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SOUTHERN BAPTIST SEXUAL REVOLUTIONARIES

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Southern Baptist Sexual Revolutionaries: Cultural Accommodation, Spiritual Conflict, and the Baptist Vision of the Family

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Southern Baptists are accustomed to thinking of themselves as “God’s last and only hope” for a darkening Western civilization.¹ Particularly on the issue of the family, Southern Baptists position their stance as increasingly out-of-step with a culture slouching toward Gomorrah. In many ways, both sides of the so-called “culture war” would agree that this characterization is true. But what if, in some significant ways, Southern Baptists are not quite the culture warriors we pretend ourselves to be? What if Southern Baptists are slow-train sexual revolutionaries, accommodating to the ambient culture’s concepts of the family, just a little behind the rest of the populace? Could it be that our press releases and confessions of faith say one thing, while our church directories and membership rolls say something strikingly different?

If Southern Baptists are to create a counter-culture that preserves the biblical definition of the family, we must first recognize that our culture may not have changed as much as we think, and that we may have changed more than we would like to admit. If this is the case, then a compelling Baptist vision of the family for the twenty-first century must consist of more than heated culture war rhetoric, sentimental Mother’s Day sermons, or market-tested denominational programs. It must consist of a truly transformational paradigm that sees all of reality through the biblical prism of Christ, and lives out this reality through counter-revolutionary churches.

¹Bill Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

The Myth of the Southern Baptist Culture Warrior

In the years 1998 and 2000, Southern Baptists adopted first a revision and then a new statement of their confession of faith, the *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM), which included language on the family. This was not the first Baptist confession of faith to address family issues (the Second London Confession of 1689, for instance, includes an article on marriage),² but the BFM is more expansive, rooting the definition of the family in creation and affirming the goodness of sexual differentiation, marriage, children, and the complementary vocations of men and women in the church and the home. This confessional stance affirms ideas that would hardly have been considered controversial in the previous years in which the Convention adopted confessions of faith (1925 and 1963), but were extraordinary given the changing attitudes of American culture, including American evangelical culture, on such matters. On issues such as a complementarian stance on “gender roles,” the normative biblical framework for human sexuality, and the sanctity of human life—including that of the unborn—Southern Baptists maintain a clear confessional consensus.

Some social and political commentators have responded with alarm to the supposedly reactionary and regressive sociopolitical trends portended in the Southern Baptist—and other similar “Religious Right”—resistance to changing views on the family. Political strategist Kevin Phillips, for instance, warns of “theocracy” as he notes the vast influence of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) as “the state church of the ex-Confederacy” and its “radical religion” on the regional culture of the Bible belt and in the “southernization” of the rest of the country.³ And yet, one must ask just how “radical” this religion is. Phillips points to the vastness of Southern Baptist influence on electoral politics: the election of President Jimmy Carter, the Republican ascendancy since 1980, state ballot initiatives on marriage definition, and so forth. What he and others are not able to demonstrate is the “radical” influence on the way real families in real communities actually are living their lives. If Baptists are “the center of gravity” in the South, then should not the region be strikingly out-of-step with the rest of the country when it comes to marital harmony, divorce rates, sexual mores, domestic violence, parenting issues, and other related matters? In fact, though, in almost all of these categories, Southern Baptists and other conservative evangelicals demonstrate a remarkable sameness to the rest of the culture.

²William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 284–85.

³Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), 159–70.

Marriage and Gender

Historian Barry Hankins contends that family and gender questions represent the “best issue” for Southern Baptist conservatives to demonstrate their “conservative countercultural” bona fides, since the outside culture is divided on questions such as abortion and church/state relations and since Southern Baptist conservatives now agree with the larger culture on racial issues.⁴ And yet, sociologist Christian Smith argues that Southern Baptists hold to a theological conviction about male servant headship in marriage, but he questions based on survey data whether such a conviction means that Southern Baptist marriages, in practice, differ at all from contemporary culture’s egalitarian, feminist models of marriage. Conservative evangelicals such as Southern Baptists, Smith asserts, are “moving along with the cultural current propelled over the past thirty years in part by the women’s movement.”⁵ The conflicted interplay between theory and life in conservative evangelicalism does not mean that these evangelicals are egalitarian, Smith explains, but instead that they have “largely integrated an older ideology of headship into newer egalitarian languages and practices.”⁶

As sociologist Sally Gallagher puts it, the family traditionalism of conservative Protestants in America is “largely symbolic” and “practically egalitarian.”⁷ This point is credible, given the fact that the wider culture seems much more shocked by Southern Baptist statements on such matters, than by Southern Baptist practice, or even by Southern Baptist preaching. Some feminist theorists could contend that the seeming lack of difference between Southern Baptists and other Americans on this point has to do with a still-“patriarchal” culture. But, one wonders, given the “revolutionary” changes in American (and European) life on gender matters in the past fifty years, if the sameness is not more a result of contemporary evangelical preaching that can be vague in application and therapeutic in focus, with the authority for differing “roles” for men and women grounded more in communication theory and *Mars and Venus*-type socio-biology than in the biblical revelation.

Baptist unfamiliarity with the language of such texts as Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 is seen in the way some moderate Southern Baptist critics of

⁴Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 239.

⁵Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 189.

⁶*Ibid.*, 190.

⁷Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 103. For a theological analysis of such studies, see Russell D. Moore, “After Patriarchy, What? Why Egalitarians Are Winning the Evangelical Gender Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006): 569–76.

the 1998 revisions to the *Baptist Faith and Message* responded with seeming shock about language on headship and submission that is word for word from Ephesians 5, with the exception of the modifiers “graciously” to describe submission and “servant” to describe headship (which is itself translated into the softer-sounding “leadership” in the document). One wonders how many critics of the family language in the statement of faith were even cognizant that the language they found most problematic was the work not of a committee but of an apostle.⁸ While this can be argued to be simply on the left fringe of the Southern Baptist experience, sociological and demographic evidence suggests that the trends, overall in American religious life, are moving in just such a direction.

Sexual Ethics

Similarly, there is real question about just how at “war” Southern Baptists are with the culture when it comes to sexual ethics. Southern Baptists maintain a consensus that sexual activity is biblically limited to the marriage union, and have sought commendably to shore up this ethic with good denominational programs encouraging premarital sexual abstinence among teenagers and young adults in Southern Baptist churches. While studies have shown some effectiveness of such initiatives in at least delaying sexual activity, it is not at all clear that Southern Baptists have created a sexual counter-culture. In a landmark study of the sexual practices of American teenagers, sociologist Mark Regnerus shows that abstinence pledge programs are most effective with younger adolescents, but the “appeal of the pledge diminishes as the sex drive increases with age.”⁹ Regnerus demonstrates, to the contrary, that evangelical Protestant teenagers are *more* likely to engage in sex than their Mormon, Jewish, and mainline Protestant peers. Indeed, Regnerus argues, these evangelicals “are largely indistinguishable from the rest of American adolescents.”¹⁰

Regnerus identifies as mythic the common notion that conservative evangelical Protestant “virginity pledges” are a driving force in leading evangelical teenagers to cling to a so-called “technical virginity” through sexual practices other than intercourse, but his analysis of this is not the good news it might at first blush appear to be. The “technical virginity” delusion has never been rooted in an avoidance of religious “guilt,” Regnerus contends, but instead in a “future-oriented, self-focused (but not

⁸Here I am not speaking, of course, of the more thoroughly liberal critics of the statement, who might have considered the original text the work of an anonymous “committee” in “the Pauline tradition.”

