

Good Christian men

by [Don Browning](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

In Review



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

W. Bradford Wilcox
University of Chicago Press

By exploring the contradictions between official theologies and the actual behavior of religious communities, sociologists of religion help religious people to view themselves more honestly—a sometimes deflating and even painful process. Such may be our experience in reading W. Bradford Wilcox's *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, perhaps one of the most important studies of American religion to come along in recent decades.

Wilcox explores how American Protestantism shapes the behavior of husbands and fathers. He asks, "Does religion in general and Protestantism in particular oppose or support the emergence of the new father—the father committed to egalitarianism in the home on issues of paid employment for both wife and husband, child care and domestic chores?" He defines the "new man" as the father and husband who supports his wife's work outside of the home, spends time with the children, washes the dishes, attends Johnny's soccer games, helps with the school work and brings home his share of the cash.

Who does a better job of being this new husband and father—unaffiliated secular men, evangelicals who listen to the Promise Keepers or Focus on the Family, or liberal mainliners who attend older and well-established churches? Ask college students from elite schools that question, and they will probably say that most of the new fathers belong to the secular and unaffiliated group. Ask mainliners and they will say that liberal Protestant men are certainly better husbands and fathers than are the conservatives who follow the blatant patriarchy of a James Dobson or Jerry Falwell. Ask conservative Protestants and they may tell you that they are not sure that being a new father is a good thing. According to Wilcox, none of these answers is accurate.

A rising star in the sociology of religion, Wilcox thinks there is much to admire in the new fatherhood. But it is a complex phenomenon. And the sociological evidence shows that evangelical men are not the obstacles to the new manhood that many feminists, liberals and academics have thought.

Wilcox sets the entire discussion about religion and family within the context of the impact of modernization. Participants in the present conflict over families within American churches and denominations would do well to take the modernization factor more seriously than they have in recent debates.

Wilcox uses a widely accepted explanatory principle in sociology called the “family modernization perspective.” This is a theoretical view of modern societies that attempts to explain why families become weaker and less important in advanced industrial societies. The increased differentiation of institutions and their autonomy from religion, the expansion of the power of the state, the higher rates of participation by both men and women in the wage economy, the increased delegation of family functions like education, leisure and food preparation to the market and the state—all these trends weaken family functions. These developments “diminish the strength and authority of the family as an institution, thereby reducing the incentives and dependencies that once fostered high levels of commitment to and investment in the family.”

The differences between conservative and mainline Protestants in family ideology and practices can be seen in how the two groups cope with the modernization process. This process is attuned to the needs of a technological society, in which gender differences increasingly are less important, functional equality for technical roles is more useful, cooperation and tolerance make the workplace more efficient, and sexual behavior and family life are less relevant to work life. Conservatives tend to resist the family modernization process; mainliners tend to accommodate it.

From 1970 to the present, mainline churches have officially been more tolerant than conservative churches of divorce, abortion, gender equality, family pluralism and homosexuality—all changes in keeping with the family modernization process. Conservatives—in spite of the fact that they are now better educated and wealthier than in the past, and have witnessed a significant increase in the number of religiously conservative women working outside the home—still resist most of these changes on the ideological level.

So who are the heroes and heroines of this drama—the liberals supporting family modernization or the conservative resisting it? Is the mainline really serving justice and equality, or is it serving the functional demands and leveling universalism of a technologically driven market economy? Are conservative Protestants a bunch of patriarchal Neanderthal men and kitchen-bound, barefoot and pregnant women, or are they people courageously building a wall against the depersonalizing and family-destructive trends of modern societies addicted to efficiency and profit? One’s answer to these questions is influenced by one’s theological and philosophical critique of modernity.

Wilcox argues that this question is more difficult to answer than Protestant liberals might like to think. Here is his punch line: Protestant conservatives may be far more innovative in coping with modernity than most theological and religious liberals have believed. Furthermore, liberal Protestants may be more culturally conformist and have more difficulty living up to equality in family relations than they realize. Wilcox trots out a bucket of data to support these conclusions. He analyzes the statistics of three massive national surveys—the National Survey of Families and Households, the Survey of Adults and Youth, and the General Social Survey.

Wilcox also is extremely perceptive about the role of theology, ideology and history in the shaping of religious identity and behavior. He tells the cultural story of how mainline and conservative Protestants came to respond so differently to the family modernization process. He reviews the amount of attention given to family, sexuality and justice in the liberal *Christian Century* and the conservative *Christianity Today*. Until recently, the *Century* has paid a lot more attention to justice and sexuality than to marriage and family, while *Christianity Today* has spilled much more ink on family, marriage and sexuality than on issues dealing with social justice. The two journals both reflect and shape the views of their readers.

Here is a fast review of some of Wilcox's findings, all worth thinking about: Conservative Protestant men are more likely to believe in the principle of "male headship" than mainline and unaffiliated men, and they do less housework than men in either of these two groups. They also are inclined to spank their children a bit more, though liberal Protestant men do their fair share of that as well, especially if they are regular church attenders. But there are some surprises. On most other measures evangelical men do better. Conservative Protestant men are more engaged with their children, more affectionate and expressive toward them, more likely to praise and hug both their children and their wives, more likely to know their children's whereabouts, and more likely to supervise their television time. The more active they are in church, the more likely they are to show these behaviors.

In short, mainline men may be a tad fairer about sharing housework, though they still do not share the load equally with their wives. But they are less affectionate with both wives and children and less inclined to praise and show gratitude to their wives for the contributions they make at home and in their paid employment. Evangelical women feel more appreciated and report more happiness with their marriages than mainline women do.

How does Wilcox explain this? He thinks fairness in work-sharing and decision-making is important; it is something women want. But it is not the only thing they want. Women also value affection and appreciation. University of Washington psychologist John Gottman provides insight into this issue. The central factor in good marital communication, according to Gottman's research, is the amount of positive over negative affect that is expressed between couples. Gratitude means a lot, and it seems that evangelical women think they get more of it.

There is a big difference between men who are nominal Protestants, whether conservative or liberal, and those who actively and regularly attend church. Active liberal and active conservative Protestant men look very much alike. In short, liberal men who are active in their churches look more traditional than nominal Protestant men and are more traditional than the official gender and family ideologies of their denominations. There is a looser fit between the liberal ideology of the mainline Protestant churches and what their men actually think and do than there is between conservative Protestant family ideology and the behavior of conservative men.

But both active conservative and active liberal Protestant men exhibit more behaviors consistent with the ideal of the new man than do unaffiliated men. Unaffiliated men are more likely to lack a positive devotion to the family, whether they are conservative or liberal. But this generalization is true only when paternal engagement, emotional expressiveness, warmth and praise are figured into the equation. Conservative Protestant men have a way to go in demonstrating fairness with their wives, who increasingly choose to be in the paid work force. But liberal Protestant men have a way to go in expressing warmth, being engaged with their children and showing gratitude to their wives.

Wilcox speculates about the future of fatherhood. He is not deterministic in his attitude toward the inevitability of the modernization process and what it means for the decline of the family, the increased marginalization of fathers and the growth in the number of divorces, single parents, out-of-wedlock births and nonmarried couples. The future will bring a variety of responses to modernity, he predicts. But the particular response of conservative Protestantism may contain more creativity, justice and health than the wider public has been led to think. Many conservative Protestant men are both soft patriarchs and, in their own way, new fathers. And many liberal men have some distance yet to travel before truly becoming new fathers.

This book deserves serious study by both conservative and liberal Protestants. Many of the tensions on family issues between these two groups could be ameliorated if leaders and laypeople read and understood this excellent book.