
Pro Rege

Volume 15 | Number 4

Article 4

June 1987

Threats to the Family

Cornelis Venema

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Venema, Cornelis (1987) "Threats to the Family," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 15: No. 4, 13 - 19.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol15/iss4/4

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Threats to the Family

Cornelis Venema
Pastor
First Christian Reformed Church
Ontario, California



A 1975 graduate of Dordt College, Cornelis Venema attended Calvin Theological Seminary and later obtained a Ph.D. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. The title of his dissertation was "The Twofold Nature of the Gospel in Calvin's Theology." Venema has published articles in the Calvin Theological Journal and The Sixteenth Century Journal. He is pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Ontario, California.

Introduction

Though we are often tempted to exaggerate and overdraw the crises we face in our lives and culture, this is hardly a danger when it comes to the state of the family today. Few would want to argue with the thesis that ours is a culture in which the institutions of marriage and family are in a state of deep crisis and turmoil. While to evaluate the state of the family fairly today we may need to warn against undue pessimism and doomsaying, there is no denying the concern and even despair that often accompanies contemporary discussions of this crisis.

Statistical studies and sociological analyses bear eloquent witness to the scope of the problem. In spite of a slight decline in the rise of the divorce rate recently, almost one-half of marriages in our society end in divorce. Between the years 1960-78, there was a 213 percent in-

crease in divorce among black families and a 151 percent increase among white families. Some 70 percent of all the children in the United States will live in a single-parent home at least part of the time as they grow up. Consequently, what once was considered a "normal" family—a working husband, a full-time housewife, and two or more children—now constitutes only a fraction of present-day families.

But it is not only the rise in the divorce rate and the marked increase in single-parent homes that reflect a breakdown in contemporary marriage and family life. There are also such features as the decline in the quality and exercise of parental nurture and discipline, the emotional and debilitating dispute over the proper relationship of husbands and wives (men and women), the problem of child abuse, the increasing use of abortion as a means of birth control, the alarming increase of teenage

pregnancies, and the remarkable decline in the annual birthrate (50 percent since 1957, with a rate today of 1.8 per thousand, as compared with a replacement rate of 2.1). All of these features of modern family life are symptomatic of a troubled and unhealthy situation. If anyone were to doubt the extent or degree of the problem, it is enough to note that, if present trends continue, fully 40 percent of all present 14 year olds will become pregnant at least once before the age of 20!

If this crisis within the family is real and has also affected the Christian community, the question which we must address is: what is the reason for it? What factors within our culture and within our families are producing these effects? What forces and cultural "spirits" are contributing to the demise and to the disintegration of the family today? What are the greatest "threats to the family?" These questions will concern us in the following pages.

However, before we address these questions, it should be noted that we are not concerned with the ordinary process of historical differentiation that has taken place within the sphere of marriage and family life. Many of the changes this process has brought are inevitable and necessary. Rather, we are concerned with those forces contributing to the *structural* breakdown and deterioration of the family. Furthermore, while many social and cultural institutions and agencies—for example, the mass media, the schools, the government—may be threatening the health of the family today, our concern will be restricted to those "spiritual" forces or powers which express the *Zeitgeist* and temper of our times. And these only as they threaten the family.

Lawlessness

Though it will seem at first glance too general and simplistic—after all, the same could be said of any preceding era and culture—the first spirit contributing to the present crisis is that of *lawlessness*. Our society, both in its spirit and practice, has repudiated a structural norm or divinely instituted order for the family and for marriage. Contemporary discussions of the

family are pervaded by a general absence of insight into the normative shape and structure of a wholesome family life. But to sense the gravity and seriousness of the modern crisis in the family we must be aware of the profound confusion that prevails today about the family.

In the biblical and Reformed tradition, we have assumed that God gave us a structural norm for marriage and family. However varied and diverse its expression may have been throughout history we treated marriage and family as a "holy institution" or "estate" established by God in creation and redeemed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Marriage was a "holy estate ordained by God," an institution created and ordered by God to serve its members and to populate the earth. To enter this estate and to live within it in conformity to the will and command of God was to assure one's well-being and "blessedness."

Within the sphere of marriage, a particular ordering of the relationship between husband and wife was considered indispensable to the proper unfolding of the covenant of fidelity established between them. Though this covenant relationship was comprised of two equal partners, it expressed itself in an ordered relationship between the husband as "head" and the wife as one who was "subject" to him.