⁹Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 92.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 153.

anti-family), risk-averse, parent-driven (and subtly class-oriented)” middle-class morality. In short, teenagers of whatever religious persuasion in contemporary America are more likely to delay intercourse or to substitute other forms of sexual immorality for intercourse because they want to go to college rather than because they want not to go to hell. As conservative evangelicals become more socially and economically ascendant, Regnerus predicts, the more likely they will be to adopt the same form of sexually-tolerant risk management focused on economic viability.

This trend is not surprising either given the ways the ambient culture has shaped even the most conservative Christian discourse on sexual morality. After all, our church initiatives and youth curricula often speak in terms of “premarital sex” and “abstinence” (as has this article, thus far). Hearing the language of the Bible on such matters, such as the word “fornication,” seems awkward and strange. Indeed, to how many Southern Baptists would the term “fornicator” sound more like a throwback phrase from a Puritan preacher or a comedic “church lady” on the last generation’s late-night television programs than like a term for serious discussion among followers of Christ? Further, the way many Southern Baptist parents and churches teach teenagers to be “abstinent” is already in terms of “risk management.” Teenagers are taught to think primarily in terms of earthly “values,” saving themselves for their spouse so that one can avoid negative consequences in their future marriage or walk with God. This is no doubt true, but why does the word “hell” seem, again, so hopelessly antiquated to our Southern Baptist ears when it comes to the subject of sexual morality? One does not have to be a wild-eyed “hellfire and brimstone” preacher to recognize that the apostles and prophets seem insistent that Christians understand that the sexually immoral “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10).¹¹ Why would we rather speak in terms of “struggling” and “need for accountability” or even “addiction?”

Furthermore, we must ask whether the typical “life cycle” of Southern Baptist childhood development and evangelism in the contemporary era does not itself almost presuppose sexual rebellion prior to marriage. Journalist Tom Shachtman details a little-known practice among some parts of the American Amish population known as *rumspringa*, or “running around.”¹² In this culture, children raised in the isolated community are given the “space” upon achieving late adolescence to go out into the world and “roam,” to experience the outside culture in ways ranging from automobiles, contemporary fashion, and cigarettes on one end of the spec-

¹¹Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV).

¹²Tom Shachtman, *Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish* (New York: North Point, 2006).

trum to sexual experimentation, alcohol abuse, and narcotic drugs on the other. This “running around” ends when the adolescent returns home to the Amish, agrees to be baptized, and assumes his responsibilities as a mature member of the community. I wonder if, in some ways, we have not adopted unawares a Southern Baptist version of *rumspringa*.

We should be thankful in many ways, to be sure, when we hear the testimony of one who was baptized at an early age, nurtured in the children’s and youth departments of a local church, went away to college and far from the Lord, engaged in immorality and rebellion throughout young adulthood, and then rededicated his life to Christ after settling down and beginning a family. But have we subtly adopted this model as the expected life cycle of a Southern Baptist church member? Is something wrong when a Southern Baptist version of Timothy—one who was raised in the teachings of Scripture and has held to the faith of his childhood (2 Tim 3:14–15)—is considered exceptionally spiritual? Again, we should be thankful for college ministries winning the lost to Christ on university campuses all over the country. But has something gone awry when the most passionate and faithful Christians on many college campuses are these new believers who are the ones often by necessity that must disciple cradle-raised Southern Baptists away from dissipation and toward Christ? Is it considered normal among us that it is the exceptionally healthy church that has a vibrant college ministry while so many others think of the “College and Career” class in the same way they think of purgatory—there may be one but there is unlikely to be anyone in it?

Divorce

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Southern Baptist cultural accommodation is found in the surprisingly high numbers of those who make the trek from our baptisteries to the local divorce court. Pointing to national statistical surveys which show that conservative Protestants are *more likely* to divorce than the general population, and that the South (again, in the center of influence of the allegedly vast sway of the Southern Baptist Convention) has a higher divorce rate than the rest of the country, theologian Ronald J. Sider rightly pronounces that there is a “scandal of the evangelical conscience.”¹³ Sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, who has done the most significant analysis of this phenomenon, argues for a direct tie between these increasing divorce rates and Southern Baptist preaching and ecclesial practice related to divorce and remarriage.

There are, of course, a variety of views among Southern Baptists and other evangelicals about when, if ever, it is biblically permissible—based

¹³Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 19–20.

on the so-called “exception clauses” in Matthew and 1 Corinthians—to divorce or to remarry after a divorce.¹⁴ Nonetheless, even the most expansive view of the biblical exceptions (and this author does acknowledge some narrowly limited causes in Scripture that would annul the marriage covenant, and allow for the church to accept remarriage) would still rule out most of the divorces in contemporary American culture. Moreover, the shift in Southern Baptist attitudes toward marital permanence does not seem to have come through any kind of theological reflection or conversation at all. Instead, the Southern Baptist approach to divorce seems to have meandered just a bit behind the mainstream of American cultural patterns of acceptance of “one wife at a time” as a sad, but normal, part of life. For many Southern Baptists, divorce does not seem like a “culture war” issue because it is not shocking, or disgusting. We have grown accustomed to it. These same Southern Baptists will have grandchildren and great-grandchildren for whom sex reassignment surgeries, prostitution, and polygamy may seem just as “normal.” Will they be more counter-cultural than we?

Wilcox notes that surveys of Southern Baptist pastors show a distinct “softening” of clergy opinions and preaching on divorce, often related to pastoral comments on forgiveness and “second chances” for those who have been divorced and/or remarried.¹⁵ Wilcox’s assessment rings true when divorce is often conceived of in Southern Baptist churches in terms of “divorce care” ministries and “singles again” Bible studies (both of which are commendable and missiologically appropriate), but rarely in the context of prophetic preaching or congregational discipline. Of course, Southern Baptist pastors should not be condemnatory of those who are divorcing or divorced. As those who follow Christ, we should not be condemnatory of any sinner (John 3:17), but always should offer full forgiveness and complete justification for all who rest in Christ (Rom 8:1). But that does not explain why we would not warn sinners away from a sin for which the wages are death, and the consequences ruinous.

