

Being Feminist and Pro-family
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VOICES in the Wilderness, P.O. Box 4486, Salem, MA,
01970; subscriptions are \$15.00 per year.

Today, many believers are finding themselves at odds with each other about the family, sex roles, and how the two intertwine. Women may find themselves gifted with the ability to teach or lead but find no context for those gifts within their churches. Men may prefer teaching children in Sunday School to organizing a missions conference, but instead get stuck doing the very things for which they have no vision, just because it is expected of them as men. And as they marry and bear children and as their lives incarnate their Christian faith, both men and women may find themselves constricted by "traditional" roles mapped out for them by their churches.

Like many women in the church today, I wear several hats: wife, mother, and professional. And, even though I find support for those roles within my own church, I am discovering that my experience is rare and that what women and men should do about family, work, sex roles and raising children is a heated issue. There seem to be two camps vying for our allegiance today - the pro-family movement and feminism. And according to some, a Christian can't be both pro-family and feminist.

The Issues

The issues look something like this. First, there's the pro-family movement, which is interested in supporting and sustaining the "traditional" family. It is thus committed to social and political issues related to the sustenance of the family because it thinks family life is being undermined and devalued. According to pro-family advocates, this deterioration is caused by such practices as widespread cohabitation, no-fault divorce, joint custody of children, blurred sex roles, government intrusion into the family, and the rampant growth of child-care centers. Many of the people who are active in the pro-family movement find a biblical basis for not only maintaining "traditional" family life but also for fighting politically against its deterioration.

Then there is feminism. It believes that men and women should be treated as equals, - socially, economically, and politically. Throughout history, women have been mistreated, deserted, and forced into submission by a system that insisted upon their maltreatment. And, because of disgust by what has historically happened to women and by what they presently experience, feminists are vocal, active, and adamant about change. The old system, the "traditional" ways, cannot support equality for the sexes, so feminists are agitating for a new paradigm of human relationships. Women have been treated poorly these

many years, and they are fighting back. There's a deep fear of regression or minimal change; they want sweeping changes. They want a new paradigm.

This new paradigm, feminists say, could ultimately be freeing for both men and women. Feminists, however, like the pro-family advocates, have broadened the issues at stake. Not wanting to let government, society, and men control them any longer, many women are demanding an environment where they can have control over their own bodies and lives. So, inevitably, issues like abortion, birth control, divorce, day-care, and welfare have come into the discussions. Like pro-family advocates, many feminists find a biblical basis for changing both society and the church.

I find it easy to get confused when I look at the agendas of both the pro-family movement and the feminist movement. Some of the things feminist often advocate, such as no-fault divorce laws or legalized abortion, are the very things pro-family advocates are alarmed about. And, some of the things the pro-family movement encourages, like hierarchical sex roles, have the feminists disturbed.

As a wife and mother, I have little use for the "traditional" roles the pro-family movement thinks are so crucial to the health of family life. Neither does my husband. Yet, my husband and I are committed to making our home a healthy, stable place for our children and ourselves. We make decisions together, we are both equally responsible for our children's well-being, and we both find we need work that gives us a sense of satisfaction and purpose.

Balance in the Home

In our own home, for example, my husband and I both feel we should be the primary caregivers to our children, ages one and four, rather than turn them over all day to persons outside the home. As it has turned out, one of us is the primary breadwinner and one takes care of the children when the other works; to us it doesn't matter who works or who takes care of the kids. What we value is that we are the ones who are the most involved with our children. This may not work out for everyone, but it is our own vision for keeping our family healthy and intact.

If someone observed the way my husband and I function in our relationship and in our home, we look very "traditional" at times and we look very "feminist" at times. It depends on who is looking and when. And I see that this is true for many Christian families. But the point to me is this: as we evaluate how best to nurture family life, we cannot be quick to judge and criticize those who may be doing a fine job, just because the way they do it may not look like the way we do it. That's not to say that we shouldn't be critical as Christians when we look at society and its values or that we shouldn't be open to criticism and change. But

we shouldn't be critical about the wrong things.

