

# HOW WOMEN STARTED THE CULTURE WAR

Modernization brings about  
a novel dichotomization of social life.

The dichotomy is between  
the huge and immensely powerful institutions  
of the public sphere . . . and the private sphere.

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I had just spoken on a panel at a large secular university when a woman in the audience stood up and said, “I’m not a feminist, but . . .” That was a pretty good tip-off that she was about to say something from a feminist perspective.

“Why didn’t this program mention any women? None of the speakers cited works by women. Why are you ignoring half the human race?” The woman glared around the room, then added: “Don’t bother to answer.” She began to stalk out of the auditorium, staging a dramatic exit.

I grabbed the microphone. “Don’t leave,” I said. That night I had talked about the divided concept of truth that runs like a chasm through all of Western thought. “The fact/value split is not merely academic,” I said. “It has been incarnated in modern social institutions as a split between public and private life—which affects even the relationships between men and women.”

That got her attention, and the room grew hushed. I explained that the two-story conception of knowledge has restructured not only the university curriculum but also the home, the church, and the workplace. This is an important aspect of the two-tiered division of truth, because it reminds us that it is not just a matter of ideas but also a powerful force reshaping the way we live.

## WOMEN AND THE AWAKENING

Come with me back to the middle of the Second Great Awakening. In 1838, a controversial article appeared urging laypeople to “think for themselves” in matters of religion.<sup>2</sup> Ordinarily, a message like that would hardly have caused a ripple. As we have seen, the call to ordinary people to read and interpret the Bible for themselves was a central theme in the evangelical movement of the time. What made this article so controversial, however, was that it was written by a woman—and she was calling on *women* to read the Bible for themselves: “I believe it to be the solemn duty of every individual to search the Scriptures for themselves, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, and not be governed by the views of any man, or set of men.”<sup>3</sup>

Once the evangelical movement had embraced spiritual populism, it was difficult to contain the logic of equality to white males. In terms of sheer numbers, the Awakenings reached more women than men, especially younger women. The revivalists also permitted women to pray and speak publicly, and even to become “exhorters” (teaching assistants), which scandalized critics. Moreover, because the revivalists stressed the emotional side of religion, their message seemed to be pitched especially to women. They began to speak of women as being more naturally religious than men, and urged wives to be the means of converting their more worldly husbands.

Like the other trends we have traced, this one has continued into our own day. American churches still typically attract more women than men, giving rise to the stereotype that religion is for women and children. This pattern is so widespread that some have spoken of the “feminization” of the church. “Men still *run* most churches,” one study concludes, but “in the *pews* women outnumber men in all countries of Western civilization.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, this is not true of other faiths: In Eastern Orthodoxy, the membership is roughly balanced, and in Judaism and Islam men actually predominate.<sup>5</sup> So the pattern cannot be explained by saying that men are just naturally less religious than women. Instead, Western Christianity is unusual in this regard. Why is that?

The answer is found in the split between the public and the private, fact and value, which cast Christianity into the upper story. This was not merely a change in ideas about religion; it involved changes in the material world as well—in the institutional structures of society. Once we grasp this process, it will shed new light not only on the state of evangelicalism today but also on issues like the role of the church in society and the roles of men and women in the home.<sup>6</sup>

## HOUSEHOLDS AT WORK

Historically speaking, the key turning point was the Industrial Revolution, which eventually divided the private realm of family and faith from the public realm of business and industry. To grasp these changes more clearly, let's start by painting a picture of life *before* the Industrial Revolution.

In the colonial period, families lived much the way they have lived for millennia in traditional societies. The vast majority of people lived on farms or in peasant villages. Productive work was done in the home or its outbuildings.<sup>7</sup> Work was done not by lone individuals but by families or households. A household was a relatively autonomous economic unit, often including members of the extended family, apprentices, servants, and hired hands. Stores, offices, and workshops were located in a front room, with living quarters either upstairs or in the rear.<sup>8</sup> This meant that the boundary between home and world was highly permeable: The "world" entered continually in the form of clients, business colleagues, customers, and apprentices.

This integration of life and work actually survives in pockets of modern society. When I was twelve years old, my family lived for a year in a small village outside Heidelberg, Germany. To go shopping we would take a large basket and walk down the street to the baker, then the butcher, then the grocer, and so on. Each storefront was located in the front room of a house, with the family living upstairs or in the back rooms. Husband and wife worked together all day, and school let out at noon (all the way through high school), so the kids could come home and help out too, stocking shelves and running the cash register. Each business was a genuine family enterprise.

One evening when I visited a small gift shop down the street, a woman came out of a back room with a baby on her hip. She waited on me holding her baby in one arm, then waved goodbye and went back to making dinner. As late as the 1960s, in German villages, one could still experience the pre-industrial form of the family enterprise.

What did the colonial integration of work and life mean for family relationships? It meant that husband and wife worked side by side on a daily basis, sharing in the same economic enterprise. For a colonial woman, one historian writes, marriage "meant to become a co-worker beside a husband . . . learning new skills in butchering, silversmith work, printing, or upholstering—whatever special skills the husband's work required."<sup>9</sup> A useful measure of a society's treatment of women is the status of widows, and historical records show that in colonial days it was not uncommon for widows to carry on the family enterprise after their husbands died—which means they had learned the requisite skills to keep the business going on their own.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, women were also responsible for a host of household tasks requiring a wide range of skills: spinning wool and cotton; weaving it into cloth; sewing the family's clothes; gardening and preserving food; preparing meals without preprocessed ingredients; making soap, buttons, candles, medicines. Many of the goods used in colonial society were manufactured by women, and, as Dorothy Sayers writes, they "worked with head as well as hands."<sup>11</sup>

Now, the fact that all this took place in the home meant that mothers were able to combine economically productive work with raising children. It also meant that *fathers* were much more involved in raising children than they are today. In fact, we cannot understand changes in women's roles unless we consider changes in men's roles at the same time.

