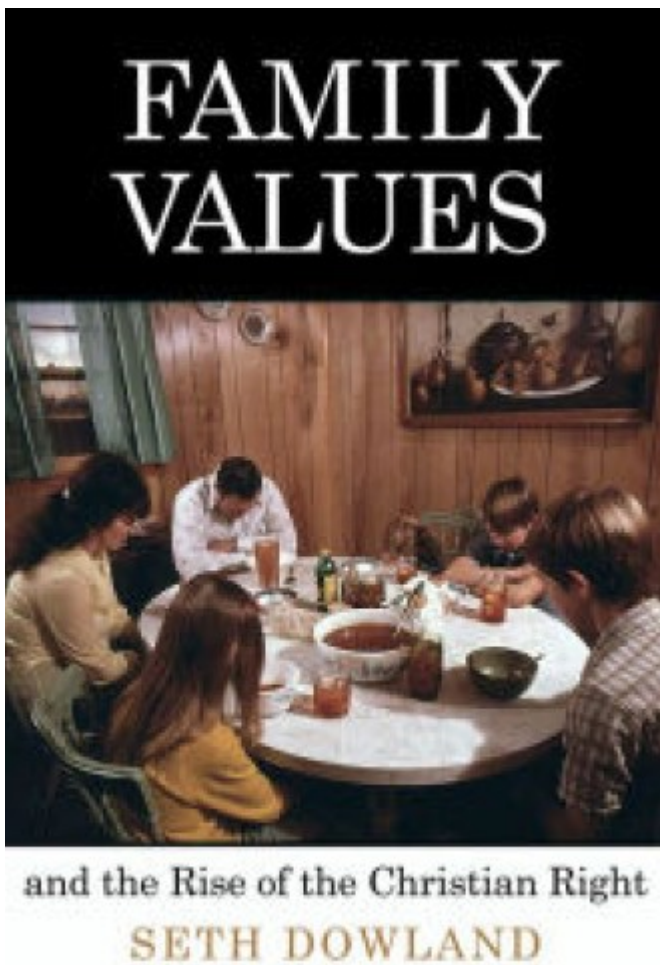


When family values belonged to all of us

The "traditional family" used to provide stability and comfort. Was it all an illusion?

by [John G. Turner](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right

By Seth Dowland

University of Pennsylvania Press

For many years, the slogan “family values” has been connected with Republican politicians and evangelical pastors.

For the 19th-century forerunners of mainline Protestantism, the Christian faith was inseparable from a home headed by male leadership, female nurture, and family prayer. Congregationalist theologian Horace Bushnell argued that genuine faith emerges not from emotional conversions at revivals but rather in the home, where fathers and mothers model lives of love and piety. Countless Protestants argued that wives and children relate to their husbands and fathers in the way that all Christians should relate to God. As the wildly popular preacher Henry Ward Beecher (later to fall from grace in a notorious sex scandal) explained, “family government . . . presents the nearest conception of the way in which God governs the whole realm.”

Well into the 20th century, Protestants of many theological stripes mobilized to defend the family’s sanctity, whether from the scourge of alcohol or from the allegedly baneful influence of Catholic immigrants. (It was left to skeptics such as the author Sinclair Lewis to portray ministers themselves as a threat to the purity of American women.) In the years after 1945, however, evangelicals and their political allies made defending the American family their particular terrain.

As Seth Dowland explains, evangelicals hearkened to a past in which gender lines were clear. Thus, they mobilized to defend the two-parent family and stay-at-home mothers from feminism, the gay rights movement, and liberal judges and politicians. Evangelical churches gained members and conservative politicians gained votes by celebrating “a nostalgic ideal of the home.”

It’s a story that Dowland tells carefully and fairly. For many Americans, “the image of a golden past where fathers, mothers, and children understood their roles and undergirded American prosperity has retained its potency.” Evangelicals defended that image by using the Bible to defend their understanding of gender, which they understood as a divinely ordained biological category rather than as a social construction. “Although the roles evangelicals assigned to men and women had more to do with 19th-century Victorian ideals than with the world of the ancient Mediterranean, evangelicals commonly described the gender norms they promoted as biblical.” Moreover, they followed 19th-century Protestants such as Beecher in arguing that the authority structures within the family reflected eternal truths about God’s governance of the world. Men and women had “complementary roles,” but

there were clear lines of authority within the family and church.

While men—from Jerry Falwell to Promise Keepers founder Bill Mc-
Cartney—sometimes occupied center stage, it was women who “were the driving
force of many family values campaigns.” In the early 1960s, Norma Gabler testified
before the Texas State Department of Education against the content of her son’s
textbooks, which she regarded as unpatriotic and anti-Christian. Later on, singer and
former Miss Oklahoma Anita Bryant successfully mobilized opposition to a Dade
County, Florida, ordinance that would have banned discrimination against gay and
lesbian teachers seeking to teach in public schools.

Of course, conservative evangelicals were hardly alone in talking about the
importance of family. In the late 1970s, Jimmy Carter convened a White House
Conference on Families. The conference was a political disaster in part because it
gave presidential recognition to family units beyond those with a mother and a
father. Concern for the well-being of families, though, united nearly all Americans
even as they disagreed bitterly on how to pursue it. “America,” Barack Obama
proclaimed in 2008, “is a country of strong families and strong values.” Dowland
suggests that Obama assuaged the fears of nervous voters through his own family’s
traditional appearance.

At the turn of the 21st century, the “family values” movement was an apparent
success. Evangelicals did much to secure the two elections of George W. Bush, who,
Dowland quips, “would have felt right at home in a Promise Keepers rally.”

Although Bush’s presidency marked a political triumph for the family values
movement, much has changed since then. Promise Keepers no longer holds mass
rallies. Same-sex marriage is legal across the United States. If “feminism” as a label
remains controversial, recent decades have reshaped the position of women in
American society. Perhaps most tellingly, Donald Trump has won the support of
evangelicals. Routed by its opponents in court and at the polls, the family values
movement has now imploded.

In the wake of the family values movement’s rise and fall, Protestants of all sorts
have entered uncharted territory surrounding the family. Many Protestant
denominations in the 1950s swelled their membership rolls by building large
campuses in predominantly white suburbs and doing their utmost to attract the
“traditional” families idealized by the subjects of Dowland’s research. It worked, for

a time. Now, though, most churches—regardless of their theology and politics—recognize the need to welcome a wider variety of families. Even many evangelicals have backed away from complementarian understandings of gender. Congregations still struggling to know how to respond to ongoing debates surrounding same-sex marriage confront a host of other issues about gender identity.

Christians follow a savior who did not marry, called people to leave their families behind, condemned divorce in no uncertain terms, and said nothing about same-sex attraction or transgender identity. While Jesus had relatively little to say about earthly family structures, the New Testament epistle to the church at Ephesus promises us that through Christ we can receive “adoption” as God’s children. Paul writes elsewhere that if we are God’s children, then we become “joint heirs with Christ”—heirs who will both suffer with Christ and be glorified with Christ. Churches, thus, bring together God’s children into a family of a very different sort.

Dowland is quite right that despite all of the cultural transformations of the past half century, the “image of a golden past” of family life retains a great deal of potency, and not just for evangelicals. One should therefore expect that despite the apparent defeat of the family values movement, Americans will continue to engage in bitter debates over families. Perhaps churches would be wise to spend less time fighting over the ideal forms of families and more time helping all individuals experience the gift of adoption within God’s family.