Families in crisis: Two parents are better than one

by Garret Paul in the May 9, 2001 issue

From Culture Wars to Common Good: Religion and the American Family Debate, 2nd ed. by Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon and Robert M. Franklin

Though media and church debates suggest that the most pressing sex-related issues today are homosexuality, sexual violence and abortion, the authors of this book argue that there is something more urgent: the crisis of the family. And mainline churches have been extraordinarily slow to respond to that crisis.

Compelling scientific evidence now exists that, on the whole (an important qualifier!), two-parent families are better for children than single-parent families. While this in no way legitimates a return to patriarchy nor any tolerance for abuse, it does require us to adopt a new family ideal: “the committed, intact, equal-regard, public-private family.” Churches must take a leading role in promoting this ideal and incorporating it into their preaching, teaching and practice.

This new family ideal takes an entire book to elaborate (with important questions still left unanswered), but can be briefly summarized as follows: it is the voluntary lifetime union of a woman and a man who parent their own children in a relationship characterized by love, justice and equal regard. In this relationship, both the woman and the man play important public (including paid employment) and private (domestic) roles.

This union is neither a revocable contract between independent and equal parties nor mandated by an unchanging divine law which legitimates the subordination of women.

From Culture Wars to Common Ground is not only about the future of marriage and the family, but about the future shape—if any—of theology and theological practice. It models and describes an approach to theology that is different and also makes a

difference. Like most work in the social and natural sciences (but utterly unlike most theology), it is collaborative. A team of five established and published scholars—women and men, black and white—interviewed a wide variety of families, ranging in religious orientation from Jewish to African-American Pentecostal, to white evangelical, to mainline Protestant, to Catholic. Their survey included two-parent and single-parent, poor, middle-class and affluent families.

Although the scholars are all theologians (primarily seminary-based, with interests in practical theology, families and gender and/or racial issues), they engage a wide variety of disciplines. History, evolutionary psychology, philosophy, economics, feminism and political theory all inform their work. Shunning the abstraction that plagues this field, they go so far as to make use of quantitative data.

This helps account for one of the book's most impressive achievements: that it goes beyond the gridlock and one-sidedness that characterize most debates about sexuality and families. The team, assembled by Don S. Browning, director of the University of Chicago's Family, Religion and Culture Project, refused to limit itself to simplistic, monocausal explanations of the difficulties facing families. Instead, it chose to confront the bewildering array of pressures, tensions and choices that today face families and couples struggling to make sense of their living arrangements. Little wonder, then, that the team members sometimes found themselves shouting at each other across the table and wondering whether the book would ever get written. Yet get written it did, and we are the richer for it.

The book moves from a thick description and multilayered analysis of families and the challenges they face to a concrete discussion of how we ought to respond to these challenges. A few examples will illustrate the main themes of the argument and the richness of the discussion.

The authors cite four "massive social and cultural trends" that have had a destructive effect on the American family: "heightened individualism"; the "increased role of market forces and government bureaucracies in family life," or "technical rationality"; the "powerful psychological shifts caused by these forces"; and the "lingering influence" of patriarchy. While all four factors are important, individualism is the most significant. Expressive individualism, for example, causes parents and children to focus on their own needs instead of those of other family members. This tendency interacts with technical rationality, which increasingly forces family members to subordinate the demands of family life to marketplace

demands for efficiency and cost-benefit decisions.

In combination, these forces greatly weaken the essential commitments that allow families to survive, let alone thrive. Furthermore, children's ambivalent interactions with economically dependent mothers and absent or distant fathers combine with the declining though still real influence of patriarchy to place terrific pressure on families.

Children are at particular risk. This is, in many ways, the linchpin of the book's argument. It is well known that most indices of child welfare—income, access to health care, physical safety, poverty, self-esteem—have been declining in the United States. Traditional liberals have long assumed that race and economic disadvantage, compounded by gender discrimination, explain this deeply disturbing trend, and have accordingly prescribed antidiscrimination and income-equity measures to solve it.

This book, however, draws attention to important research which began to surface in the late 1980s documenting that children of single-parent households do worse on a variety of measures of child welfare independent of race, gender, educational level and place of residence. For example, children of single-parent families are 15 percent less likely to finish high school regardless of race, parents' education or place of residence. Parents spent an average of 17 hours per week with their children in 1985, as compared with 30 hours in 1965. The data bear close scrutiny. (One could now add, for example, the data indicating the greater incidence of violence among cohabiting, as compared to married, couples.)