### COMMUNAL MANHOOD

In the colonial period, the husband and father was regarded as the head of the household—and headship had a highly specific definition: It was defined as a divinely sanctioned office that conferred a duty to represent *not* his own individual interests but those of the entire household. This was an extension of the classical republican political theory discussed in chapter 10, in which a social institution (family, church, or state) was regarded as an organic unity where all shared in a common good. There was a "good" for individuals, but there was also a "good" of the whole, which was more than the sum of its parts—and this latter was the responsibility of the one in authority. He was called to sacrifice his own interests—to be *disinterested*—in order to represent the interests of the whole.<sup>12</sup> Husbands and fathers were not to be driven by personal ambition or self-interest but to take responsibility for the common good of the entire household.

We might say that the culturally dominant definition of masculinity was "communal manhood," a term coined by Anthony Rotundo in *American Manhood*. It meant that a man was expected to rank duty above personal ambition. To use a common phrase of the time, he was to fulfill himself through "publick usefulness" more than through economic success.<sup>13</sup>

In their day-to-day life, fathers enjoyed the same integration of work and childrearing responsibilities that mothers did. With production centered on the family hearth, fathers were "a visible presence, year after year, day after day" as they trained their children to work alongside them. Being a father was not a separate activity to come home to after a day at work; rather, it was an integral part of a man's daily routine.<sup>14</sup> Historical records reveal that colonial literature on parenting—like sermons and child-rearing manuals—were not addressed to mothers, as the majority are today. Instead, they were typically addressed to

*fathers*. Fathers were considered the primary parent, and were held to be particularly important in their children's religious and intellectual training.<sup>15</sup>

Each household was a small commonwealth, headed by a Hausvater (literally: "house father"). In the mid-nineteenth century, writes historian John Gillis, "Not only artisans and farmers but business and professional men conducted much of their work in the house, assisted by their wives and children." As a result, "There was no difference between [the Hausvater's] time and that of his wife, children, and servants. They all ate and prayed together; they got up and went to bed on the same schedule." Indeed, surprising as it may seem, "Males . . . were as comfortable in the kitchen as women, for they had responsibility for provisioning and managing the house. Until the nineteenth century, cookbooks and domestic conduct books were directed primarily to them, and they were as devoted to décor as they were to hospitality."<sup>16</sup>

In terms of the father's constant presence in the home, nineteenth-century America was actually closer to the world of Martin Luther than to our own. "When a father washes diapers and performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool," Luther wrote, he should remember that "God with all his angels and creatures is smiling."<sup>17</sup>

This is not to idealize colonial life, which was often a rugged life of back-breaking labor. Yet in terms of family relations, there is no doubt that families benefited from an integration of life and labor that is extremely rare in our fragmented age.

## HOME AS HAVEN

All of that changed with the Industrial Revolution. The main impact of the Industrial Revolution was to take work out of the home. This apparently simple change—in the physical location of work—set off a process that led to a sharp decline in the social significance accorded the home, drastically altering the roles of both men and women.

Industrialization took place in America at breakneck speed, roughly between 1780 and 1830. In the early stages, whole families went to work in the factories or did piecework at home—after all, they were used to working together as a unit. But it soon became evident that industrial work was shockingly different from the older family-centered work culture.

Since we've grown used to an industrialized workplace, we have to use a bit of historical imagination to grasp the differences. The old pattern was based on *personal* relations between a farmer and his sons and hired hands, or between craftsman and apprentices. In the Industrial Revolution, that gave way

to *impersonal* relations based on wages. Or again, in the old handcraft tradition, a single craftsman would plan, design, and then carry out a project. But under capitalism there arose an ever-increasing class of managers and contractors, who took over all the creative planning and decision making, while leaving workers with mechanical tasks divided into simple, repetitive steps—the assembly line. In the traditional agrarian society, farming and handcrafts were “task-oriented,” structured by human need and seasonable requirements. But in an industrial society, factory work was “time-oriented,” structured by the clock and the regularity of the machine.

The new workplace fostered an economic philosophy of atomistic individualism, as workers were treated as so many interchangeable units to be plugged into the production process—each struggling to advance himself at the expense of others. To many, the world of industry seemed to be a Social Darwinist war of each against all. (Some have even suggested that Darwin’s concept of the struggle for existence was merely an extrapolation into biology of the competitive ethos of early industrialism.<sup>18</sup>)

It was not long before a great social outcry was raised against this new and alien work style, while large-scale efforts were mobilized to restrict its dehumanizing effects. The primary strategy was to delineate one outpost where the “old” personal and ethical values could be protected and maintained—namely, the home. It came to stand for enduring values and ideals that people desperately wanted to maintain in the face of modernity: things like love, morality, religion, altruism, and self-sacrifice.

To protect these endangered values, laws were passed limiting the participation of women and children in the factories. This was followed, beginning in the 1820s, by an outpouring of books, pamphlets, advice manuals, and sermons that delineated what historians call a doctrine of separate spheres: The public sphere of business and finance was to be cordoned off from the private sphere of home and family—so that the home would become a refuge, a haven, from the harsh and competitive world outside, a place of solace and spiritual renewal.<sup>19</sup>

## WHY MEN LEFT HOME

How did these changes affect men and women? The most obvious change is that men had little choice but to follow their work out of households and fields, and into factories and offices. As a result, their physical presence around the household dropped sharply. It became difficult for them to continue acting as the primary parent. Fathers simply no longer spent enough time with their children to educate them, enforce regular discipline, or train them in adult skills and trades.

