

“The ‘Traditional Values’ Core: Christian Conservatives, the Family, and Sexuality.”

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The dramatic cultural and legal developments of the late 1960s and the 1970s—from the sexual revolution to no-fault divorce—ushered in marked changes for American family life and sexual behavior. These changes, and the challenges they posed to more traditional understandings of marriage, gender, and sexuality, prompted a vigorous response from conservative Catholic and especially conservative Protestant groups. This response has had both a political and a pastoral component, with groups like Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America launching a range of public and private strategies to strengthen the family.

This paper will explain why conservative Christian churches, and the pro-family groups formed by conservative Christians, responded in the ways that they did to the dramatic societal changes in the 1960s and 1970s. It will then detail some of the important family-related pastoral and political initiatives, and their consequences, of conservative Christians over the last three decades. On the pastoral front, this paper will discuss the strategies that churches and family ministries have taken in promoting marriage, gender traditionalism, and fatherhood. One of our key insights is that the conservative Christian pastoral approach is a form of “innovative traditionalism,” where innovative cultural strategies—in this case, encouraging men to be more involved and affectionate husbands and fathers—are harnessed to traditional ends—strengthening marriage and family life and maintaining a measure of gender traditionalism. In many respects, conservative Christians have done fairly well in strengthening their families along traditional lines and resisting the logic of family modernization. However, this paper will also note the ways in which conservative Christians have accommodated contemporary family trends—especially female labor force participation and divorce.

On the political front, this paper will discuss some of the key family-related policy initiatives taken by conservative Christian organizations. We will focus on their efforts to promote marriage (e.g., covenant marriage, President Bush’s Healthy Marriage Initiative), toughen divorce laws, and limit gay marriage. We will also describe the institutional infrastructure that has emerged over the years at the national and state level to advance pro-family policies. This section of the paper will discuss, among other things, why efforts to block homosexual marriage have been more popular and successful than efforts to toughen divorce laws—both inside and outside of the conservative Christian world.

This paper will conclude by assessing the place and prospects of the pro-family agenda of conservative Christians in twenty-first century America. In our view, the future of the American family turns to a large degree on the success or failure of this agenda. If key aspects of this agenda are incorporated into American society, it seems likely that the future of American family life will depart from European trends—where marriage and fertility are weak. If this agenda is largely rejected, it seems likely that the U.S. will follow Europe in largely abandoning marriage as the way of organizing the bearing and rearing of children, and will see a concomitant decline in its fertility rate to well below the replacement level.