How can Southern Baptists and other evangelicals—whether on the Right or the Left of the political spectrum—speak to issues of social justice and the common good without addressing what is no doubt the leading cause of “widows and orphans” in our midst? Why would Southern Baptists think and speak in one way (“muted” and “ambiguous,” in Wilcox’s words) on the issue of divorce, and quite another (full volume and unambiguous) on an issue such as homosexuality? Wilcox suggests, and I think

¹⁴For a recent contrast of evangelical views on this issue, see Mark Strauss, ed., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

¹⁵W. Bradford Wilcox, “Conservative Protestants and the Family: Resisting, Engaging, or Accommodating Modernity,” in *A Public Faith: Evangelicals and Civic Engagement*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 58.

rightly, that Southern Baptists and other conservative Protestants have been “far from untouched by the dramatic increases in divorce since the 1960s.”¹⁶ Wilcox writes: “It may well be that leaders and pastors are more comfortable confronting homosexuality, which probably does not affect many people in the pews, than confronting divorce, which does.” To put it bluntly, we have many more “out of the closet” multiple divorcees than “out of the closet” homosexuals in our churches. At issue here is pastoral courage. John the Baptist would put his head on a platter to speak truth to power that not even a king can have another man’s wife. John the Southern Baptist is too often not willing to put his retirement benefits on the table to say the same thing to a congregational business meeting.

As I was preparing for this project, one of my student interns assembled for me a list of twentieth-century Southern Baptist quotations from various articles and sermons across the denominational spectrum on issues related to the family. The most impressive was from a Southern Baptist pastor speaking to the Christian Life Commission (now the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission) of the SBC in 1987 on the question of the family in crisis. This pastor prophetically charged Southern Baptists with relegating the issue of divorce to “descriptive statements in which we are drowning” at the expense of “normative statements, a divine word, a prophetic word, an authoritative word, a transcendent word from God.” This denominational leader displayed what impressed me as some of the most remarkable pastoral courage I have seen in print, as he laid out the carnage left in our Southern Baptist churches by rampant divorce, noting what such does to our global witness for Christ. This leader did not attack “the culture” or the political establishment but lamented instead that divorce was “the only great question on which both extremes of the spectrum, politically and in our own convention, are tongue-tied.” He charged the left wing of the Convention with a “mutinous silence” on divorce as they championed other causes. But he also charged the right wing of the Convention, his fellow biblical inerrantists, with having “an anti-abortion, anti-ERA, anti-sex education stance, but total silence in popular evangelical culture about divorce.” As I read these bold words, I was sobered to contemplate how this leader’s indictment is no less relevant twenty years later, indeed probably more so, despite “winning” the battle for the Bible and settling the issue of biblical authority long ago. I was sobered further to turn the page to find the name of this fearless prophet, and to recognize that he is now himself divorced.

Given this trajectory in Southern Baptist life, it is difficult to argue with political scientist Alan Wolfe’s contention that the “culture wars”

¹⁶Ibid.

are mostly an illusion in the contemporary American milieu. The heated rhetoric of evangelicals in the political and media spheres, Wolfe asserts, are often directly related to the ineffectuality of Christian distinctiveness in our own living rooms and pews. Of evangelical conservatives, Wolfe writes: “Their inability to use their political power to lower the abortion and divorce rates, instill a sense of obedience and respect for authority among teenagers, and urge courts and legislatures to give special recognition to Christianity’s power role in American religious life creates among them a perpetual outrage machine.”¹⁷

So why are evangelical family lives so relatively unaffected by the traditionalist doctrine our churches espouse? Wolfe argues, compellingly, that our churches are intentionally embedded in the same consumerist, individualist, narcissistic culture that birthed the sexual revolution in the first place. He writes:

If churches need day care for their children while engaged in frightfully long commutes from their exurb in downtown Atlanta or Minneapolis, the church will provide it. If not displaying a cross will bring in more of the unchurched, the cross will not be displayed. If young people want preachers that can speak their slang, preachers will be trained who can speak their slang. If women need to work to support the family’s lifestyle, they will not be told from the pulpit that their Christian duty requires that they stay at home and be full-time mothers. If best-selling authors want to introduce believers to old-fashioned ideas about the end times, they do so through the medium of science fiction.¹⁸

In short, we’re as counter-cultural as we want to be. And that’s not nearly enough to turn our churches, much less the world, upside down.

The Cosmic Roots of the Family Crisis

It is hardly a fair characterization for Christian Smith to speak of evangelical groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the “Promise Keepers” movement as wishing to “recreate some mythic 1950s happy nuclear family.”¹⁹ Enough has been written on the exegetical and theological groundings of the historic Christian position on the family and

¹⁷Alan Wolfe, “The Culture War That Never Came,” in *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Washington DC: Brooking Institution Press, 2006), 56.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹Smith, *Christian America*, 162.

its various components to make clear that there is more than nostalgia at work here. Moreover, some advocates of a traditionalist family have made clear, rightly in my estimation, that the economic and social patterns in mid-century America actually sowed the familial discord we now reap.²⁰ Christians, of all people, with a strong sense of human depravity in tow should agree that feminist scholar Stephanie Coontz is at least partly right that any nostalgic vision of an idyllic era of “normal” families is “the way we never were.”²¹

Still, Southern Baptists should heed the warning never to see the “crisis in the American family” as a new development, or as the result of blind cultural or historical trends. The Scriptures present a picture of the family as constantly under assault in this age, albeit often in craftily veiled ways, that only appear to be incidental. Family chaos did not begin in Caligula’s court, the Hefner mansion, or the Clinton White House; and the “culture wars” around the family are not chiefly a matter of what originates in Hollywood, Wall Street, or Capitol Hill. The antidote to our myopic vision on the family, whether nostalgic or apathetic, is to see it through the hermeneutical grid of the Scripture’s storyline: the mystery of Christ.

Those who seek to redefine whatever point of traditional Christian concepts of the family often suggest that individual proof-texts related to the family ought to be placed within the proper context, or within the overall trajectory of Scripture.²² They are quite right. Traditionalists have nothing to fear from this, except an exposure of our own timidity and cultural accommodation, since the “trajectory” of Scripture and the larger canonical narrative context could not be further from the contemporary revisionist proposals. When the goal and trajectory of Scripture is seen in its proper context—as an unfolding of the mystery of Christ against the opposition of the hostile cosmic powers—we see even why the family is so significant, as iconic representations of Christ Jesus, His church, and His Gospel.

²⁰See, for instance, Allan Carlson, *The Family in America: Searching for Social Harmony in the Industrial Age* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2003), and Brian Robertson, *Forced Labor: What’s Wrong with Balancing Work and Family* (Dallas: Spence, 2002).

²¹Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

²²Such arguments range from the relatively restrained end of the spectrum on “gender roles” represented by William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), to the relatively radical end of the spectrum on sexuality represented by *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006). This is not at all to equate the agendas or the outcomes of the two arguments, except as both argue for a larger biblical trajectory in order to understand individual texts.

The Family and the Cosmic Curse

The Scripture is clear that one cannot understand the universe rightly without distinguishing between those aspects of the creation that are “from the beginning” and thus created good, and those aspects that were unleashed by the curse on the universe’s designated ruler, man (Rom 8:18–23). This “reign of death” that begins with the revolt in Eden does not simply result in individual alienation from God, but the disruption of the entire fabric of the cosmos—including the familial relationships established in the garden temple. Indeed, the most immediate disruption in the *shalom* of the Garden is seen in alienation of the one-flesh union of the man and the woman, as they experience nakedness and shame in one another’s presence.