As a result, the most striking feature of child-rearing manuals of the mid-nineteenth century is the disappearance of references to fathers. For the first time we find sermons and pamphlets on the topic of child-rearing addressed exclusively to mothers rather than to fathers or both parents.<sup>20</sup> Men began to feel connected to their children primarily through their wives. The story is told of one Victorian father with sixteen children, who failed to recognize his own daughter at a parish Christmas party: “And whose little girl are you?” he asked. To which the miserable child replied, “I am yours, Daddy.” The incident was probably exceptional, yet there is no doubt that middle-class fathers were becoming secondary parents.<sup>21</sup>

The impact on women was, if anything, even more dramatic. After the Industrial Revolution, the home eventually ceased being the locus of production and became a locus of consumption—which meant that women at home were gradually reduced from producers to consumers. Household industries with their range of mutual services were replaced by factories and waged labor. Instead of developing a host of varied skills—spinning, weaving, sewing, knitting, preserving, brewing, baking, and candle-making—women’s tasks were progressively reduced to basic housekeeping and early childcare. Instead of enjoying a sense of economic indispensability, women were reduced to dependents, living off the wages of their husbands. Instead of working in a common economic enterprise with their husbands, women were shut off in a world of private “retirement.” Instead of working with other adults throughout the day—servants, apprentices, clients, customers, and extended family—women became socially isolated with young children all day.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the role of mothers in childrearing actually became *more* salient than it had been in the past, when they had shared the task with other adults in the household—grandparents, single relatives, older siblings, servants, and especially fathers. As these others left home for the workplace, raising children became almost solely the mother’s responsibility.

In a nutshell, women experienced a drastic *decrease* in the range of work available to them in the home—while, at the same time, experiencing a dramatic *increase* in responsibility for the narrow range of tasks that remained. Historical records give evidence of the dramatic change: Women “vanished more or less entirely from a number of occupations; they appeared less frequently in public records as printers, blacksmiths, arms-makers, or proprietors of small business concerns.”<sup>23</sup> As I mentioned earlier, colonial widows often took over the business when their husbands died—but no longer. “By the early nineteenth century,” writes one historian, “widows were conventionally viewed as pitiful charity cases,”<sup>24</sup> lacking the work skills to support themselves.

## THE PASSIONATE MALE

Even the portrayals of masculine and feminine character came in for social redefinition. In the older ideal of “communal manhood,” the key word was *duty*: duty to one’s superiors and to God. Manly virtue was defined as keeping one’s “passions” in submission to reason (with *passion* defined primarily as self-interest and personal ambition). The good man was one who exercised self-restraint and self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good.

But the emerging world of industrial capitalism fostered a new definition of virtue. The capitalist world seemed to require each man to function as an individual in competition with other individuals. In this new context, it was appropriate, even necessary, to act under the impulse of self-interest and personal ambition. Economic theories appeared—like Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*—that treated self-interest as a universal natural force, analogous to the force of gravity in physics.

At the same time, political theory was shifting from the household to the individual as the basic unit of society. Classical republican political philosophy—with its organic view of an overarching, unifying common good—gave way to an atomistic view of society as an aggregate of warring, self-interested individuals. There emerged a new vision of the individual as free from settled social bonds, free from generational ties to the past, free to find his own place in society through open competition.<sup>25</sup>

We discussed these trends earlier in relationship to the evangelical movement, but they also had an enormous impact on the family. Eventually the values of the colonial period were actually turned upside down: The Puritans had viewed the “passions” as a threat to social order, requiring control and self-restraint for the public good. But by the end of the nineteenth century, male “passions” and self-interest had come to be viewed in a positive light—as the source of equality and economic prosperity.

In fact, the word *competitive* now entered the English language for the first time. Until then, the English did not even have a word for a person who relished the challenge of a contest. But by the end of the nineteenth century, competition had become an obsession among American men. It was firmly believed that free competition was the engine of prosperity and political life.<sup>26</sup> “By a remarkable inversion,” writes Lesslie Newbigin, people began to find “in covetousness not only a law of nature but the engine of progress by which the purpose of nature and nature’s God was to be carried out.”<sup>27</sup> And as men went forth to do battle in the tough, competitive world of commerce and politics, the masculine character itself was redefined as morally hardened, competitive, aggressive, and self-interested.



## TAMING MEN

For women, however, the doctrine of separate spheres meant an entirely different story. They were called on to maintain the home as an arena cordoned off from the competitive, dog-eat-dog ethos of economics and politics. Women were to cultivate the softer virtues—of community, morality, religion, self-sacrifice, and affection. They were urged to act as moral guardians of the home, making it a place where men could be renewed, reformed, and refined—a place of “retirement” from the competitive, amoral world outside. As Frances Parkes wrote in 1829, “The world corrupts; home should refine.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus the public/private split was reflected in a sharp contrast between the sexes as well. As Kenneth Keniston of MIT writes: “The family became a special protected place, the repository of tender, pure, and generous feelings (embodied in the mother) and a bulwark and bastion against the raw, competitive, aggressive, and selfish world of commerce (embodied by the father).”<sup>29</sup>

This was a startling reversal. In colonial days, husbands and fathers had been admonished to function as the moral and spiritual leaders of the household. But now men were being told that they were naturally crude and brutish—and that they needed to learn virtue from their wives. And many men acquiesced to the new ethos. For example, during the Civil War, General William Pender wrote to his wife, “Whenever I find my mind wandering upon bad and sinful thoughts I try to think of my good and pure wife and they leave me at once. . . . You are truly my good Angel.”<sup>30</sup> Women were called upon to be the guardians of morality—to make men virtuous.

This is the origin of the double standard, and on the surface, it may appear to empower women. After all, it accorded them the status of enforcers of virtue. But the underlying dynamic was actually very troubling: As Rotundo explains, in essence America was releasing men from the requirement to be virtuous. For the first time, moral and spiritual leadership were no longer viewed as masculine attributes. They became women’s work. “Women took men’s place as the custodians of communal virtue,” Rotundo writes, but in doing so, they “were freeing men to pursue self-interest.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, men were being let off the hook.

In the long run, this “de-moralizing” of the male character would not be in women’s best interest, as we will see. Nor was it in men’s best interest, either, for they were becoming content with a stunted definition of masculinity as tough, competitive, and pragmatic, which denied their moral and spiritual aspirations.

