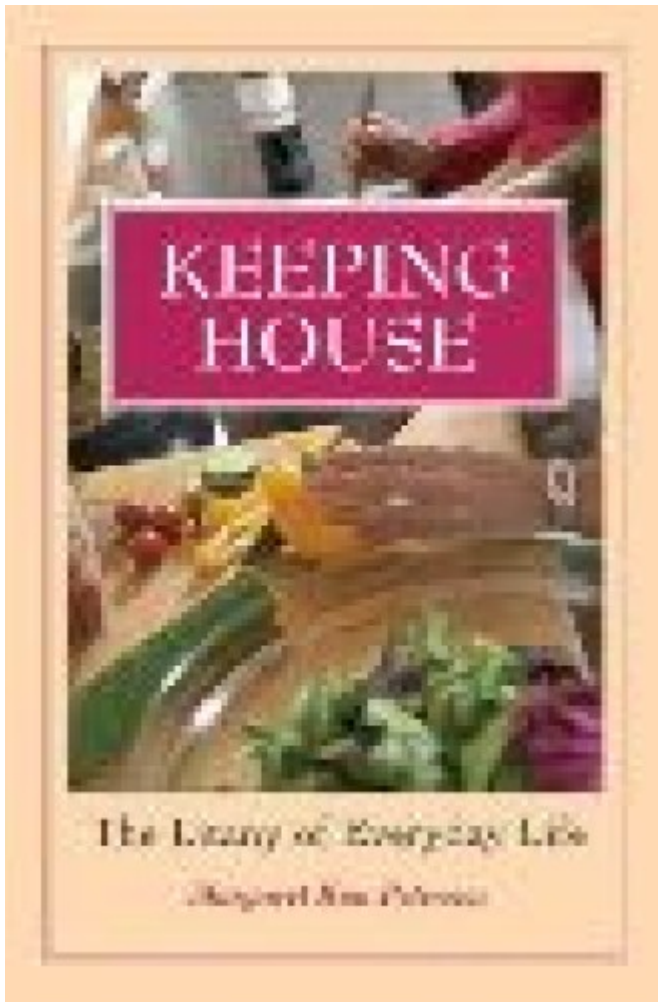


Keeping House

reviewed by [Sarah Morice Brubaker](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life

Margaret Kim Peterson
Jossey-Bass

Pastors, religious educators and denominational officers, take note: many people in your churches would appreciate a Christian explanation of household work. A big

part of our Monday-through-Saturday lives is spent keeping our households reasonably clean and supplied with food and clothing. Granted, some streams of Christianity do give religious significance to these household activities: Seventh-day Adventists observe dietary laws, for example, and the Orthodox have periodic churchwide fasts requiring the involvement of many of the faithful and their kitchens. Homeschooling and the house church movement represent other ways of bringing Christianity home. There are many congregations, however, for which the Christian life remains a largely extradomestic endeavor. We worship, attend church meetings and accomplish acts of service not only outside of our homes but far from our neighborhoods. And in the polarized climate in which “family values” Christianity is regrettably pitted against “social justice” Christianity, it’s easy for the social-justice types to conclude that the gospel kicks in only after we leave the driveway.

Is the ideal home for Christians the same as the homes in *House Beautiful*? Can the Christian story include a household with dog hair on the carpet, take-out containers in the trash, and one or more humans slumped on the sofa? Such questions have been addressed by a number of books in the past few years. Two books by David Matzko McCarthy—*Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household* and *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class*—attend to the complex economic relationships in which every household participates and to the theological significance of those relationships in furthering or hindering the Christian life. In the Practices of Faith series, Stephanie Paulsell’s *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore’s *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* give excellent reflections on the Christian discipleship involved in caring for the vulnerable bodies of ourselves and others.

Margaret Kim Peterson continues this conversation by focusing on the activities collectively known as housekeeping. Many who have studied women’s history would agree that the words *housekeeping* and *housework* are interesting for what they do commonly designate (fixing everyday dinners, clothing children, doing repetitive daily cleaning) and for what they don’t (barbecuing for guests, building a deck, repairing the car). The significance of these distinctions is greatly obscured in *Keeping House*—but more on that in a moment.

The book has much to recommend it. Peterson deftly connects the life of the home to the history of God’s abiding with humanity and creation. In her discussions of the house as a physical dwelling, she effectively relates the keeper and tender of a home to the God of the Bible, who graciously dwells with the people God has

welcomed. For Christians, she concludes, the beauty of a home therefore lies not in its being a place of escape from the world or in its reflecting the owner's impeccable sense of style or cleanliness, but in its capacity for hospitality and invitation.

Peterson again and again ties the practices of clothing and feeding the household and caring for bodily needs to the God of salvation history. This understanding gives Christians a powerful theological reason to make sure that their houses are kept with justice—sustained by food and labor that are life-giving rather than exploitative. This consistent connection to the biblical narrative—and the creativity with which Peterson forges it—is the strength of the book, and it adds much to the current conversation surrounding theology and the household.

That's the good news, and that much good news is well worth the price of the book. However, I found Peterson's analysis to be lacking in one significant respect. The lapse occurs at precisely the point at which *Keeping House* could have made a great contribution to the conversation: analyzing housekeeping and housework as a gendered category, comprising those activities that women (but generally not men) do in a home. A great number of historians have suggested that greater esteem attaches to the "masculine" set of activities around the home than to the "feminine" set, which has tended to be coded as unskilled. Even now, the thinking goes, women stand the best chance of gaining esteem by elbowing their way into domains still thought of as masculine. Whether or not one agrees with this interpretation, it enjoys much support from historians. A book touching on gender and the value of housework ought at least to address it.

Though Peterson clearly believes that housekeeping is woefully undervalued and though gender is very much on the table for her, in *Keeping House* gender mostly appears in her criticisms of feminism. She seems to miss the central point that would have enabled her to read her feminist interlocutors more charitably. It is not that she necessarily disputes the idea that women's labor has historically been devalued simply because it has been done by women. Rather, she mostly declines to engage the idea. Absent any real engagement with this more common interpretation, her alternative assertion—that feminism and industrialization are to blame for the devaluing of housework—makes little sense.

Peterson ends up framing the issue as a dispute between two parties: those who care about keeping house and have been formed and encouraged to do it well and feminist detractors who (seemingly without provocation) deem housework to be

mindless drudgery. Not only is this framework historically dubious, it makes the subject into a debate between women—which prompts me to raise the question: Should men read Peterson’s book?

There is a revealing anecdote in the introduction. Peterson recounts that when she told men that she was writing a book on housekeeping, they commonly responded that their wives would probably like it. In many ways this is no surprise—but it is a shame, and it’s a response the book does not counter strongly enough. Surely Christian men should also be formed in the practices of housekeeping if (as Peterson rightly argues) those practices contain profound possibilities for imitating and following Christ and growing in faith.

Some recent studies suggest that married American men are engaging more and more in the practices of housework; in some demographic groups they are even approaching parity with their wives when the wives also work outside the home. This would be a very good time for a Christian theological account of housework that addresses masculinity. For this reason I hope that many people, but especially Christian men, read Peterson’s mostly fine book. And I hope someone soon writes a book explaining why they need to.