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# The Fate of the Family and the Future of the Church

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Is the future of our congregations tied to the fate of the family? Professor W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia is sure that this is so, and his research and analysis is impossible to ignore. In his essay, "[As the Family Goes](#)," published in *First Things*, Wilcox argues that the future of America's Christian congregations will "rise and fall with the fortunes of the intact, married family."

His analysis is drawn from mountains of statistical research combined with a keen understanding of how both families and congregations actually work. The best predictor of church attendance for young adults is marriage. Wilcox cites Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow's report that decreases in marriage and childbearing among young adults were "by far the strongest predictors" of a decline in religious attendance. As a matter of fact, Wuthnow argues that

American churches would now have 6.3 million more young adults attending if marriage and childbearing rates had not fallen so precipitously.

Wilcox suggests what observers of young men already know — "the link between religious attendance and family life is particularly strong for men." As Wilcox explains:

*Currently, men are 57 percent less likely to attend church regularly if they are not married with children, compared to men who are married with children. Women are 41 percent less likely to attend church regularly if they are single and childless. Marriage does more than bind a man to one woman; it also ties a man to a local congregation.*

More:

*For men, marriage, fatherhood, and churchgoing are a package deal. Men's comparatively fragile faith often depends on wifely encouragement to flower. More important, fatherhood often awakens in men a sense of paternal responsibility that extends to their children's religious and moral welfare. Men are much less likely to identify with and be able to fulfill the responsibilities of fatherhood—including the religious ones—if they are not married to the mother of their children. This is why divorce is much more likely to drive men away from church than it is women.*

This makes a great deal of sense and a look at congregational life will tell the story. Marginalize marriage, depreciate childbearing and fatherhood, and say goodbye to young adult men in church.

In a fascinating analysis, Wilcox suggests that evangelical congregations have done relatively well in attendance and draw considerable numbers of young adult men precisely because those congregations tend to support, honor, and encourage the establishment and health of intact families.

Liberal Protestantism, on the other hand, has swallowed something of a poison pill. They have embraced trends weakening the family and have encouraged "alternative lifestyles" — trends that have been disastrous for their own attendance.

In his words:

*After almost half a century of decline . . . those in the churchly mainline—particularly those on the left, politically and theologically—still cannot see their dependence on strong families. Blinded by their desire to be both “with it” and welcoming, they continue to lend vocal support to the family revolution that is draining their congregations.*

As an illustration of this trend, he pointed to the “God is Still Speaking” media campaign undertaken by the United Church of Christ [UCC]:

*The “Ejector Pew” commercial from this campaign has attracted attention. It depicts a WASP upper-middle-class nuclear family settling comfortably into a church pew as unconventional families—a black single mother, a gay couple, a single man, and so on—are ejected from their pews. The commercial closes with this tag: “The United Church of Christ: No matter who you are or where you are in life’s journey, you are welcome here.”*

*This campaign—and the larger sentiment behind it—is doubly ironic. First, despite their inclusive rhetoric, mainline Protestant congregations are actually less likely to have single parents, single adults, and married couples without children than are evangelical Protestant churches. Mainline Protestant churches attract upper-middle-class people who live in conventional families but also aspire to the progressive cultural conventions of their class, which is to say, they walk right and talk left. Evangelical Protestant churches attract working- and middle-class people who hail from a range of different family situations but who now aspire to live in accord with God’s plan for their lives.*

Wilcox identifies the UCC campaign as “ironic” for the very reason that it “embraces the trends that have been the undoing of the UCC—indeed, of all the mainline.” He also observes: “The average young man raised in a Congregationalist home isn’t likely to enter his local UCC church on any day except Christmas and Easter—unless he finds himself married with children.”

Noting some of the same trends recognized by [Mary Tedeschi Eberstadt](#) [see [article above](#)], Professor Wilcox argues that the link between intact family structure (married couples with children) and congregational vitality is virtually a “sociological law.”

Professor Wilcox offers a compelling sociological analysis. Without doubt, basic theological issues lie just under the surface of these trends. Theological liberalism weakened the mainline Protestant denominations long before the breakdown of family structure became evident. A loss of confidence in the truthfulness and authority of the Bible preceded and facilitated a loss of confidence in the family — including marriage, childbearing, and the crucial responsibility of fatherhood.

Evangelical congregations should look to this analysis with concern and a consideration of the degree to which our own congregations might marginalize or minimize marriage, childbearing, and the importance of intact family structure. Gospel imperatives, congregational health, and family concerns all meet at this crucial intersection.

It certainly makes sense that our churches give careful attention to Professor Wilcox’s central argument: “The fortunes of American religion rise and fall with the fortunes of the intact, married, family.”

In last Friday’s edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Professor Wilcox turns to the question of why evangelical Christians are so concerned about family issues. As he explains:

*There are at least three reasons that evangelicals are concerned about issues like abortion, sexual promiscuity and marriage. First, most obviously, evangelicals subscribe to a traditional form of the Christian faith that views the Bible as a literal and authoritative guide to family life.*

*Second, in the past 40 years, evangelicals have come to see their pro-family worldview as a countercultural badge of honor. It signals both to themselves and to the broader society that they have not conformed to the ways of the world. Thus, paradoxically, attacks by the likes of Howard Dean, Frank Rich and Bill Maher on “intolerant” and “bigoted” evangelicals only deepen their commitment. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Seminary, put it this way in an op-ed in the New York Times: “To the cultured critics of religion, we are the cantankerous holdouts against the inevitable. But so far as the Southern Baptist Convention is concerned, the future is in God’s hands. If faithfulness requires the slings and arrows of outraged opponents, so be it.”*

*Third, and perhaps most surprisingly, evangelicals are concerned about the state of the family in their own homes, neighborhoods and communities. And for good reason. Studies indicate, for instance, that teen sex and divorce are as common among evangelicals as they are among other Americans. Indeed, divorce is especially high in Bible Belt states such as Kentucky, Mississippi and Arkansas. Thus evangelical efforts to advance a pro-family agenda in the public square must be understood, at least in part, as a defensive effort to get their own house in order.*

In this article, Professor Wilcox seeks to explain the worldview of evangelical Christians to the larger public. Nevertheless, evangelicals, too, should look carefully at his essay.

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