## FEMINIZING THE CHURCH

Where was the Christian church in all this? Did it stand firmly against the “demoralization” of the male character? Sadly, no. Instead the American church largely acquiesced in the redefinition of masculinity. After centuries of teaching that husbands and fathers were divinely called to the office of household headship, the church began to pitch its appeal primarily to women. Churchmen began to speak of women as having a special gift for religion and morality. If you look carefully at illustrations of camp meetings, you often see women dominating the front rows, swooning and fainting (see fig. 12.1). In many evangelical churches, women began to outnumber men, often by two to one. When the British novelist Francis Trollope visited America in 1832, she commented that she had never seen a country “where religion had so strong a hold upon the women or a slighter hold upon the men.”<sup>32</sup>



*Fig. 12.1* THE “FEMINIZATION” OF CHRISTIANITY: The awakenings tended to attract more women than men. (*Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZC4-4554].*)

Even the tone of religion became feminized. In a classic book on the subject, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas writes that the ministry lost “a toughness, a sternness, an intellectual rigor which our society then and since has been accustomed to identify with ‘masculinity,’” and instead took on “feminine” traits of care, nurturing, sentimentalism, and retreat from the harsh, competitive ethos of the public arena.<sup>33</sup> The trend was especially typical

of liberal churches. "Religion in the old virile sense has disappeared, and been replaced by a feeble Unitarian sensibility," lamented Henry James, Sr., father of the famous novelist.<sup>34</sup> A Congregationalist minister complained that "the sword of the spirit" has been "muffled up and decked out with flowers and ribbons."<sup>35</sup>

The underlying dynamic is that the church was adopting a defensive strategy vis-a-vis the culture at large. Many churchmen simply retreated from making cognitive claims for religion that could be defended in the public sphere. Instead, they transferred faith to the private sphere of experience and feelings—which put it squarely into the domain of women. In 1820 the Unitarian minister Joseph Buckminster wrote,

I believe that if Christianity should be compelled to flee from the mansions of the great, the academies of the philosophers, the halls of legislators, or the throng of busy men, we should find her last and purest retreat with women at the fireside; her last altar would be the female heart.<sup>36</sup>

The operative word here is "flee." There was a presumption that religion was on the run from the public realm of hard-headed men, retreating to the private realm of soft-hearted women.

In short, instead of challenging the growing secularism among men, the church largely acquiesced—by turning to women. Churchmen seemed relieved to find at least one sphere, the home, where religion still held sway. Whereas traditional church teaching had held that fathers were responsible for their children's education, in the early 1800s, says one historian, "New England ministers fervently reiterated their consensus that mothers were *more* important than fathers in forming 'the tastes, sentiments, and habits of children,' and more effective in instructing them."<sup>37</sup> As a result, "mothers increasingly took over the formerly paternal task of conducting family prayers."<sup>38</sup>

Once again, we detect a disturbing dynamic: The churches were releasing men from the responsibility of being religious leaders. They were turning religion and morality into the domain of women—something soft and comforting, not bracing and demanding. Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard spoke for many at the time when he complained of the intellectual flabbiness—he called it the "unmanliness"—of religion.<sup>39</sup>

## MORALS AND MERCY

A similar transformation was taking place in the arena of social reform. If women were the moral guardians of the home, it seemed logical that they should be the guardians of society as well. After all, many women began to argue, it was impossible to hermetically seal off private life from public life.

Public vices like drunkenness and prostitution have private consequences. As the leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union put it, women must seek to "make the whole world Homelike."<sup>40</sup>

Thus it was largely women who fueled the widespread reform movements of the progressive era in the nineteenth century. Working first through churches, women set out to reform the public sphere by dispensing Christian benevolence. They joined or started societies to feed and clothe the poor. They supported the Sunday school movement and missionary societies. They joined or founded organizations to abolish slavery, to outlaw prostitution and abortion, to stop public drunkenness and gambling. They supported orphan asylums and societies such as the YWCA to assist single women in the cities. They initiated movements to abolish child labor, establish juvenile courts, and strengthen food and drug laws.

This interlocking network of reform societies has been dubbed the Benevolent Empire, and one prominent reformer at the time credited its construction largely to women: "Scarcely without exception," he said, "it has been the members of the women's clubs . . . who have secured all the advanced legislation . . . for the protection of home and the child."<sup>41</sup>

The progressive era marked the birth of the secular feminist movement as well, which I will discuss later. But most of these early crusaders were definitely *not* feminists: They did not base their claim to work outside the home on the feminist argument that there are no important differences between men and women. Just the opposite: They accepted the doctrine that women are more loving, more sensitive, more pious—but then they argued that it was *precisely those qualities* that equipped them for benevolent work beyond the confines of the home. As one woman put it at the time, the affairs of government and industry have "been too long dominated by the crude, war-like, acquisitive, hardheaded, amoral qualities of men," and they "should no longer be deprived of the tempering influence of women's compassion, spirituality, and moral sensitivity."<sup>42</sup>

The locus of many of these reform activities was the church, and they were eagerly supported by the clergy, who declared that women's naturally pious influence was crucial for society. Again Joseph Buckminster gives an eloquent example:

We look to you, ladies, to raise the standard of character of our own sex [i.e., men]; we look to you, to guard and fortify those barriers which still exist in society, against the encroachments of impudence and licentiousness. We look to you for the continuance of domestick purity, for the revival of domestick

religion, for the increase of our charities, and the support of what remains of religion in our private habits and publick institutions.<sup>43</sup>

But notice the same dangerous dynamic we noted before: When “ladies” are given responsibility for “raising the standard of character” among men, then men are freed to be less responsible. They are let off the hook. “The care of dependent populations” was “once the civic duty of town fathers and poor masters,” writes one historian. But in the nineteenth century, it became “known as charity . . . and became the province of women.”<sup>44</sup>

### FEMALE STANDARDS, MALE RESENTMENT

Eventually the double standard created tensions in relationships between men and women. After all, who were the objects of all these reform movements? Who were the scoundrels so debauched that women must take them in hand? They were, well, . . . men. The temperance movement mobilized wives and mothers against hard-drinking husbands and fathers, to drive them out of the tavern and back to the hearth. The rhetoric of female abolitionists focused on male slave masters who took sexual advantage of slave women.<sup>45</sup> The movement to outlaw prostitution and abortion cast fallen women as victims and men as cruel seducers. Historian Mary Ryan sums up the gender dimension to the reform movements: “Almost all the female reform associations were implicit condemnations of males; there was little doubt as to the sex of slave masters, tavern-keepers, drunkards and seducers.”<sup>46</sup>