Likewise, the family was ordered and directed by the Creator as a relationship of mutual love and care, within which parents and children bear a peculiar and "official" relationship to one another. Parents were called and authorized to nurture and discipline their children in the "fear of the Lord," and children were called to honor their parents in this office and to obey them in their responsible conduct of it. Though this is a shorthand summary of the approach taken, it indicates the extent to which a Reformed and Christian view of the family was informed by a view of God's ordinance for its structure and well-being.

However, when we speak of "lawlessness" as the first cultural force or spiritual power destroying the family, we refer to the radical way in which this Reformed perspective, both in theory and in practice, has been called into question. To speak of a structural ordering of

marriage and family, or to speak of an "estate" or institution of the family seems to conflict with the freedom which is ours to order our lives according to our own aspirations and reason. The very idea of order and limits, within which a life of blessedness is obtained and divine sanction is given, is being questioned.

For this reason, there is no limit to the questions which are being posed openly and ruthlessly in the present context. Who is to say, and upon what basis, that there is such a thing as a rightly ordered and regulated family life? What constitutes the origin and basis of the institutions of marriage and family? What purposes do they serve? Who defines the relationship between a husband and a wife, or between parents and children? In whose name and with what authority do parents nurture and discipline their children? How do we obtain insight into the peculiar norms and directives which should inform our marriages and families? How do we determine "right" and "wrong," "good" and "bad," within this sphere? We have not grasped the gravity of the present threat against the family until we recognize that these questions, though they are being relentlessly raised, are often going begging for answers.

Perhaps the single, best illustration of this spirit was the White House Conference on the Family in 1980. Originally this Conference bore the title "Conference on the Family," but this was subsequently changed to "Conference on Families" because there was an explicit rejection of any single normative definition of the family. Why exclude a lesbian or homosexual couple from one's definition of the "family"? Why limit one's understanding of the family so as to exclude a variety of ways of ordering relationships between men, women, and children? Who is to say that the task of nurturing and training children belongs primarily to parents and not to alternative institutions and agencies? In the discussions before and during the Conference, a cacophony of conflicting voices was raised and things often degenerated into bitter and acrimonious debate.

Though this may be an extreme example of

what is taking place in our culture, the Christian community has been affected by this anti-normative and anti-structural direction of our time. It has not managed to escape the influence of the relativism and uncertainty which has characterized Western philosophy and culture since the Enlightenment. Any one of the intellectual currents of the modern era—the rationalistic humanism of the Enlightenment, social Darwinism, German idealism and its children (historicism and hermeneutical philosophies/theologies), existentialism, Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of revolution—is inimical to the idea of an enduring form and shape to marriage and family life. None of them acknowledges a divinely authorized norm for the family, one which brings well-being and blessedness to human life *coram Deo*. To the extent that the Christian community is affected by this "lawless" spirit, its families are threatened.

Individualism

A second spiritual force in American life and culture which threatens family is that of *individualism*. From the time of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, there has been a recognition that our culture magnifies and values the individual as a pre-eminent value. The themes of the freedom of the individual to define his or her life and of the precedence of the individual vis-a-vis forms of human community, are commonly held and expressed in our social and family life. Consequently, the quintessential American hero is the self-made person who, in a spirit of self-reliance and self-initiative, establishes his or her own place and identity without conforming to the standards of others.

In their masterful study, Robert Bellah *et. al.* have described two forms of this spirit of individualism, both of which corrode the institutions of marriage and family.² The first of these is "utilitarian individualism," and the second is what they term "expressive individualism."

From the perspective of utilitarian individualism, social relationships and communities are *contracted* between free and other-

wise independent individuals. When such individuals contract to associate together, they do so from a prior independence that endures even within and subsequent to whatever relationships they may enter. Moreover, the governing principles for this contract and association remains the interest or advantage of the individual members. Rather than being founded upon social obligation and commitment to an abiding norm, they are based upon their usefulness to the individuals who comprise the partners in the contract. As far as marriage and family are concerned, therefore, these relationships are understood to be constituted by free individuals who live together in a mutually agreeable and useful community. They exist as "institutions" only in their being the product of the free choices of separate individuals.

By "expressive individualism" Bellah *et. al.* have in mind the interesting development in modern American culture of an ethics of the "therapeutic self." Within American society today there has developed a view of the authentic self which judges relationships—even life generally—from the vantage point of self-fulfillment and self-gratification. The language of "interpersonal" and "self-fulfilling" relationships, of being "in touch with one's inner self," of having a proper sense of identity and "self-esteem," of being free from the standards of others and conformity to their strictures—this language has permeated many sectors of modern discourse (not to mention many books on the shelf in Christian book stores!).