What light can psychology and biology throw on the situation? An earlier generation was socialized to speak of sex in Freudian terms of "drives" and "repression," while a subsequent one loudly proclaimed that "anatomy" had nothing to do with "destiny." Here, the authors draw heavily on evolutionary psychology, which declares that we are "hard-wired" for certain reproductive behaviors, but not determined by them. Two central concepts emerge in this analysis: the "male problematic" and the "female problematic."

Each "problematic"—a constellation of problems, really—is rooted in the different reproductive strategies of male and female mammals. Male mammals are capable of producing a very large number of offspring, but can have little certainty about which are actually theirs. Female mammals are capable of producing far fewer offspring,

but have almost complete certainty about which are theirs. According to evolutionary psychology, the emergence of the human species was accompanied by a change in reproductive strategy, a switch to producing a smaller numbers of offspring whose parents made a correspondingly greater investment in seeing them reach adulthood.

For males, this meant bonding to a single female and making a lasting investment in a smaller number of children, which he could be reasonably certain were his own. For females, it meant bonding to a single reliable male. The development of the human species depended on this investment, an investment which remains as precarious as it is important.

This constitutes the background of what the authors call the male problematic, “the tendency of men to drift away from families,” undermining the greater parental investment that this reproductive strategy requires. The corresponding female problematic is the tendency of women “to suppress their own needs and raise children without paternal participation.”

This, according to the authors’ analysis, helps to explain why children of single parents do not do as well on average, and provides additional motivation for involving fathers in the lives of their children. It also provides grounds for accepting and deepening contemporary feminist criticism of the traditional ethic of maternal self-sacrifice, which reinforces the female problematic.

What are we to make of these data? One perhaps could argue that the 17 average hours that parents spent with their children per week in 1985 could have been quality time and therefore just as good as, or even better than, the greater number of hours they spent together in 1965. But it is impossible similarly to explain away the poorer educational and employment performance of children of single-parent families. Yet just what our response should be—as a culture, as the church—is obviously not something on which we all agree.

When I present these data to my college students, the loudest and quickest responses come from children of single-parent households who say, “This isn’t true of me. The statistics must be wrong.” But, of course, they are the ones who have made it to college. Other, usually quieter, responses come from students who confirm that at least some of the data ring true for them, and that they have had to struggle with additional challenges children in two-parent families don’t face. But

few students, regardless of background, can think of any alternatives to the way things are.

To deal with the problem the authors champion “critical familism,” an endorsement of the value of two-parent families without a return to the rigid sex-role stereotypes and patriarchy of earlier eras. Their book is both a cause and an effect of the broader “marriage movement,” a loose alliance of religious, social work, public policy and educational organizations and professionals who seek to promote this vision.

Critical familism favors cultural, religious, market and government measures designed to promote two-parent families while supporting all families, without stigmatizing single parents and their children. It promotes the involvement of fathers with their children and advocates a love ethic of mutuality and equal regard over self-sacrifice.

The authors’ emphasis on love as mutuality and equal regard is one of the most important contributions of the book, and a good example of how they integrate a variety of perspectives. Accepting the feminist criticisms that the ideology of love as self-sacrifice has played a role in the systematic subordination of women’s needs and abilities, they define love between husband and wife primarily as mutuality. Even the love between parent and child, despite the profound helplessness of the human infant, should and does move in the direction of equal regard. Nevertheless, they concede that self-sacrifice must continue to play a role within this ethic of mutuality.

All this may sound well and good (or bad, if you remain convinced that dismantling patriarchy is more important than involving fathers in families, or if you think that James Dobson has the last word on family dynamics), but what next? What, specifically, can be done? This is where the book shines. The team recommends specific strategies for building a new critical familism. Many have public-policy implications, but most are directed toward churches and religious communities.

The public-policy recommendations include providing state-supported marriage and family education, developing a “family-friendly” workplace, and moving toward a modified “fault” divorce law in cases involving dependent children. But state and market solutions, while indispensable, cannot by themselves create stronger families characterized by more mutuality. Churches must take a leadership role in

this area. The authors challenge churches to recover the idea of the family as a locus of religious observance, to develop a “bilingual theology” that addresses the needs of intact families and also the realities of other family forms, to critically confront divorce as a sign of failure and yet support those who are divorced and directly to take up the issue of father absence.