The message sent by the doctrine of separate spheres was “that women must control men morally,” explains historian Carl Degler. Women were urged to “work together to control the male tendency toward lasciviousness.” For if the mother was “moral arbiter in the home,” that role “vouchsafed to women the right—nay, obligation—to regulate men’s sexual behavior.”<sup>47</sup>

The ideology of separate spheres was nothing less than “a plan for female government of male passions,” Rotundo agrees. But then he notes that it had a paradoxical effect: “It gave men the freedom to be aggressive, greedy, ambitious, competitive, and self-interested, then it left women with the duty of curbing this behavior.”<sup>48</sup>

These themes were even reflected in the literature of the day. In the early nineteenth century, a full third of all novels published in the United States were written by women (inspiring Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous outburst that America had been taken over by a “mob of scribbling women”).<sup>49</sup> One of the most common themes in these novels is the triumph of women against evil men. “The major repeated story,” writes an English professor, “is that of the

struggle of the good woman against the oppression and cruelties, covert and blatant, of men.”<sup>50</sup> The message was that men are inherently coarse and immoral—and that virtue is a womanly trait, imposed upon men only through great travail. The very concept of virtue, which had once been primarily a masculine trait, defined as courage and disinterested civic duty, was transformed into a feminine trait, focused primarily on sexual purity.<sup>51</sup>

## MANLY MEN

Ultimately, however, the attempt to make women the moral reformers of men was self-defeating. Why? Because when virtue is defined as a *feminine* quality instead of a *human* quality, then requiring men to be virtuous is seen as the imposition of a feminine standard—a standard that is alien to the masculine nature. Being virtuous took on overtones of being effeminate instead of manly. The Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing was once praised by a friend who described him as “almost feminine” and admired his “womanly temperament.”<sup>52</sup>

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a reaction set in and men began to rebel against female efforts to reform them. A new word entered the American language: *overcivilized*. Men began to worry that boys were now growing up far too exclusively under the tutelage of mothers and female teachers, with the result that they were becoming soft and effeminate.<sup>53</sup>

In reaction, a new emphasis was laid on the wild, untamed masculine nature. This is when legends of the lost frontier became popular—the lives of Davy Crocket and Daniel Boone. Theodore Roosevelt went west and began to celebrate the “strenuous life” of the outdoorsman. Ernest Thomas Seton dressed up in an Indian costume and founded the American Boy Scouts. A 1914 Scout manual expressed the new philosophy vividly:

[The] Wilderness is gone, the Buckskin man is gone, the painted Indian has hit the trail over the Great Divide, the privations and hardships of pioneer life which did so much to produce sterling manhood are now but a legend, and we must depend on the Boy Scout movement to produce the MEN of the future.<sup>54</sup>

Literary works began to sound a tone of male rebellion against female standards of virtue. Around the turn of the century, says one historical account, there arose “new genres of cowboy and adventure fiction, written by such authors as Owen Wister [author of the first Western] and Jack London”—books that “celebrated the man who had escaped the confines of domesticity.”<sup>55</sup> So-called “bad boy” books became a popular genre, the best-

known being Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. The latter ends with Huck taking off for lands unknown "because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it." Note that "sivilizing" is something done by old maid aunts. Twain's books express a poignant ambivalence of "both reverence for and resentment of the home and female standards."<sup>56</sup>

Some writers began to celebrate the male as primitive and barbarian, praising his "animal instincts" and "animal energy." The Tarzan books, featuring a wild man raised by apes, became immensely popular. This new definition of masculine virtue reflected in part the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution. For if humans evolved from the animal world, the implication was that the animal nature is the core of our being. This was a startlingly new concept: From antiquity, virtue had been defined as the exercise of restraint of the "lower" passions by the "higher" faculties of the rational spirit and the moral will. But now, in a stunning reversal, the animal passions were held up as the true self. "It is a new sensation to come to see man as an animal—the master animal of the world," wrote John Burroughs (son of the author of *Tarzan*).<sup>57</sup> The rise of Social Darwinism exalted "the triumph of man over man in primitive struggle."<sup>58</sup>

Even churches sensed a problem and began recasting religion in a more masculine tone. Too long religion had been the domain of women, tinged with sentimental piety. In 1858 an *Atlantic Monthly* article scolded parents, saying that if a son was "pallid, puny, sedentary, lifeless, joyless," then he was directed to the ministry—while on the other hand the "ruddy, the brave, and the strong" were directed to secular careers.<sup>59</sup> The answer? "Muscular Christianity"—a concept that combined hardy physical manliness with ideals of Christian service.

The best-known advocate of muscular Christianity was the evangelist Billy Sunday, who proclaimed that Jesus was "no dough-faced, lick-spittle proposition" but "the greatest scrapper that ever lived." Sunday offered followers a "hard-muscled, pick-axed religion," not some "dainty, sissified, lily-livered piety."<sup>60</sup> Books appeared with titles like *The Manliness of Christ*, *The Manly Christ*, and *The Masculine Power of Christ*. A church-based movement appeared called the Men and Religion Forward movement, which lasted until the 1950s, stressing an image of Jesus as the Successful Businessman or Salesman. Organizers bought ads on the sports pages, alongside ads for cars and whisky, and proclaimed that women "have had charge of the Church work long enough." They promoted a manly religion that emphasized strength and social responsibility.<sup>61</sup>

## ROMPER ROOM DADS

This welcome emphasis on male strength was tainted, however, by the continuing theme that genuine masculinity is attained only by resisting “feminine” standards. In 1926 an influential book called *The Mauve Decade* opened with a savage attack on what the author called “the Titanesse”—the American woman as arbiter of public taste and morals. The author worried about the masculinity of boys growing up in woman-dominated homes and schools.<sup>62</sup>

In the 1940s, Philip Wylie penned a best-selling book called *A Generation of Vipers*, in which he accused women of “Momism”—of smothering, controlling, and manipulating their sons.<sup>63</sup> I still remember as an adolescent seeing articles in women’s magazines on the dangers of “Momism.” In the 1950s, *Playboy* made its appearance, warning that women are economic parasites and that marriage is a trap that will “crush man’s adventurous, freedom-loving spirit.”<sup>64</sup> An early issue showed a full-page spread of a smiling bride and groom—but on the next page, the bride’s nose and chin are elongated, her veil sticks out like spikes, and the poor man discovers he’s married a harpy. The theme was that family life and values are imposed by women, but are oppressive to men.