The curse that comes upon humanity—and all that is under their feet—upends every aspect of their calling as the universe’s regal family. The woman’s vocation as mother of all living now includes pain and anguish in childbirth (Gen 3:16). The man’s vocation as the tiller of the ground, to bring forth bread for his wife and children, now includes the toil and sorrow of a cursed creation (Gen 3:17–19). The marriage union of the man and the woman now includes disharmony and rivalry (Gen 3:16). The “fruitful and multiply” command results not just in new life, but also in bloody fratricide (Gen 4:1–16). Eastward from Eden, the biblical story traces a bloody trail of familial anarchy—even just in the immediate literary context of Genesis—from polygamy (Gen 4:23) to rape (Gen 19:1–11; Gen 34:1–31) to incest (Gen 19:30–38) to vigilante tribal violence (Gen 34:1–31) to sexual blackmail (Gen 39:1–23). Add to this the accounts of the reproductive transgression of the angelic/human divide (Gen 6:1–4), the dishonoring of the patriarch of the post-deluge new creation by his son (Gen 9:18–27), and the repeated cycles of familial deceit, sibling warfare, inheritance skirmishes, and it becomes clear that the Edenic peace of the family is no more. This continues throughout the canon and beyond.

The Family and the Christic Mystery

When the Pharisees seek to trap Jesus with a question about divorce, Jesus indicts them for failing to understand the alpha-point of the biblical storyline. By pointing to the Mosaic era’s provisions for divorce, they are missing that it was not so “from the beginning” (Matt 19:1–12). When the Sadducees seek to trap Jesus with a question about Levirate marriage, Jesus indicts them for failing to understand the omega-point of the biblical storyline. By assuming in the question the eternal relevance of the “fruitful and multiply” clause, they are missing the way it will be in the consummation—when human existence reaches its resurrection goal of a new creation (Mark 12:18–27). In both instances, they are abstracting

legal requirements or theological constructs from God's purpose in Christ, the Alpha and Omega of the creation. Unwilling to recognize Jesus as the Christ, they are unable to see where God's creational structures—whether the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–14) or worship (John 2:13–22) or dominion over the angelic beings (Matt 12:22–32) or the family structures—fit into the universe.

It is no surprise then that those who could not see their rebellion against God's anointed could not see their rebellion against the divine order on the family, be it through divorce or through the refusal to honor their fathers and mothers with financial provision. They are veiled to Christ, so they are veiled to the family order—all the while surrounding both concepts with out-of-context Scripture references and human traditions that excuse their rebellion and self-justify them, they suppose, before God. This is precisely what the apostle Paul refers to in Romans 1:18–32 when he notes that those who refuse to give thanks as creatures then become darkened in their minds and turn to the creation itself (as Adam does to a reptile in the Garden, and then by hiding himself in the vegetation God has made). This downward spiral results in being handed over to one's rebellion—a rebellion with distinct implications for the family order, including misdirected sexuality and disobedience to parents (Rom 1:26–27, 30). But what is this creation order against which humanity rebels? Why does Paul fit this in the context of a discussion of his lack of shame about the gospel of the resurrected Son of David (Rom 1:1–17)?

This is because, in the apostolic message, the gospel of Christ is the key to understanding the meaning of all of reality. The New Testament repeatedly makes clear that the universe was created through and for Christ as the firstborn and heir of all creation (John 1:1–3, Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:2–3). Adam and Eve seek to usurp God's wisdom through the fruit of the Tree, to grasp it for their self-interest in order to be deified by it. The man and the woman seek to know the mystery of the universe apart from the Word of God. But the apostolic message is that the mystery of the universe *is* the Word of God. Thus, millennia after the Fall God reveals in His wisdom what the world could not know through autonomous wisdom (1 Cor 1:21).

The apostle announces to the church at Ephesus that God “in all wisdom and insight” has made known the “mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9–10). In the fullness of time, God unveils that He created the universe as an arena for the kingship of His heir, His Son. He created all that exists in order to recreate them, to set them in line with their archetype, Christ Jesus, who will unite in His own person the fullness of Deity

and the consummation of humanity, so that He is both the God whose throne is unchallenged (Heb 1:8) and the human firstborn among many brothers (Heb 2:10–17). Jesus unites in His own person the God who creates through His *Logos*, and the human vice-regent who is to govern through and be governed by the *Logos* of God. He unites in His own person the God who promises to dwell with His people, and the people who dwell with their God—a unity that, mysteriously, joins in one new man the peoples of the earth fractured by the Fall since Babel (Eph 2:1–6).

One key aspect of this unveiled mystery is that the family structure is not an arbitrary expression of the will of God. It is an archetype, an icon of God's purpose for the universe in Christ. Paul's classic text on marriage, for example, from Ephesians 5 makes no sense if it is presented as tips for a happier, healthier marriage. It is part of an argument regarding the cosmic mystery of Christ "which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Eph 3:5). The Genesis 2 mandate to leave father and mother, to cleave to one another, to become one flesh is a "mystery" that "refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:31–32). Paul is emphatically not using Christ and the church as illustrative of human marriage. To say such would be similar to saying that Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead in order to teach us the proper mode of baptism. In both instances, it is the other way around. The husband/wife union is a visible icon of the Christ/church union; a union in which, as a head with a body, Jesus is inseparable from His bride, a bride He protects, provides for, leads, disciples, and sanctifies. He is as inseparable from His body, as a human head is from a human body; a truth Paul heard from the voice of the Galilean Himself when Jesus asked the persecutor of the church on the road to Damascus, "Why are you persecuting me (Acts 9:4)?"

Thus, male headship and female submission are not indicative of some hierarchy of value, or differing degrees of the image of God. Both are iconic, pointing to the purpose of the creation. The headship the wife is to submit to, then, is not a raw sovereignty. It is a covenantal love that reflects the love of Christ for His ecclesial Bride. The husband is to lead his wife as Christ washes His bride with water (Eph 5:26)—an image drawn from the prophetic promise of a God who washes His bride Israel with water (Ezek 16:9). It is modeled in Jesus' act of washing the feet of the foundation stone of his church, Peter, as representative of the apostles—an act that entails self-humbling on the part of the Lord Christ, but also requires decisive leadership. Peter says to his Lord, "You shall never wash my feet" (John 13:8), but Jesus leads His disciple to see the necessity of such cleansing (John 13:8–9).

In the same way, the Ephesians text says that the husband loves, “as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Once again, Peter as representative of the apostles did not deem crucifixion to be a wise course of action for the messianic King (Matt 16:21–23; 26:50–56), but Jesus sets His face towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–53), not for His own self-interest but for that of His church. The wife submits to her husband not because she is somehow less dignified than he, but precisely because she is a model, a picture of an assembly that is pursued, protected, and led by a Spirit-anointed King. Thus, “as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Eph 5:24).

