Excerpts

Excerpt from the Preface

(pre-publication version)

What is the Christian family? This is the question that motivates this project. It is a question with a context. During the 1990s, North American social theorists and cultural critics seemed to divide into two schools of thought about families. Both agree that family forms are changing, but they diagnose the causes and results of this phenomenon very differently. On one side are those who pinpoint rising divorce and illegitimacy rates as symptoms of unfettered individualism, narcissism, moral laxity, and hedonism. These vices lie at the root of widespread family disintegration. They are devastating civil society while depleting the “social capital” (important social institutions that promote inclusive social participation and support) that depends on healthy family life and is so necessary to a viable society. Crime and poverty follow in the wake of such trends. Key to their reversal is a renewed ethic of family life built around responsibility, fidelity, and self-sacrifice.

On the other side stand those who view newly pluralistic family forms as a liberation from the patriarchal “nuclear” family, which is in reality not traditional but a product of the industrial revolution, capitalism, and the public-private split. The nuclear, middle-class family is structured according to hierarchically ordered gender roles and owes its economic security to a racially segregated underclass perpetually excluded from economic prosperity. Diversity in families is a welcome change, and it should not be judged socially or morally inferior.

These opposing camps were vociferous and influential during the 1992 and 1996 U.S. election campaigns and continue to be vocal in this century. They have fought for different approaches to family, health care, and welfare policies, and they both try to manipulate cultural symbols to form public consciousness in support of their own agenda.

To oversimplify, religious responses to those two views of the family have tended to break down into evangelical-conservative and mainline-feminist categories, with black churches occupying a complex middle position that will be investigated in this book’s first and fifth chapters. The evangelical-

conservative and mainline-feminist reactions, however, seem to focus on two different North American experiences of family and to put the problems, successes, and future of one rather than the other at the center of debate and political action. Evangelical Protestants and conservative “pro-life” Roman Catholics focus on the middle-class family, disrupted by new rates of sex and childbearing outside of marriage and by infidelity and divorce in marriage, all of which destabilize the economic base of the nuclear family. That base consists of a male breadwinner providing indirect access to material and social goods for his wife and children. Liberal Protestants and Catholics, on the other hand, especially feminist theologians and churches that are rapidly institutionalizing nontraditional roles for women, focus on families that are outside of or excluded from the social structures that protect the model of family built on the male wage-earner and female domestic support. They are looking for new patterns of access via different family forms, or they have found access within the standard middle-class forms constraining or oppressive. Hence they seek to institutionalize “nontraditional” patterns of family life. A counterpoint to both of these contrasting religious responses, one that will be explored at some length in chapter 5, is found in African American interpreters of family life. Writers from this perspective often acclaim the strengths of black kinship patterns outside the nuclear model and call for socioeconomic reform, even while they seek to enhance marital and parental stability to improve the social position of blacks in our society.

The evangelical-conservative Christian response answers what it defines as the problems of families today by championing strong family relations and bonds, urging sacrifice and altruism within the family. Yet, this approach often fails to provide a socioeconomic critique of internal family relations (especially male-female relations), and of the social positioning of families (especially why economic factors make it impossible for some families to thrive on the nuclear model). The mainline-feminist model typically undertakes a more radical critique of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation as they appear in family forms and social functions, but it, in turn, has difficulty regaining its normative balance around some vision of what is a healthy family or a Christian family. It tears down oppressive forms without building up better ideals of kin-derived, spousal, and parental relationships or of how families serve the common good of society and are served by it. While advocates of the first approach claim that “the Christian family” denotes the monogamous, reproductive pair who sacrifice for the welfare of their children, advocates of the second maintain that the “Christian” values of compassion, love, and inclusion not only prohibit the condemnation of other types of family but demand the acceptance of all families who have been the victims of social injustice. African American

authors tend to agree with the latter position while still supporting and encouraging the formation of two-parent families within an extended kin network.

The family is here understood as basically an organized network of socioeconomic and reproductive interdependence and support grounded in biological kinship and marriage. Kinship denotes affiliation through reproductive lines. Marriage in turn is a consensual and contractual manner of uniting kin groups, especially for the purpose of reproduction, and for perpetuation of the kinship structures through which social and economic relations are managed. While modern societies invest affective, interpersonal relationships within the family with primary significance, this has not universally been the case. Moreover, the extended consanguineous family is more ancient and more universal in social importance than the modern so-called nuclear family, consisting of spouses and children and considered to have been formed through marriage. The fact that family is defined primarily in terms of kinship in virtually all cultures signifies the importance of the body and of essential material needs in defining the family and its functions. The fact that marriage, however, is also a way of creating and defining family cross-culturally represents in turn the importance of affiliation through free choice in defining family ties. Both are important elements in understanding and defining family.

Although family as created by kinship and marriage is the most basic family form or definition of family, it is not the only or exclusively legitimate form. It is basic in that it prevails across cultures as an important social institution and provides the fundamental working concept of family for most individuals and societies. There are other types of human alliance, however, for mutual economic and domestic support, as for reproduction and childrearing, that are analogous to the basic kin- and marriage-based family. These need not entail biological kinship or male-female marriage. For instance, forms of adoption are familiar in most societies, though in many cultures adoption of children within the kin group is preferred over adoption of non-kin. The outer boundaries of “family” are thus perhaps impossible to define, since analogous forms arise according to particular circumstances and needs. In any event, it would be imprudent to attempt to set definitive limits on what counts as family, if as I do, one wants to advance an inclusive and supportive approach to family life, one that can hold up ideals such as male-female coparenting and sexual fidelity without thereby berating and excluding single-parent families, divorced families, gay and lesbian families, blended families, or adoptive families. Such family structures are often very worthy and successful

adaptations to particular circumstances and, given appropriate support, can fulfill family functions as well as more traditional families. As I hope to show, the ideals of Christian family life should focus more on function (fostering gospel-informed commitments and behavior) than on regularity of form.