For the first time it became socially acceptable for fathers not to be involved with their families. By the 1920s and 30s in urban areas, the father had become the secondary parent who covered the “extras”: hobbies, sports, trips to the zoo. As one historian describes it, fathers were reduced to entertainers—Romper Room dads.<sup>65</sup>

There emerged the now-familiar image of fathers as incompetent bumbler in the home, who are patronized by long-suffering wives and clever children<sup>66</sup>—the image popularized today in the comic strip figure Dagwood Bumstead, Al Bundy on “Married with Children,” and the beleaguered Father Bear in the popular Berenstain Bears picture-book series. When Mother Bear decides the family must stop eating junk food, it’s Papa Bear who sneaks his favorite snacks. When Mother Bear decides the family must give up TV, it’s Papa Bear who sneaks downstairs at night to watch the tube. The books present a stereotype where mothers impose rules, and childish fathers break them. Even the children scold Papa Bear for his infractions. It’s all presented as humorous, of course. Ha-ha! Let’s teach children to feel superior to their incompetent fathers.

When I was attending seminary, a professor opened class one day by telling a story of how he was left alone—*alone!*—with his two small sons one Saturday morning while his wife went shopping. Unable to restrain their lively behavior, he finally imposed order by settling one boy at one end of the couch,



the other boy at the other end, while he stationed himself rigidly between them, forbidding them to move or talk until his wife returned and rescued him. The (male) students in the class all laughed. And I wondered: When did it become socially acceptable for a Christian man to admit that he is incompetent as a father?

As fatherhood lost status, not surprisingly, men showed a decreasing investment in being fathers. From 1960 to 1980 there was a striking 43 percent reduction in the amount of time men spend in a family environment where young children are present.<sup>67</sup> For many women today, on a personal level, the problem is not male dominance so much as male desertion.

## FEMINIST FURY

As we noted earlier, the feminist movement began at roughly the same time women were swelling the ranks of the Benevolent Empire, so let's back up now to see where it fits into the cultural pattern. From the beginning, feminism was marked by considerable anger and envy—not toward individual men so much as toward the fact of the opportunities available to men in the public sphere. In 1912 one feminist wrote,

Not since I started to do my own thinking have I been in any doubt as to which sphere most attracted me. The duties and pleasures of the average woman bore and irritate. The duties and pleasures of the average man interest and allure.<sup>68</sup>

As feminists saw it, the problem began when work was removed from the home. The solution, then, was obvious: Women should follow their work into the public arena. That's what men had done; why not women? Even science supported the idea of getting out of the house. The Social Darwinists of the day explained that the reason men were superior to women (a premise they did not question) was that, from their brute beginnings, males had fought for survival out in the world, where they were subject to competition and natural selection—a process that weeds out the weak and inferior. By contrast, women were at home nurturing the young, out of the reach of natural selection, with the result that they evolved more slowly.<sup>69</sup>

Ironically, even those who defended women against the Social Darwinist theories of biological inferiority did so by denigrating the home. Sociologist Lester Frank Ward argued that women were not *inherently* inferior; their faculties were merely underdeveloped because of their restriction to the home. Since nothing of significance happens in the home, those who spend time in it

have only trivial matters upon which to exercise their minds, so it's no wonder they are stunted in their development.<sup>70</sup>

Feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman (a student of Ward's) concluded that women would never undergo evolutionary progress as long as they remained isolated in the pre-scientific environment of the home. Gilman urged that all the functions remaining in the home should be removed and put under the care of scientifically oriented professionals. Only when taken out of the amateurish hands of the housewife, she said, would any progress be made in cooking, cleaning, or childcare.<sup>71</sup> That may have sounded radical at the time but in our own day many women in essence follow Gilman's recommendations: Many rely on prepackaged foods or fast-food restaurants for much of their family's food; they hire crews to clean their houses; and hand their children over to be raised by day care workers.

### WHAT HATH WOMAN LOST?

How does this historical perspective give us a better understanding of contemporary "women's issues"? What principles can we draw out for crafting a more biblical view of marriage and family?

First, it is clear that we cannot understand the changes in women's roles and circumstances without relating them to parallel changes in men's roles. The two are intertwined in a dynamic interaction. The Industrial Revolution caused both men's and women's work to contract and become more specialized; the work of both sexes lost range and variety, and became more intensely focused. Men lost their traditional integration into the life of the household and family (no more of those cookbooks written for men!). They lost the close contact they once enjoyed with their children throughout the day, and as a result were unable to function as their children's primary parent and teacher.

For their part, women at home lost their former participation in economic production, along with the wide range of skills and activities that once involved. The loss of women's traditional productive role placed them in a new economic dependence: Whereas the preindustrial household was maintained by an interplay of mutual services, now women's unpaid service stood out as unique, feeding into a stereotype of women's character as selfless and giving—or more negatively, as dependent and helpless. Women also became more isolated: They lost their easy contact with the adult world, while at the same time, their responsibility for childrearing actually increased, since it was no longer shared by fathers and other adults in the household.

It might be asked why, since both sexes lost much of the integration of life and labor characteristic of the preindustrial household, only women protested.

Why has there been a women's movement but no men's movement (at least, not until recently)? The answer is that the contraction of women's sphere was more onerous because they were confined to the private sphere—which means they suffered from the *general devaluation* of the private sphere. The home was cut off from the “real” work of society, isolated from intellectual, economic, and political life, at the same time that the church was.<sup>72</sup> I suggest that just as it is not good for religion to be compartmentalized in the private realm, it is not good for women either.

## REMORALIZING AMERICA

A second theme we can draw from history is that the goal of the reform movements of the Benevolent Empire was to “remoralize” the public sphere with the values of the private sphere—of religion and family. We could even say this was an early stage of today's “culture war”: Politics, economics, and academia were beginning to declare autonomy from the old controls of religion and morality, and evangelical Christians were fighting back.