The offspring of the husband/wife union and the interplay between parents and children are also archetypal and Christological. The command to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, is fulfilled eschatologically in the Christ who stands triumphant before His Father, not hiding in the vegetation as did the shamed first Adam, but announcing, “Behold, I and the children God has given Me” (Heb 2:13). The love between the Father and the Son through the Spirit is incarnated; it leads to life and flesh and community. The universe is built around the Father’s joy in bestowing on His Son an inheritance (Ps 2:7–8), a great name (Phil 2:9–11), and the glory of a firstborn among many brothers (Rom 8:29). The command for fathers to protect, provide for, and discipline their children is not, again, arbitrary. It is in place because human fatherhood is to model the divine patriarchy (Heb 12:5–11). This is why Jesus teaches us to pray “Our Father” along with Him (Matt 6:9), because in Christ we participate in the Father/Son dynamic at the heart of the universe (John 17:24). Human fathers are to train their children to trust and obey precisely because God does so (Matt 6:10). Human fathers are to bring forth bread from the earth for their families precisely because God does so (Matt 6:11). Human fathers are to guard their children from evil threats precisely because God does so (Matt 6:13). The Fatherhood of God to His only begotten Son is thus paradigmatic of the family structure.

This is why Jesus tells us that we, being evil, can understand what it is to know God as Father—even our fathers would give us bread when asked, not stones. Jesus knows this experientially as Satan seeks to subvert the Father/Son relationship by tempting Jesus to turn stones to bread in the wilderness (Matt 4:3–4). The temptation is the same as that which came thousands of years earlier to the “son of God” in the wilderness beyond the Jordan, Israel, whom the Serpent caused to grumble against their Father’s supposed lack of provision (Num 11:1–15; 21:4–9). God as Father responds with both discipline and provision. To Israel God says that He “humbled you and let you hunger” and “fed you with manna” so that “He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man

lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deut 8:3). Satan wished Jesus to believe that His Father would give Him stones, not bread. But the promise of God to the Davidic Son is that “the enemy will not outwit Him” (Ps 89:22), but that instead, “He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation’” (Ps 89:25). Unlike the sons of Eli, who shame their father—and demonstrate his failure—by their enslavement to their own grasping appetites (1 Sam 2:12–17, 29), this Son trusts that His Father hears Him when He calls, and leads us through the Spirit to cry out with Him “Abba!” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

This is why the command to honor father and mother is included in the Torah of God. This is why such obedience is tied to the inheritance of the land of promise (Eph 6:1–4). This is why disobedience to parents is included as among the horrors of a universe in rebellion against God (Rom 1:30). This is why the man who will not provide for his household is “worse than an unbeliever” and has “denied the faith” (1 Tim 5:8). Such is not mere social control, and certainly is not a relic of an outmoded and inhumane patriarchy. The breakdown of familial honor, discipline, and order is indicative of a larger revolt against the archetypal Fatherhood of God. The way of Christ is to listen to the voice of His Father (John 5:19–23). Disharmony between parents and children is not simply a cultural problem; it implicitly pictures a false gospel of a Father who does not hear His Son, and a Son who does not honor His Father.

The Family and Spiritual Conflict

Only when we step back and see the fuller mosaic of the Christic mystery behind the family do we perceive something of why family disorder is always with us, in every age between Eden and the New Jerusalem. Paul tells the church at Ephesus that the mystery of the Christ/church union is a sign of the “manifold wisdom of God” that is now made known to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10). It is no accident, then, that Paul writes of marriage in Ephesians 5 and childrearing in Ephesians 6 in the context of an ongoing discussion of spiritual warfare (Eph 4:14–6:20). In his Patmos vision to the apostle John, Jesus sums up all of redemptive history in the image of a woman clothed with the sun, giving birth to a child who is to rule the nations.²³ Crouched to devour the man-child is a dragon, which pursues the woman and her child with fury. This dragon—identified as the Serpent of Eden—despises the people of God precisely because from this people comes the Messiah. This is exactly the story first unveiled in the curse of the Serpent in the oracle

²³For an excellent discussion of Revelation 12 as a recapitulation of redemptive history, see G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 621–79.

of God in the Edenic garden. Yes, the woman will experience the cursed tumult of birth pangs (Gen 3:17; Rev 12:2), yet she shall be saved through childbearing (1 Tim 2:15). It is the offspring of the woman who will crush the skull of the snake-god (Gen 3:15) and thus through His pierced flesh and spilled blood free the human race from the tyranny of the satanic accusation (Rev 12:10).

It is little accident, then, that the Serpent's strategies turn in the biblical storyline to disrupting the *shalom* of the marital covenant, of the integrity of the sexual union, of the parent/child bond, and of the church as the household of God. These are icons of the mystery of Christ, visible images of the gospel against which the demonic powers rage in fury. The destruction of those made in the image of God is an act of violence against the God of the image (Gen 9:6), thus the satanic powers are murderous "from the beginning" (John 8:44). Likewise, the destruction of a Christ-imaging, gospel-announcing family order is as antichrist as desecrating the temple of God. This is why no generation of humanity is exempt from such warfare.

The spiritual warfare aspect of the family is also why the Scripture places such a close tie between family breakdown and occultism, with sexual immorality repeatedly tied to idolatry and vice versa.²⁴ The Scripture repeatedly shows the people of God drawn away by the demonic through fertility rituals, cultic prostitution, child sacrifice, and anointed kings and judges who are led to idolatry through sexual relationships with foreign women. The warfare of the Serpent against the Seed of Abraham cyclically involves the slaughter of children in the attempt to snuff out the messianic line (Exod 1:1–22; Matt 2:16–18). The mystery of the Christ/church archetype was revealed, it should be remembered, to a congregation in the shadow of the temple of a fertility goddess (Acts 19:21–41).

In the Scripture, this cosmic rage against the family order is decidedly personal. The counsel of a father to a son in the Proverbs speaks of the pull toward a man destroying his family through adultery as one who is led along as an animal to the slaughter, right to the abode of the dead (Prov 5–7). The foolish man is not just indulging his urges; he is listening to a voice (Prov 9:13–18). In forbidding an "unequal yoke" between believers and unbelievers, the apostle Paul echoes the Old Testament tie between paganism and marriage to unbelievers. Paul does not refer to the implications of such a union, first of all, for the couple's intimacy or the difficulties it would bring to childrearing. He asks instead, "What accord has Christ with Belial" (2 Cor 6:15)? Paul speaks of the man who scandalizes

²⁴For a thorough treatment of the "whoredom" motif in the Old and New Testaments, see Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

the church and the culture by consorting with his father's wife as though he were prey for a predator. He instructs the congregation to hand the man over, through the Kingdom authority granted by Christ, "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor 5:5). Paul commands married couples to have sex regularly. This is not just because sexuality bonds the couple together and increases intimacy—although that is certainly true. It is a matter of spiritual warfare, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor 7:5).

Like every other aspect of the wreckage of Eden, the curse that tears asunder the family order is absorbed in Jesus who reconciles the universe "by the blood of His cross" (Col 1:20). In living out the obedient trust in the Father that Adam and Israel refused, Jesus' covenant righteousness included obedience to every aspect of the Law of God, including that of obedience to parents (Luke 2:51). Even as He drowns in His own blood, Jesus fulfills righteousness by doing precisely what the Pharisees rebelled against in their own families: providing for his mother's care (John 19:26–27) even as the sword pierces her own soul just as the prophet foretold (Luke 2:35). Paul tells the church at Galatia that on the cross the sin-bearing Messiah "became a curse for us" (Gal 3:13–14), referring to Deuteronomy 21 that a man hanged on a tree is cursed by God (Deut 21:22–23).