My thesis is that strong family, spousal, and parental relationships are important, but that these very ideals are undermined by condemnatory and punitive attitudes and policies toward nonconforming families.

Excerpt from Chapter One

(pre-publication version)

Families in North America are in crisis. Such is the founding thesis of the Religion, Family, and Culture Project, according to its brochure. I endorse that thesis, if properly qualified. The crisis in American families looks different for women compared to men, for people of color compared to whites, and for the chronically undereducated and unemployed compared to the middle class. Divorce and births to poor, teenaged mothers are in fact bad signs for families. But the family crisis has other social and economic roots that are just as truly matters of Christian moral concern as are narcissistic individualism and unwillingness to make and keep commitments.

In 1991 the Religion, Culture, and Family Project took as its point of departure the fact that the American family is in decline, with terrible consequences for children and hence for social stability and prosperity in the next generation. While recognizing that working mothers and the freedom to end abusive marriages are here to stay—and not bad developments—leaders of the project fault an individualist ethos of self-fulfillment for family breakdown. As one authority frequently cited by members of the project has written, an American ethos of “expressive individualism” is the cause of much of America’s family woes. In this ethos, fostered as the baby-boom generation reached its professional phase in the 1980s, individual fulfillment takes precedence over the well-being of the family as a whole. During this period, sexual experimentation and divorce rates rose, while birth rates declined.

A special concern is fatherlessness, attributed—here drawing heavily on sociobiology—to the “male problematic.” Evolutionarily tilted toward sexual promiscuity, so the argument goes, men, unlike women, need powerful cultural norms to ensure their parental investment. A cultural ethos of narcissism points men in the wrong direction: away from mates and children.

This ethos must be shifted toward greater concern for the common good, and, near to home, a greater sense of responsibility for family ties.

Religious traditions and ideals—faithful marriage, self-sacrifice, care for children, male-female family cooperation—can engage the imagination, inspire conversion and dedication, and unite us in a new project of family well-being. The new pro-family atmosphere of church and society must be structured by equality and justice in gender, economic, and racial relations. Social institutions that support families, including poor and minority families, are the right and responsibility of all members of society. As Don Browning and co-authors state it, "the new postindustrial ideal should be the egalitarian family in which husband and wife participate relatively equally in paid work as well as in childcare and other domestic responsibilities. This family will need new preparations, new skills, new religious and communal supports, and a new theory of authority. . . . [The] new family ideal . . . [is] the committed, intact, equal-regard, public-private family."

I support wholeheartedly the project agenda of addressing the state of family life in relation both to a culture of individualism and to socioeconomic factors, of examining both positive and negative aspects of changing gender and workplace expectations, of bringing the contributions of religious institutions and faith traditions to bear on the strengths and problems of families, of devoting explicit attention to the experience of the African American churches in America, and of building bridges between liberals and conservatives. Attention to the complexity of these dimensions became stronger as the project progressed, fostered by Browning's efforts to ensure a relative degree of pluralism among the positions represented.

Nonetheless, I suspect that among many critics of today's families there remains a tacit assumption that the modern nuclear family is normative and that its decline is more or less traceable to a single cause: lack of moral commitment, self-sacrifice, and perseverance among an increasingly narcissistic childbearing population.

I agree that an individualist market mentality pervades the social attitudes of much of the middle and most of the upper classes. This includes their attitudes toward sexual exchange and family relations. In particular, too many young adults make and keep commitments only on the basis of clear short-term advantage, while prosperous middle-aged men "trade up" by acquiring trophy wives. This has devastating effects for women and children, both psychologically and financially. Furthermore, in segments of society under

economic duress, economic factors can militate heavily against the ability of persons to make and sustain commitments to sexual partners and children, as has been ably demonstrated by William Julius Wilson. The values, motives, and shaping social circumstances of the higher classes cannot be projected facilely onto the poor. Instead, according to Wilson, it is the ruthless market individualism of the well off that creates the socioeconomic climate inimical to family formation in the “underclass.”

Moreover, the proposed solutions to the supposed rise of home-wrecking self-indulgence are often unfair to women, since it usually turns out that women are expected to make asymmetrical sacrifices of educational and professional development to care for young children and that women are urged to accept male authority in the home to entice mates away from the infidelity that causes so much fatherlessness. The solution to “expressive individualism” proposed by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead is a “new familism,” in which both parents sacrifice for children, but the woman makes more concessions, rearranging her professional life to defer advancement in favor of domestic responsibilities. Equality of the sexes in the family, the need for flexible alternatives in reconciling family responsibilities with other social roles for both sexes, and even the importance of equalizing access to employment and its benefits are much more in evidence in the “critical familism” of Browning and his co-authors, who hope that a sixty-hour family work week (sixty hours combined work outside the home by both adults) will become the norm for employed couples in America.

At around the same time that the Religion, Culture, and Family Project was developing under Browning’s guidance, the United States Catholic bishops were pursuing a program of family evangelization focused through the metaphor of family as domestic church. The purpose of this program was not so much to bring families “into line” according to ecclesiastical norms but to reach out to families that had not experienced themselves as part of the church and to encourage the growth of spirituality in the family setting. Those the bishops hoped to address included single-parent families, blended families after divorce, and African American and Hispanic families.