Yet there was a gender dimension to this conflict: Since men worked in the public sphere, they were the first to absorb the ethos of modernity—while social reform was largely fueled by the efforts of women (backed by the clergy). Thus, to be more precise, it was largely an attempt by *women* to remoralize the public sphere and draw men back to traditional values.

A third theme should be obvious: This strategy did not work and ought to be abandoned. Men perceived the attempt at remoralization as an attempt to impose “feminine” values, which they were bound to resist. The consequent male rebellion against religion and family led to a devaluation of both—a trend that continues even today.

Despite the adverse consequences, astonishingly, some social commentators persist in holding women responsible for “taming” men. In an article titled “Women Taming Men,” columnist William Raspberry says crime and drugs among African-American men are the fault of . . . African-American women! “As long as women tolerate this behavior in men, it will continue,” Raspberry writes. In support, he argues that it was women who “created marriage” and “domesticated” men, and who “are the civilizers of the society.”<sup>73</sup>

Yet the historical record in America shows that this approach did not work. The truth is that men will be drawn back into family life only when they are convinced that being a good husband and father is a *manly* thing to do; that parental duty and sacrifice are masculine virtues; that marital love and fidelity are not female standards imposed upon men externally, but an integral part of the male character—something inherent and original, created by God.

## NO DOUBLE STANDARD

Finally, the failure of the strategy of separate spheres illuminates why the feminist movement grew rapidly in the 1960s. It meant that many women were no longer willing to be the “moral guardians” of men or to “regulate men’s sexual behavior.” In short, they refused to maintain the double standard. Nor were they willing to remain isolated in a private sphere that had been devalued and emptied of much of its productive and personally fulfilling work. Feminists urged women to leave the empty husk of the home and to stake out a claim in the public arena, where “real” work was done and where they could regain some respect.

Of course, there was only one small problem—or actually several small problems: young children. Who would take care of the children? That’s why it became so important to feminists to gain control of their reproductive lives through contraception and abortion; and when they did have children, to demand state-sponsored day care. These measures seemed crucial to gaining relatively equal access with men to the public realm.

Clearly, these “solutions” are morally objectionable to most evangelical Christians. Yet few have suggested realistic alternatives to the historical and economic trends that gave rise to them. In conservative circles, writes Dorothy Sayers, women are often simply “exhorted to be feminine and return to the home from which all intelligent occupation has been steadily removed.”<sup>74</sup>

## RECONSTITUTING THE HOME

A better course would be to challenge the trend toward emptying the home of its traditional functions. On the conceptual level, we need Christian economists willing to rethink the modern economy from the ground up, and creatively craft a biblically inspired philosophy of economics. What is the proper function of the family and of economic institutions, and how can they interrelate in ways that support rather than hinder each sphere’s proper calling before the Lord?

Christians also need to challenge the “ideal-worker” standard in American corporate culture, which decrees that an employee should be available for full-time (even overtime) work without permitting his personal and family life to interfere—because he has turned all that over to a home-based spouse.<sup>75</sup> The ideal-worker standard did not function well even when wives and mothers were still home-based, filling in for absent fathers. Among the many causes of the rebellious youth culture of the 1960s was a great deal of “father hunger.” The ideal-worker also helped create America’s rootless, mobile society because it required workers to be willing to move anywhere at any time—tearing apart

extended families and stable neighborhood communities. Family life became impoverished and more difficult to sustain without that traditional network of support systems.

Christian organizations ought to be the first to debunk the ideal-worker standard as harmful to families. They should be on the forefront in offering practical alternatives for reintegrating family responsibilities with income-producing work—through such things as home-based work, part-time work positions with prorated benefits, flexible hours, and telecommuting.

Heidi Brennan of Mothers At Home, a national group headquartered in Virginia, says the single most frequent question the organization receives from mothers around the country is, How can I earn an income and still be home with my family? Many women are finding that an effective way to combine work and family is to start a home-based business, and today women-owned small businesses are growing at a rapid pace. Home-based work has the added benefit of providing a means for children to participate, so that parents once again fulfill the role of training their children in basic work skills and values, just as in the preindustrial household.<sup>76</sup>

Nor are these suggestions just for women. One poll found that men (age 20 to 39) with young children said having time with their family was the most important issue in their jobs. A full 82 percent said a family-friendly schedule was “very important,” while only 56 percent wanted more job security, 46 percent mentioned a high salary, and 27 percent mentioned status.<sup>77</sup>

What about single mothers, families living in poverty, and others who have no choice but to work? Even they would benefit from measures that allow them to integrate work with raising children, instead of putting them in day care. Some groups have discovered that strategies first developed among the poorest of the poor in places like Bangladesh work equally well in America’s inner cities. For example, the Women’s Self-Employment Project in Chicago works with poor women—mostly single mothers—using a rotating loan system developed in Third World countries in order to support the creation of “microenterprises” based in the home. Many work-training programs offered to low-income women channel them into hotel cleaning, data entry, and other positions that offer relatively little scope for creativity or responsibility. By contrast, self-employment gives women the opportunity to develop initiative and to take charge of their lives. It also gives them much more flexibility in working around their family responsibilities.<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, Christians must not fall into the trap of assuming that paid employment is the only thing that will give women a sense of dignity. That’s a mistake secular feminists often make. Instead Christians need to challenge the prevailing ideology of success by insisting that individuals are most

fulfilled when they enjoy a sense of calling or vocation—whether in paid *or* unpaid work. We all long for a sense that we are contributing to something larger than ourselves, to a greater good, to God’s purposes in the world.