This text immediately follows a similar instruction from Moses that says:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst and all Israel shall hear, and fear (Deut 21:18–21).

Jesus indeed is charged by the elders of Israel with being a rebellious son, with being a glutton and a drunkard (Matt 11:19). He is indeed taken outside the gates of the city where He bears the curse of God, not for His own rebellion (for there was none) but for that of Adam's race. And, after absorbing in His body the full measure of the curse against the Edenic revolt, after tasting death, Jesus is raised to announce to the women at his tomb, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God, and Your God'" (John 21:17). He establishes a

community, a household, a family. And as the gospel goes forward through the ages and through the nations, He and His Bride are fruitful, and they multiply.

And so we are not surprised when the fallen creation is repulsed by the family order. It pictures for them Christ, the light of the world, from whom the Satan-blinded cosmos retreats into the darkness (John 3:19). The powers will ask us to deify sex, in a hedonism unhinged from the creation purposes of God (Rom 1:24–28). After all, what could be more cosmically mysterious than the ecstasy of orgasm? The powers will then ask us to reject gender, in a severing of procreation from sex. After all, who needs “male and female He created them” when we have mastered human cloning? But we do not give up on a culture because they have twisted the family order. The darkness does not overcome the Light (John 1:5). At the root of all sin, including family chaos, there is not some insurmountable obstacle to the advance of the gospel. Ultimately, it is just the same old conspiracy of power-hungry demons and fallen humanity. In the spattered bloodstains of Golgotha and the empty grave-clothes of the garden tomb, the demons are routed, humanity redeemed.

The Path Ahead

The radical environmentalist Edward Abbey was probably on to something when he said, “Anyone who says he loves the Universe, or God, or Life, is probably neglecting his wife.”²⁵ Abbey had probably seen countless people—among eco-radical secularists but, sadly, perhaps among evangelical Christians, too—who offer abstract slogans rather than flesh-and-blood love and respect. If Southern Baptists are going to cast a compelling Baptist vision of the family, we must articulate a program very different from what Abbey, and most of the rest of global culture, have heard from American Christianity. But such a move will mean that Southern Baptists probably will lose some influence, some affluence, and some social capital in exchange for seeing the family as part of a purpose-driven cosmos.

Recovering a Warfare Vision

For too long, Southern Baptists have maintained some right ideas about the family, even unpopular ones, while keeping those ideas segregated neatly from the broader picture of the gospel to which we witness. To engage this issue, Southern Baptists must walk away from modernism and see once again the universe as the Scripture unveils it: as an invisible conflict of the kingdoms, a satanic horror-show being invaded by the reign

²⁵Edward Abbey, *Postcards from Ed: Dispatches and Salvos from an American Iconoclast* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2006), 79.

of Christ. This means that a Baptist vision of the family must be grounded in a “warfare worldview.”²⁶ This worldview is particularly needed in an era when Western Christians are all too distant from the demon-haunted landscape of the Old and New Testaments, so much so that we unwittingly are blind to the personal and cosmic aspects of the struggle around us.

In his seminal study on thriving Christianity in the Global South, Phillip Jenkins attributes part of the resurgence of conservative Christianity in the Third World to the consonance between the biblical worldview of unseen spiritual conflict and that of African and Asian cultures. When the gospel comes with power and conviction, an African ex-animist or an Asian ex-ancestor worshipper is able to read the Bible better than an American ex-rationalist can, precisely because, at this point, their idolatries are closer to the truth of God than ours are. This mindset explains why the Global South churches see such a connection between Christian orthodoxy and family stability. “This spiritual-warfare perspective helps explain the depth and fury and alarm expressed in recent sexual controversies within the Anglican Communion,” Jenkins writes. “When conservative African and Asian clergy invoked the name of the diabolical in these conflicts, they were not just indulging in overheated rhetoric.”²⁷ We have much to learn from our African and Asian brothers and sisters here.

Yes, Southern Baptists have an “outrage” catharsis about the culture, but can we say that we have acted with “depth and fury and alarm” about our own divorce culture, about our own family breakdowns, about the loss of more and more of our baptized adolescents to post-Christian American culture? Unlike our African and Asian and Middle-Eastern brothers and sisters, we fail to see reptilian eyes behind such things. Could it be that God will humble Southern Baptists by making the Bible belt a mission field for Nigerian and Indonesian Christian missionaries, who will explain to hurting families who their real enemy is—and how to crush his head? If Southern Baptists were to embrace the supernatural perspective we say we believe, however, we would have much more to say. We would seem much less sophisticated, much more backward, much less at home in modern America.²⁸ It is far easier, and yet far more costly, to keep our talk of demons and spiritual warfare locked away in our closed but inerrant Bibles, lest anyone should mistake us for Pentecostals.

²⁶Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997). Boyd integrates this warfare motif with unorthodox notions of God and providence, but the structure itself is hardly unique to him, but is the framework of the biblical narrative itself.

²⁷Phillip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102.

²⁸For a discussion of the loss of the angelic and the demonic in Western religion, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Penguin, 1971).

A Kingdom warfare worldview—articulated in our pulpits, our Sunday school rooms, our dining room tables—would mean that Southern Baptists should walk away from a belligerent “culture warrior” tone when addressing the outside culture. If we remember—even in debates over the family—that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness” (Eph 6:12), then we are less likely to see those on the other side of “family values” debates as enemies to be vaporized. We will see that the enemy is not Hillary Clinton or Hugh Hefner, but a much less easily tracked foe. We will not mock with derision—even just among ourselves—the transvestites marching in the parade on Main Street of our community, nor will we sit silently as our sons don lingerie. We will be able, as the apostle instructs us, to be “kind to everyone” in order that “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim 2:22, 24–26). This compassion does not mean that we back down one iota from declaring the whole counsel of God on the family—or anything else. To the contrary, it means that we do so with vigor, but with tears in our eyes as we see our fellow image-bearers in the clutches of this era’s dragon-king. It does mean, though, that our public discourse will lack the “You kids get off my lawn” type of ethos that it far too often carries.

This warfare perspective means that Southern Baptists would be more attentive to the family, not less, because we recognize that it is a target for the demonic beings that see in it a symbol of their downfall drawing near. We then must equip our own congregations to see the subtlety and craftiness of the Serpent’s strategies “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Cor 2:11). A biblically literate Southern Baptist church will be able to see that the demonic beings do not mind shifting tactics from generation to generation; wherever people are unsuspecting as to their own weakness, they will strike. If Bathsheba will not take down a son of Adam, then Babylon can; if not hedonism, then Pharisaism will do. It is at this point that Southern Baptists are especially vulnerable, because we fail to see how the family chaos around us is directly related to our captivity to our appetites.