I believe that living in families is something God affirms. Men and women marry, they raise children, they are a family. This is at the basis of God's creation. We can try to change it slightly or drastically; we can struggle to live up to our commitments and responsibilities; we can fail miserably at it, or we may not even be called to it, but the family is here to stay.

Equality in Christ

I also believe that men and women are equal. Our sins, our weaknesses, our strengths, and our gifts are equal. They are not necessarily the same, but they are equal. The first time I grasped the real meaning of Paul's writings on the subject in Galatians, I was elated: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." One woman's gift is different from another woman's, just as one man's gift is different from another man's, but one specific gift or weakness is no better or worse than another. And God, not being a respecter of persons, is not biased toward one sex or the other. Women and men can teach, encourage, guide, and exhort. And women and men can be taught, encouraged, and led. Scripture continually supports these notions, and many good studies exist which have researched the New Testament's treatment of women and gifts.

When I look at my own life and the experiences of those in my church, I just don't perceive the feminist and pro-family viewpoints as complete opposites. In fact, I think they both ultimately want the same things: a healthy society where both men and women can live at their full potentials, where families find support and encouragement, where fidelity between husbands and wives is valued, where bearing and raising children is valued. It has made me wonder what these movements have done to polarize each other so drastically and so weaken the important goals of each.

"That Word"

One thing that has alienated me at times and I sense has polarized many Christians is "that word." Many believers, even though they practice mutuality of the sexes, are afraid to admit it or label it or be active in a movement for change in the church because they are afraid of "that word." They are afraid of being labeled and thus judged by the standards of "that word." Choosing between the two camps is a dilemma that faces many Christians, and to many it seems far more "spiritual" to be pro-family than *feminist* (ah, there, I named it). If we Christians can just overcome our fear of that word and embrace what we know God wants for both men and women, then we can actively and fervently be part of the transformation God is working in the church today.

A way to begin overcoming our fear of the word

is by understanding what feminism actually is. As one dictionary tells it, feminism is the theory of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. For Christians, we can add spiritual equality. I think I would be hard pressed to find someone who didn't agree with those ideas. Feminism is also an organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. And, this "feminism," along with the good it has produced, also carries with it an excess baggage of doctrine and reputation that many people hesitate to support.

An Intelligent Faith

I may not agree with everything that the different wings of the feminist movement have done or hope to do, but I don't have a problem sorting that out. We need to have an intelligent faith that is not afraid to look at the movement and trust the Holy Spirit in us to discern what is part of God's plan and what isn't.

Likewise, I find that I can be pro-family without accepting lock, stock and barrel everything the pro-family movement finds necessary to our well-being. It is possible to be pro-family and not support an archaic hierarchy of male/female roles.

The whole idea of the "traditional family" as an ideal has only existed since the Industrial Revolution. So to go back to a supposed ideal that was lived out for such a short period of time is not only historically inaccurate but is certainly biblically naive. And, it doesn't even attend to the economic realities of our lives.

Most men and women work because they have to, so they can provide food, clothing, and shelter for their families. And it's not a glamorous life out there for the majority of workers. Women are not listlessly eating their chocolates, watching soap operas and saying, "Oh, life's a bore, I think I'll find a job." The hard economic reality is that many women work because they must.

Yet, pro-family advocates insist that family life is doomed to a slow death unless we re-establish the male headship over the home and the female submission to that headship, which often means men must work and women must not. After all, we don't want to be a genderless society, do we? They insist that we will be blurring our sexual identity and the identity of our children if men and women can do the same activities, instead of doing a set of pre-ordained ones.

Are feminists and pro-family advocates then part of separate camps, enemies to one another? Does the baggage they carry require that we choose one over the other?

The Choice

Some say I am naive in thinking I can be part of both camps. Pro-family advocates insist that the many issues, from sexual identity to pro-life concerns and a narrow definition of family, are all related and bibli-

cally founded, and must all be embraced to save the family from deterioration. Likewise, feminists give the impression that for women and men to experience true equality we must support abortion on demand and re-define the family.

