

How *Home Alone* started a debate about rebellious children

By [Seth J. Bartee](#)

December 8, 2015

This holiday season marks the 25th anniversary of the release of the Christmas movie *Home Alone*. The film fascinated a generation of latchkey children and their baby boomer parents with its portrayal of eight-year-old Kevin McCallister, who not only survives while his family is out of the country but anchors them when they forget the real meaning of Christmas. It spent four weeks at no. 1 in box office sales and grossed nearly \$300 million in the United States. It also sparked a debate over the authority of parents.

In a recent *Atlantic* piece, “How *Home Alone* Ruined John Hughes,” [the writer argued](#) that in the 1980s, John Hughes produced “definitive” films like *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* about that generation’s youth, but then sold out for popularity in the 1990s beginning with *Home Alone*.

Hughes was hardly a director creating arthouse films who then suddenly began making children’s movies to get famous, but there was a perceptible shift in Hughes’s thinking about children and family in the latter half of his career. The McCallister children dressed and acted differently than the rebellious and sexually promiscuous teens that filled most of Hughes’ earlier movies. Far from being robotic or dismissively obedient, they appear to possess agency—possibly because they are less fretful about the future.

When Kevin believes he made his family disappear, he goes to a grocery store, cooks dinner, decorates, cuts down a Christmas tree, and orders pizza. This is not rebellion nor the coming-of-age story with which Hughes seemed fascinated in the ’80s.

Perhaps it’s surprising then, that a segment of Protestant evangelicals rejected *Home Alone*, fearing that it prompted children to disobey their parents. They saw Kevin as a symbol of an anti-authoritarian personality brewing in the ’90s. Common Sense Media, which publishes family-oriented reviews, [writes](#) about *Home Alone*, “What might be shocking to parents who haven't seen this movie since it first came

out is the level of disrespect between kids and adults and the amount of sibling name-calling early in the movie.”

Some parents likely made a connection between the film and a child named Gregory Kingsley, who made news in 1992 by filing to divorce his parents. The details of his case rarely made into the pews, but plenty of preachers saw the case of a child permitted to split from his or her parents as disastrous for traditional family values. An emerging generation of evangelicals believed such happenings demonstrated the need for strictness and that their children had to surrender television and movie watching privileges.

It is no surprise that home schooling grew rapidly during this period, partly as result of the formation of Bill Gothard’s Institute in Basic Life Principles in 1989. The [recently disgraced leader’s ministry](#) grew along with fear that unfettered children would lead the way to cultural collapse.

Gothard, a key figure in [Christian legalism](#), promised parents that strictness was the cure for teen rebelliousness. The growth of IBLP and Basic Life Principles conferences show that the culture wars struck genuine fear in Christian evangelicals. They believed that bad ideas could have catastrophic consequences for Western culture. The cold war’s conclusion presented new opportunities for re-making culture in Christ’s image, even if it meant overplaying their concerns about cultural artifacts such as *Home Alone*.

A host of new literature addresses the culture wars as a whole, but not yet its effect in specific contexts. In fact, side trails like the evangelical reaction to a seemingly harmless Christmas movie cannot be discounted for their larger impact on evangelical thinking about the influence of the arts on human action. Many of the institutions that blossomed during this era, such as IBLP, are either fading or ending. Let us hope a generation of historians can reconstruct the strange and amazing puzzles that made the culture wars.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Shalom Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).