers with a transcendent sense of significance.

We can also think about family time. Churches and other congregations provide men with opportunities to spend time with their families. One example is the father-daughter dances that are held often by congregations. It's just one opportunity for dads to spend time with their kids and with their wives.

The third thing we can talk about is social networks. These networks lend support to people when they're trying to figure out how to parent their kids or how to deal with difficulty in marriage. They also supply social control; that is, they encourage people to abide by more pro-family norms. For instance, if some guys are seeing another guy in their parish or congregation having lunch with a woman who's not his wife on a regular basis, they might ask him about that and try to determine whether or not he's really living up to his marital vows.

The fourth thing is that there is a sacred canopy that these men encounter in their lives. There's a sense that God is a part of their lives and gives emotional security to them, and this is important because one of the key factors leading to marital problems and problems with parenting is stress. Things like unemployment, especially for men, or a death in the family can lead to poor parenting or poor marriage behaviors for men. If men can offer these problems up to God, God can provide them with a sense of security and direction in terms of how to deal with these things in a productive way.

The last thing I want to talk about is, why are Evangelicals distinctive? In almost every outcome I looked at in the book, Evangelicals are the most distinctive group, especially the active Evangelicals. What is it about this particular tradition that explains this distinctiveness?

One point that's pretty clear is that they have strong religious motivations for their family orientation. There's a sense in this particular subculture that what these dads do with their kids, for instance, has a lot to do with their children's salvation. There's this sense in which they want their kids to be faithful and to be saved, and that motivates them to invest more in their kids. These dads and these husbands want to embody what they view as God's mercy and justice in their interactions with their spouse and with their kids. So there's a kind of a unique religious perspective that they bring to bear.

Another point is that these men have the highest levels of familism of any group in the U.S. with the possible exception of the Latter Day Saints, or Mormons. Although their gender traditionalism is what

gets most of the attention in the media and in the academy, it's this familism, this interest in the family, this commitment to the family that helps to explain why these men are more engaged, particularly when it comes to the emotional domains of parenting and marriage. So this familism is more powerful in explaining their motivations than their gender traditionalism.

The third thing that we can focus on is that there is a pastoral focus in these churches on men's role in the family. I have a colleague, Penny Edgell in Minnesota, who's done some work on New York State congregations and she looks at mainline Catholic and Evangelical churches. What she found in looking at these churches is that the Evangelical ones were the ones most likely to challenge men to take their marriage and parental responsibilities seriously. So, there's a recognition in a lot of these churches that men need to do more around the home. They need to attend more to what's happening in their homes.

Finally—and this is more speculative—I have this sense there's a fraternal ethos that you're more likely to encounter in Evangelical Protestant churches; that is, that there's a male-friendly ethos, with active men's ministries and strong male pastoral leadership, that allows many men to link their masculinity to their faith and family life. There's a sense that they don't have to check their masculinity at the church door, and that helps these churches encourage men to put their families first.

To sum up, is religion, particularly Evangelicalism, a force for gender reaction? I think that one can make a case, when it comes to household labor and ideology, that there is some evidence that Evangelicals, in particular, foster a more traditional approach to household labor and to gender ideology. But, as we've seen, I don't think there's much

evidence to support that notion when it comes to marriage and parenting.

Second, does religion domesticate men? Does it turn men toward the ideals and aspirations of their wife and kids? My answer is, yes, it does. In my book, I focus on Protestants. I think there's evidence that Evangelical Protestants are particularly attuned to their families. Most surveys don't really pick out traditional Catholics or Orthodox Jews, but I have a dataset that does that, and I'm seeing similar patterns for traditional Catholics and Orthodox Jews. They approach parenting and marriage somewhat differently than Evangelical Protestants, but you see similarly high investments in these other communities.

The bottom line is that religious orthodoxy appears to be one answer to the male problematic: this process whereby men are more likely to be distant from their families and to be preoccupied with work and leisure at the expense of their families. I would argue that these religious groups are succeeding because they endow fatherhood with transcendent significance; because they provide a range of social support and social controls that strengthen family ties; and because they consider their families to be threatened by the secular world that they view as both debased and debasing. I don't think we can overestimate the way in which the sense of cultural alienation motivates men to fight for their faith and family by focusing on their families.

The paradox is that, as we continue to see cultural battles fought over family-related issues, it may motivate these religiously orthodox men to continue to devote themselves to their families in ways that often approximate this new-man ideal. These cultural battles may be motivating religiously orthodox men to become, in some ways, more progressive in their approach to marriage and parenting.