Philosopher Leon Kass identifies in the Genesis text the core of what it means that our enemy is called a snake in Scripture. “For the serpent is a mobile digestive tract that swallows its prey whole; in this sense the serpent stands for pure appetite,” he writes. “At the same time, the serpent is cold, steely-eyed, and unblinking; in this respect he is the image of pure attentiveness and icy calculation.”²⁹ It is no accident, then, that the

²⁹Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 81.

Scripture warns us against the path of Esau, who sells the inheritance of his father for a pile of red stew (Heb 12:16–17), and that the Bible directs us away from the god of the belly (Phil 3:19). From the tree in the garden onward to the wilderness beyond the Jordan to the present hour, the powers challenge the sonship of humans precisely by aiming at turning their digestive or reproductive tracts away from the Christic mystery and toward the self as god.

We have become the people that Jesus warned us about. Southern Baptists more and more want to distance ourselves from our blue-collar, economically impoverished roots, and more and more wish to be seen as affluent, suburban, and politically influential. But this comes with a cost. The reason we have made peace with the sexual revolution is because we are captive to the love of money. Southern Baptist men and women want to live with the same standard of living as the culture around them, and, as the Spirit warns, we will grind our churches and our families to pieces to get there (Jas 4:1–4). Why does the seemingly godly deacon in a conservative Southern Baptist church in north Georgia drive his pregnant teenage daughter to Atlanta under cover of darkness to obtain an abortion? Because, however he votes his “values,” when crisis hits, he wants his daughter to have a “normal” life. He is “pro-life” with, as one feminist leader put it three exceptions: rape, incest, and my situation.³⁰

Why do Southern Baptist parents, contra Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 7, encourage their young adult children to delay marriage years past the time it takes to discern whether this union would be of the Lord? Why do we smilingly tell them to wait until they can “afford” it? It is because, to our shame, we deem fornication a less awful reality than financial ruin. Why do Southern Baptist pastors speak bluntly about homosexuality and X-rated movies, but never address the question of whether institutionalized day-care is good for children, or for parents? It is because pastors know that couples would say that they could never afford to live on the provision of the husband alone. And they are right, if living means living in the neighborhoods in which they now live, with the technologies they now have. Christian pastors know that no godly woman will ever say on her deathbed, “If only I had put the children in daycare so that I could have pursued my career.” But do Southern Baptist pastors ever ask whether it might be better to live in a one-bedroom apartment or a trailer park than to follow this American dream? Rarely, because it seems so inconceivable to us that it doesn’t even seem like an option. When confronted with the

³⁰This line is attributed to Kate Michelman, formerly of the National Abortion Rights Action League. Elizabeth Achtemeier cites it in an address to the Presbyterians Pro-Life meeting at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 3 June 1993.

challenge of a counter-cultural, family-affirming—but economically less acquisitive—life, too often we see what our inerrant Bibles define as the joyful life, and then we walk away saddened like another rich young ruler before us who wanted eternal life but wanted his possessions more (Luke 18:18–30).

Here Southern Baptists could stand to listen to some of our liberal critics, who deny a biblical understanding of the family but who seem to understand the connection between the whirl of familial destruction and the corporate culture we take for granted. After all, they are not usually Greenwich Village bohemians in tie-dye shirts or eco-feminist Marxists with Darwin fish on their Volkswagen vans who are producing the cultural pornotopia that America is exporting around the world, and right into our churches. They are more likely to be conservative Republicans in three-piece suits, and some of them know some Fanny Crosby songs by heart and know what a baptistery looks like from the inside. They vote their values too. Southern Baptists assume that consumer culture is morally neutral, and that American corporatism must be godly, since it is opposed so strongly by the culture warriors of the Left. But the counter-culture there is an illusion. Both left and right in the American mainstream are captive to the ideology that the appetites are to be indulged; the heart wants what it wants, by whatever system will do it most efficiently.

Philosophers Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter are correct that the counter-culture and the consumer culture are symbiotic. As they put it, “In the end, it is just people fighting for their right to party.”³¹ We should ask, then, whether Ralph Nader (yes, *that* Ralph Nader) is right that television advertising is a threat to the family order, since “corporations have decided that kids under twelve are a lucrative market, and they sell directly to them, subverting parental authority.”³² Could it be that Ronald McDonald and digitalized talking “Christian” vegetable cartoons are just as erosive of the family as the cultural rot we are accustomed to denouncing? Could it be that the consumer culture we mimic in our own church and denominational programs is, in reality, just as hedonistic as a truck-stop “peep show” booth, and for the same reasons?

Recovering a Christocentric Vision

If the family is under assault by demonic beings, then the ultimate antidote for hurting families is for churches to offer what frightens and disperses the demons: Jesus Christ. Southern Baptist churches believe the

³¹Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 322.

³²David Wallis, “Give Them the Business: Questions for Ralph Nader,” *New York Times Magazine*, 16 June 2002.

gospel, and we know we should evangelize the lost. Too often, however, we preach as though the gospel were for unbelievers only, as though Christ crucified is the initiatory truth of the Christian life, followed by a series of ethical principles and life-coaching. This is not the preaching of the prophets and apostles, and such preaching does little to disturb the powers-that-be. Southern Baptists know they should believe the Bible, and they should preach it. But Southern Baptist churches must present the Bible not as a series of disconnected proof-texts but as a coherent and holistic vision centered on the unveiled mystery of Jesus Christ. There is no passage in the Old or New Testaments that is not about Jesus Christ and His gospel, because there is no aspect of reality that is not, ultimately, about God's goal for creation in Jesus Christ through the gospel.

Southern Baptist church members should not just see the commands of Scripture or the positive and negative examples of Scripture. Instead, they should see how their small storylines (including their family lives) fit in the overall storyline of Christ Jesus (Rom 8:28–29). Southern Baptist husbands and wives, and children and young adults, should see modeled constantly from the pulpit how to find their identity in Christ, how to be freed from condemnation through the triumph of Christ, and how to walk with Him in His Spirit (Rom 8:1–8) towards a cosmic inheritance that demonstrates the paltriness of the satanic offers of the kingdoms of self-satisfaction, self-vindication, or self-exaltation (Matt 4:1–11).

We must ask ourselves honestly whether the divorce culture and the adultery crisis in our churches have not been fueled in part by our own preaching. When we reduce marriage to endless sermon series on “Putting the Sizzle Back in Your Spouse” and “Ten Tips for Couples for a Hotter, Holier Romance,” are we not contributing to the very same emphasis on hormonally-driven acquisitiveness as the culture, rather than on the model of a Christ who displays not just affection but fidelity to His Bride? Is it any wonder, then, that so many of our men and women—who have professed to believe the gospel—are willing to abandon their spouses and children when they find a new “soul-mate?” Could it be, at least in part because they felt the thrill of the new, the same kind of “spark” their car-radio pop songs and their pastor's marriage workshops tell them they always should feel when they are in love?