## PRIVATE AND PERSONAL

To summarize the historical changes we have traced, in the nineteenth century the two-realm theory of truth came to be reflected in a deep social divide. Whereas in colonial times the social order was viewed as an organic whole, by the mid-nineteenth century it had splintered into a set of separate domains. Society was segmented, says Donald Scott, into “sacred and secular, domestic and economic, masculine and feminine, private and public.”<sup>79</sup>

Yet these were all aspects of a single fundamental cleavage. “The fissure in society divided the sexes,” explains Newbigin: “the man dealt with public facts, the women with personal values.” Read that sentence again and notice how succinctly it covers the split between public and private, facts and values, men and women.<sup>80</sup> We can better understand secular feminism by realizing that it was an attempt by women to cross this troubling chasm in order to join men in the public sphere. A better route, however, would be to find ways to *close* the gap itself, recovering some measure of integration of work and worship for both men and women.

Obviously, we could also raise exegetical questions about the way Scripture deals with the relations of husbands and wives, women’s leadership in the church, and so on. But such questions go beyond the scope of this book. My goal has been to show how the social and intellectual context shapes the very way those questions are conceived. Though we no longer live in the nineteenth century, the tension between the public and private spheres continues to have profound personal consequences, especially for women. Most women today are trained, like men, for life and work in the public sphere. As a result, they may not even have much contact with the private sphere until they have children, which can then be a difficult and even traumatic transition.

My own interest in this subject grew out of the conflicts I experienced upon becoming pregnant with my first child. As a seminary student, I was profoundly ambivalent about this pregnancy. What would having a child mean for my future? How could I have children and still grow professionally? The only way I knew to pursue my deepest interests, to fulfill my calling before the Lord, was in the world of ideas, through academic study. But having a child seemed to pose a profound threat to the possibility of continuing my studies. I felt as though I were facing a black hole of uncertainty.

To jump ahead, I want to say that I greatly enjoyed becoming a mother,

even homeschooling our son because I wanted to be intensely involved in his life. In addition, for most of my career, I have worked part-time and from a home office, which allows me to combine work and parenting responsibilities. Yet in my student days, unable to foresee all this, I went through an agonizing dilemma—and it was this experience that caused me to begin thinking about the pressures women face when they become mothers.

Let me highlight the issue by turning it around: My husband was about to become a father for the first time, but *he* did not have to wrestle with fears of giving up a central source of fulfillment, and the exercise of his gifts, for a significant portion of his life. When men have families, most are able to continue working in their chosen fields (though admittedly, they often do make difficult trade-offs between family and career advancement). At the time, I confess, it struck me as decidedly unfair that women should experience such intense pressure to choose between the two major tasks of adult life—between pursuing a calling and raising the next generation.

Rachel Cusk, in her book *A Life's Work*,<sup>81</sup> says many women describe becoming a mother as a “shock.” Their lives are turned upside down by the constancy of a baby’s demands. At the same time, they are astonished by the intensity of the love bond they form with their newborn. They feel like aliens entering a strange new world of home and childrearing.

Why does all this come as such a surprise? Because through young adulthood, most of us have been carefully primed for participation in the *public* world—while growing out of touch with the private world of babies and families. We probably haven’t even baby-sat a neighbor’s kids since we were teenagers. Our identity and sense of self-worth has been built primarily on our public persona and accomplishments, especially at work. By contrast, motherhood is still individual, personal, and private. As Cusk puts it, “In motherhood, a woman exchanges her *public* significance for a range of *private* meanings” for which she has not been prepared. Modern child-care manuals, she comments, “begin with a sort of apocalyptic scenario in which the world we know has vanished, replaced by another in whose principles we must be educated.”<sup>82</sup>

Here the yawning gap between public and private spheres becomes a personal issue, as women find themselves catapulted into a new world that is not only unfamiliar but also undervalued. If they are feminists, as I was when I had my first child, they may even feel guilty about taking on “traditional” female roles and responsibilities in the home.<sup>83</sup> Women often face intense pressure from the outside world, including former colleagues urging them to return to the “real” world of professional work. Because of the unusually high percentage of professional women in the Washington, D.C., area where I live, there

are no less than three support organizations that help mothers who want to leave the workplace, or at least cut back, while they have young children at home. The pressure is so relentless on professional women to stay in the workforce and put in long hours away from their families that women who want more time with their children need support from others who understand the strain.

## BLUEPRINT FOR LIVING

Not only this topic but all the topics we have discussed up to this point have profound personal implications. These are not merely abstract intellectual matters fit for philosophers and historians to debate in the rarified atmosphere of academia. Ideas and cultural developments affect real people, shaping the way they think and live out their lives. That's why it is crucial for us to develop a Christian worldview—not just as a set of coherent ideas but also as a blueprint for living. Believers need a roadmap for a full and consistent Christian life. We also need to understand enough of modern thought to identify the ways it blocks us from living out the gospel the way God intends—both in terms of intellectual roadblocks and, as we have seen in this chapter, in terms of economic and structural changes that make it harder to live by scriptural principles. It is enormously difficult for fathers in a modern industrialized society to function as the primary parent, as Scripture calls them to—and as they *did* in earlier historical periods. It is likewise difficult for mothers to raise their children well, and still be faithful in honing their other gifts in a Christian calling. The distance between home and workplace, between public and private spheres, means most of us are required to specialize in either one or the other, at least for a substantial period of our lives.

The personal dimension to living out a Christian worldview typically gets short shrift in most books on the subject, yet it is by far the most important. What ultimate benefit do we gain from investing time and effort to develop a Christian worldview, if it is only a new way to think? A mental exercise? A slick set of arguments? New ideas have limited value unless they transform the way we actually live—the day-to-day decisions we make, the way we interact with other people, the way we run our organizations. The practical application of Christian worldview is so important that it is the subject of the next chapter. We cheat ourselves terribly unless we take the final step and restructure our entire lives by the life-giving truths in God's Word.



# Total Truth: Chapter Twelve Questions

Answer the questions as you read and give many and specific details.

1. After the Industrial Revolution, how did accepted definitions of masculinity grow narrower, excusing men from many of their traditional responsibilities?
2. How did the Industrial Revolution change women's work?
3. How did women begin to extract themselves out of the home as a response to the change that the Industrial Revolution brought?
4. How did the American church contribute to the divide between the role of men and women?
5. How did all this affect the way that men and women viewed each other?
6. What is the origin of the double standard? Does it still exist today?
7. How can churches support families seeking to integrate work and home life?