There is much to praise in this book. It is an exemplary piece of religious and political discourse and action. It does not bow down before the American religion of freedom and does not hesitate to criticize revered icons of the right or the left. The authors use theological terminology but argue in categories accessible to “believers” and “nonbelievers” alike. They use a far broader range of metaphors for God than the vague and exhausted concepts of “love” and “acceptance” that plague liberal Protestantism. They recognize the positive role of power in family relations, and insist on justice within the family as well as in society. That they are able to combine the traditional feminist concern for women’s well-being and justice with a nuanced attention to families, children and men is particularly commendable. Moreover, it is refreshing to see men present in the debate as something other than problems to be addressed in the third person.

Another important achievement is that the book calls churches, and theology, to accountability for the impact of their discourse. Even after social scientists had accumulated data demonstrating that the optimistic predictions concerning the impact of divorce and single-parent families on women and children had failed to materialize, most mainline churches ignored this evidence, continuing to say little or nothing about the issues. This left church members without guidance as they struggled to sort out complex personal issues.

In contrast, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* actually confronts the specific questions that so much theology and religious discourse ignore. And it calls on churches to do the same, and to make critical use of data in doing so. The focus on data raises questions, of course. Even if children generally do best in two-parent families, that does not demonstrate that particular children would automatically do better if they had two parents. Even research that seeks to account for other variables does not demonstrate the truth of that argument. In other words, statistical correlation does not prove causation.

The same holds true for understanding the motivations behind divorce. The book could have been much more forthright about acknowledging the unhappiness felt in

many marriages. Many, perhaps most, people who abandon marriage do so because they feel that they have compelling reasons. The data indicate that the consequences of divorce are statistically serious, even catastrophic; but the unhappiness that leads to divorce remains a serious matter. All the book's emphasis on eros and mutuality rings rather hollow without a frank acknowledgment of that. Nor does its rhetoric of eros reflect how little genuine eros is actually permitted to women and men in the midst of an ostensibly salacious society.

The hollowness of this appeal to eros seems to be related to a failure to make more explicit the tragic character of human existence. The Christian traditions to which the authors appeal are primarily Catholic and Calvinist, traditions that respectively view marriage as sacrament or covenant. Notably missing from the study is the Lutheran view of marriage as an order of creation that serves as a restraining dike against sin, but which does not and cannot play a role in human salvation. While the Lutheran view is often (justly) accused of pessimism, it does have the virtue of acknowledging the inevitability of imperfection and unhappiness in an institution which is, as the authors admit, only a subordinate and temporal good. If marriages and families will often be unsatisfactory and unhappy, as will all of created life, then perhaps self-sacrifice will need to remain a permanent fixture of families, and not merely a means to the end of mutuality (though it will be that too).

The growth in the number of single-parent families and the powerful evidence that children of single-parent families do not do as well as children of two-parent families could also be interpreted differently. The authors take these data to mean that, since what is now being attempted is not working, a return to something like what went before is called for. But a radical critic might just as well propose that something completely different is needed. The authors present only two main choices: either a continuing increase in the number of one-parent families or a return to more or less re-formed two-parent families. Is it self-evident that these are the only two alternatives? Or are there others, such as more extended families or kibbutz-style arrangements? Or are there as yet undreamed-of versions of families awaiting us in the future?

This brings us to a final question: What about same-sex couples and parenting? The committed two-parent family of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* is a mother-father family. Though the book neither attacks nor denigrates same-sex parents, it does not make clear where they fit into its ideal. This is different from the authors' approach to single-parent families; they urge the church to support single-parent

families in every way possible, even while continuing to articulate the view that the mother-father family is the ideal. The writers may well believe that the present state of mother-father and mother-only families (which together constitute the great majority of families) more urgently needs to be addressed than does the issue of same-sex couples, but it is perplexing not to see that argument made more explicit.

How new will “critical familism” be? History never moves backward, and the past never returns. Family structures will never again be exactly the same as they were in the past. History never disappears, either, and the lessons of our evolutionary and cultural past can be ignored only at our peril. The families of the future will both be different from and continue to mirror those of our biocultural past. But since the publication of this book no one can deny that families are in crisis, and that there is an urgent need for church and society to respond to that crisis.