I believe that unless both camps realize they agree on some basic things and can acknowledge that certain values are crucial to all concerned, neither will be as successful as they would like to be in changing society. In fact, being both feminist and pro-family can look quite different from being only one or the other. We don't need to force an impossible agreement between the feminist and pro-family movements. Instead, we need to start by being critical in our thinking and realizing that there are things on both sides that don't belong in a "pro-family/feminist movement." And, there are also some things that do. As we undergo this process, I believe we will be transformed into people who understand the evolution of the issues and show compassion toward the individuals who, to us, seem to overreact. As Christians, we should be most concerned with love, forgiveness, and compassion, rather than with dogmatic adherence to a set of lifeless regulations. That also holds true as we allow God to transform us into being pro-family and feminist.

To be people who are both pro-family and feminist means being non-judgmental yet discerning. It means, for example, understanding that something must be very wrong with society's treatment of women to put them in a predicament of having to use abortion as birth control. We may not support abortion on demand, but we can have a gentle spirit toward women faced with unwanted pregnancies. Instead of judging the victim, we should try to change society so that there are fewer victims. Actually, it has always seemed ironic to me that the feminist movement wants a humanized world with equal rights for all, yet is adamant that the right of a woman to get an abortion overrides the right of the child she bears.

Those who are pro-family and feminist value biblical principles of commitment and marriage, yet are compassionate toward individuals in other lifestyles. We are alarmed by the soaring divorce rate, the lax acceptance of homosexuality and cohabitation, and the lack of commitment in today's marriages and families. Yet we are compassionate toward those struggling with problems in their marriages, their sexual identity, and their attempts at child rearing.

Defining the Family

But compassion does not seduce us into a redefinition of the family, where, in the words of the American Home Economics Association, a family simply consists of "two or more persons who share values and goals and have commitments to one another over time." Even college roommates would qualify

under that watered-down definition! They certainly have common goals - a clean, cheap apartment - and commitments to one another over time - a lease until the end of the school year. Yet how many college roommates would consider theirs a "family" arrangement? In this re-definition, the AHEA is probably trying to recognize single-parent families, gay marriages, "blended families," and cohabiting individuals as alternative types of families. I don't have a problem with recognizing the existence of some of these lifestyles, but I do have a hard time placing them side by side with what is ideal, and that is the committed, loving marriage between a woman and a man who may or may not bear and raise children.

The feminist movement's redefinition of family is a fair description of a reality in our society, but should not replace the ideal institution of marriage and family, an ideal that respects life-long commitment. Acknowledging the existence of certain wrong or not-so-desirable ways of doing things does not mean redefining our value system in order to make them praiseworthy. Even divorced people still value commitment and marriage. That's why divorce and remarriage are such painful processes. They are not painful because our society doesn't condone them; they are painful because they go against the grain of how we are made, of what we know, deep in our being, to be truth.

Finally, the feminist/pro-family individual does not see the male-dominant hierarchy as part of healthy and biblical family life. The pro-family movement has long been criticized for its dogmatic adherence to the "Father Knows Best" style of marriage and family, where men are the ultimate authority and women merely act on their orders. The fear of the pro-family advocates is that if it is any other way, then we are both disobeying God's way and pushing for a genderless society. But, the male-dominant hierarchy is not biblically based, and I certainly don't want to live in a genderless society. Men and women are different but those differences don't require that only women or only men can do X, Y, or Z. Minimally, the differences mean that women physically bear children and men don't.

The Gray Area

Here begins one of the biggest gray areas in these movements. As soon as we start enumerating what men and women can and can't do, we run the risk of squelching the Spirit of God in each individual. Sometimes women are better at nurturing than men. So what? Does that mean all women should stay home and raise their children and all men go to work all day? A major change I would like to see in society is one where it is equally acceptable for either men or women to work and equally acceptable for either men or women to stay home with the kids if that is what they choose to do. How many men could quit their jobs midstream in their careers, stay home for five years to

raise their children, and then reenter the work force as freely as they left it? They would not only get a few raised eyebrows if they tried, but they'd be criticized and most likely discriminated against as they tried to regain employment. On the other hand, women may not be able to freely reenter the work force either, but most likely they would experience a different kind of prejudice.