This means that family issues must be seen not as merely “moral” issues but gospel issues—because they have everything to do with God's announcement of Christ to the powers. Our evangelism training cannot stop with teaching our church members how to walk through a tract with a neighbor. It must also include how to preach the gospel through kept wedding vows and disciplined children. It does not matter how insistently we proclaim eternal security; when those growing up in our churches see the

icon of the union of Jesus and His church being destroyed week by week after divorce, they are hearing a more compelling message. It does not matter how much we preach the holiness of God; a father who doesn't discipline his children is preaching to them the exact same sermon first voiced from a tree somewhere in Eden: "You shall not surely die." A teenage boy who tells himself that he has kept his "True Love Waits" promise by stopping at oral sex is not just hurting his walk with God, he is believing—and proclaiming—a false gospel. The teenage girl who is starving herself into conformity with the pixilated images on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine is crying out not just for a better self-image, but for a vision of Christ. The man who sits upstairs viewing Internet pornography while his wife chauffeurs the kids to soccer practice is not some unusual "pervert," he is (like his forefather Adam) seeking the mystery of the universe apart from Christ. The middle-aged woman who pores over romance novels fantasizing about an idealized man less disappointing than her husband is not just a sad figure, but one who is desperate for a picture of the gospel. With our pews laden down with worshippers seeking a counterfeit mystery, an alternative gospel, is it not time that Southern Baptists learned once again to address the "felt needs" of our people by presenting a captivating, imaginative, and biblical portrayal of the One who is both their deepest longing and their scariest fear: Jesus Christ?

Recovering an Ecclesial Vision

A speech on family values is much more likely to get applause at the Southern Baptist Convention than a speech on regenerate church membership. But only regenerate church communities, outposts of the Kingdom of Christ, can provide the alternative vision of the family we so desperately need. The apostle Paul reveals that pastors must have well-ordered households since "if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church" (1 Tim 3:5)? But the reverse is also true. If one cannot care for God's church, then how can he manage his own household? The church, after all, is the "the household of God," which is also to be well ordered (1 Tim 3:15). How can churches castigate the outside culture for believing the family structure is socially malleable when we fail in our ecclesial households to distinguish between those who are brothers and sisters, and those who are not (Matt 18:15; 1 Cor 5:11)?

The loss of the disciplined church is especially tragic in the wake of the scandal within the family structure within our own churches. What would happen if Southern Baptist churches, en masse, began to involve the entire church household in a marriage in crisis? What would happen if rather than quietly allowing a divorcing man to join a different Sunday

school class with his new wife, we called him to repentance, publicly, with the authority of Christ? What would happen if we, on the first word of accusation about spousal abuse, handed the unrepentant pugilist over to Satan spiritually for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor 5:5) and over to Caesar legally for the avenging of wrongdoing (Rom 13:4)? What would happen if single mothers in our communities were treated as widows, cared for by the entire congregation spiritually, socially, and, where needed, economically? Perhaps if such churches were more common, we would have a decreasing need for parachurch organizations to train our people how to love their spouses and discipline their children because our people would see such on display every Lord's Day in the assembly of Christ.

The renewal of our churches for the sake of the family would mean a re-visioning of the pastorate. How can we teach our children to honor their parents, when in so many of our churches, the "fathers" of the church—the pastors God has placed over the care of His people—are treated with such disdain and dishonor, contrary to the explicit teaching of Scripture (Heb 13:7)? Can baby-boomer Christians—especially Southern Baptists—really be surprised at a younger generation that despises the authority of their parents, when so many of them have seen their pastors eviscerated by power struggles in congregational business meetings, or the subject of anonymous letter-writing campaigns and psychological warfare? On the other hand, we must question how the short-term pastorates so common in Southern Baptist life in the contemporary era have affected our vision of the family. No one is suggesting that a man ought to stay in the same pastorate, necessarily, all his life. But, could it be, that many pastors lack credibility when they instruct a man to remain faithful to his wife—even in the face of her Alzheimer's disease or his layoff at the factory or their son's cocaine problem—when so many of our families have seen pastor after pastor react to the first sign of hard times in a congregation by leaving for a more hospitable locale?

Finally, the renewal of the church will mean intentional one-on-one discipleship. This does not mean a new set of curricula from Nashville. It means modeling in our churches the way the Spirit has always worked: through older men mentoring younger men; older women mentoring younger women. We must recognize as did the apostle Paul that the demonic strategies against men and women are often different—focused as they are on the complementary vocations of each sex (1 Tim 2:8–15). We must also recognize that the fruits of sanctification often look different in men and in women, as both grow into the glory of their respective differences (Titus 2:2–3; 1 Pet 3:1–7). It is no accident that Paul refers repeatedly to his relationship with Timothy as that of a "father" with a "son," or

that Ruth is identified with Naomi as a daughter with her mother (Ruth 4:14–17).

Men in our congregations must take responsibility for the discipleship of our boys and young men, training them away from a pagan hyper-masculinity that deifies the appetites and hurts women and children. “If you destroy the ideal of the ‘gentle man’ and remove from men all expectations of courtesy and consideration toward women and children, you have prepared the way for an epidemic of rape and abuse,” warns agrarian Wendell Berry. “If you depreciate the sanctity and solemnity of marriage, not just as a bond between two people but as a bond between those two people and their forebears, their children, and their neighbors, then you have prepared the way for an epidemic of divorce, child neglect, community ruin, and loneliness.”³³ Berry is exactly right, and is, perhaps unwittingly, strikingly biblical at this point. Women in our congregations must take responsibility for the discipleship of our girls and young women, training them away from the siren song of seeing themselves as sexual objects for the enjoyment of predatory men and towards seeing themselves as faithful “daughters of Sarah” (1 Pet 3:3–6).

With both men and women, such discipleship must be borne of genuine friendship, rooted in churches that celebrate authentic community. With both men and women, such discipleship is not simply about so-called “spiritual” things, but about how to make one’s way in the world. Paul instructs Timothy not simply about doctrinal matters, but about his stomach ailments (1 Tim 5:23). The older women of Titus 2 train their protégés not only in the content of Scripture but how to work within their households and love their husbands and children (Titus 2:3–5). As we know from the Book of Proverbs, after all, such matters are “spiritual” too.

Conclusion

The sexual revolution and the “changing American family”: these are the status quo in a Satan-haunted cosmos. A truly biblical Southern Baptist vision of the family will not point to the 1950s (AD *or* BC), but to the Kingdom of Christ. Perhaps the continuing upheaval over the family will force Baptists either to fully and explicitly accommodate to the culture, so that our churches lose the lamp-stand of the presence of Christ, or to create authentically counter-cultural churches and families. If the latter, Baptists should be prepared to be much less comfortable in contemporary American culture. Perhaps we will have less impressive “Family Life Centers” and more impressive family lives. Maybe the next generation of

³³Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 124–25.

Baptists will look much less respectable to their communities than we do; maybe their commitment to fidelity, discipline, self-sacrifice, and love will make them seem bizarre. But maybe, just maybe, this cultural weirdness will be the very thing the Spirit uses to prompt the culture to ask why such is the case. Maybe those who hear when He speaks of earthly things can then believe Him in heavenly things (John 3:12). Perhaps then, by picturing the mystery of Christ, Southern Baptists will show the culture around them what a real revolution, sexual and otherwise, looks like.