It's all to say that these issues are not as black and white as the pro-family advocates and the feminists make them out to be. I consider myself very different from men and don't desire to live in a society where my sexual identity is blurred, but I just cannot live out the "traditional" roles the pro-family advocates call "biblical" and "crucial to the health of society." Nor do I want admittance to the hierarchy of power that men have designed over the centuries. So where do I fit in?

I live *actively* with the ambiguity; I try to be intelligent and discerning in my faith, sorting out what's good from what's not so good. It's not easy to grapple with issues of sexuality and family life. Both pro-family advocates and the feminist movement have identified some real problems in our society, problems that deprive women and men of their wholeness, their humanness and their gifts. The issues just are not as black and white as either side makes them out to be. The impact of these movements demands that we look to God and trust the Holy Spirit in us to discern what is right and wrong along the way. And, we just can't do it alone. One important way to begin this process is to do it with others. Through discussion, shared experiences, prayer, and support with others in our churches we can begin sorting out these hard issues and learn what God wants for our lives.

FROM OUR MAILBAG

It is significant that only about seventeen percent of families in the U.S. conform to the model of the "traditional family." For too long the church has tried to sweep this fact under the carpet. Although I do not condone easy divorce, single parenting by choice, or double income families for *materialistic* reasons, we have to face up to the fact that there *are* many single parent homes, created not by choice, and that many families have both parents working for reasons other than greed or selfishness. As John Stevens says, "Unfortunately, the evangelical Christian community tends to hold a much narrower understanding of family life" and "Scripture presents many different kinds of family units, and none of them is considered the only valid one."

The most blatant area where the church unbiblically forces the family to fit the "traditional" mold is in its portrayal of working mothers as self-centered and materialistic, putting their own wants before their

family's. I believe that the Bible teaches that both father and mother are to provide financially for their household (what better example than the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31?)-that is not the exclusive role of the father; and that both parents are to be involved in the upbringing, nurturing, and care of their children - that is not the exclusive role of the wife.

Having the wife/mother work protects the husband/father from the pressure of being the sole breadwinner. Experiencing job loss, which is increasingly common in today's economy, does not have to be a crisis. The man experiencing unemployment will have time and opportunity to retrain for a new occupation without having to snatch at any job.

With the wife contributing to the family income, the husband can feel less pressured to devote himself single-mindedly to work - he can decide that there are things more important than heavy travel, unpleasant work conditions, longer hours. He will no longer have to give in to the (sometimes ungodly) need to climb the corporate ladder in order to provide for his family. He can allow himself more leisure time (and less work stress) than if he were the sole breadwinner.

But even more important than more leisure time is more time to be a father. The "traditional" approach creates problems, I believe, when it tries to encourage the father to be more involved with his children, yet at the same time insists that he should be the only financial provider for the home. To me, these two goals are not compatible. Maybe we as a church should encourage society to accept the idea of the part-time working father as well as condoning the part-time working mother.

Having the wife work does not always mean the family seeks an elevated standard of living. It may well be recognition that children need the involvement of *both* parents equally. I believe that the only way to accomplish this is to have *both* parents providing income, so that both parents will be involved in parenting.

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I have just returned from a teaching term at an evangelical school of theology in Africa. One of the courses was "Culture, the Bible, and Women." Beginning in the creation account and working through the entire revelation and difficult Pauline texts, the course was an experience of liberation. I fully believe that a careful exegesis of the Word leads us to the absolute equality of women and men before the Lord and in the church.

It was refreshing to find literature describing Christians for Biblical Equality. Please send a subscription to an influential African woman who is the chairperson of the Pan African Christian Women's Assembly.