With respect to the institutions of marriage and family, this expressive individualism measures their value in terms of their contribution to the well-being of the self or selves of which they are comprised. The first important question that must be addressed concerning them is this: do they meet the needs of my self and do they advance my personal well-being and fulfillment? This means that, if the relationship within marriage or family is to be sustained, it must contribute something to my personal happiness and sense of my self.

It is not difficult to see how this spirit of individualism, as it expressed itself in both of

these forms, constitutes a direct threat to marriage and family informed and directed by biblical teaching. Biblically measured, marriage is a covenant of mutual commitment in which self-interest and self-advantage are to be consciously subordinated to the interests of the other partner. The same holds true within the family. The biblical themes of a relationship of mutual and lasting commitment, of self-less love for others, of a union between husband and wife so that the two become "one flesh," of a relationship of authority between husband and wife and parents and children—these themes run directly counter to the spirit and the forms of individualism in our culture. If personal happiness and fulfillment, if the usefulness of a relationship to the individual selves comprising it—if these are the goals of institutions like the family, then ruptured relationships, selfish marriage partners, irresponsible parents, and discontented children are not surprising. If a marriage is unfulfilling and detrimental to the self-interests, it must be broken off! If children drain our emotional resources, demand our time and interest, and spoil our leisure, they are not desirable!

Feminism

A third spirit threatening the family today—and one which bears affinity to these first two—is that of *feminism*. However much contemporary feminism may have corrected the sin of male chauvinism and rightly asserted the full equality of men and women, it remains a grave threat to the well-being of the family. Though the feminist movement may have served to point out forms of injustice and repression in our society, it expresses often a self-consciously anti-normative and individualistic spirit in its understanding of women and their liberation. As itself a notable expression of the spirit and temper of our age, contemporary feminism defines the liberated woman as one who pursues her own identity according to her own free choosing and her own self-interest before the interest of the larger community.

In two areas contemporary feminism

threatens the family directly. The first is what has been popularly termed the “battle of the sexes,” and the second is the disparagement of motherhood that characterizes feminist thinking and practice.

Feminists begin by affirming the freedom of the individual woman. A woman must be free to shape her own destiny and to define her own existence, not bound by any “arbitrary” limits placed upon her allegedly because of her sex. Any form of life or social institution which hinders the free expression of her self, or which establishes practical inequality (read:identity) between men and women (husband and wife), is repressive and repugnant because it limits her options and defines her existence apart from the free acting of her will.

By this standard, the traditional view of marriage and family is pervasively patriarchal and oppressive. To speak of authority within marriage and family where the husband exercises

petitiveness and jockeying for position within many marriages and families. Husbands and wives simply coexist in a mutually agreeable relationship; they contract to cohabit together, retaining their individual liberty and self-identity. When the relationship, however, becomes stultifying and repressive of the full development of her potential as a woman, it no longer retains any real legitimacy. Without any ordered structure in the relationship between husband and wife, marriage is transformed into a useful contract between partners which, if it should no longer be useful, is expendable. This often has the practical effect in our culture of reducing their relationship to a competitive, self-assertive battle. For this reason, many feminists fear, or at least doubt, the institutions of marriage and family.

Despite some adjustment in recent feminist writing on the significance of bearing and nurturing children, generally it has been belittled

The biblical themes of a relationship of mutual and lasting commitment, of self-less love for others, of a union between husband and wife so that the two become “one flesh,” of a relationship of authority between husband and wife and parents and children—these themes run directly counter to the spirit and the forms of individualism in our culture.

headship and is responsible for its conformity to biblical teaching denies the equality of women with men. For feminists, true equality require that both partners retain their individual identity and freedom, along with the prerogatives that identity entails. There are no normative forms for the relationship of husband and wife. Since both partners are equal, their position within the marriage must be at least potentially identical.

Unquestionably, there is a wide range of opinion within feminist literature on the meaning and the nature of a woman’s freedom and on the relationship of men and women within marriage and the family. However, this general perspective fosters a practical spirit of com-

and openly demeaned. Germaine Greer, for example, in her early feminist manifesto, *The Female Eunuch*, remarked: “Obviously any woman who thinks in the simplest terms of liberating herself to enjoy life and create expression for her own potential cannot accept such a role.”³ Bearing and nurturing children, far from being an opportunity to express her creativity and potential, hinders a woman’s self-expression and self-definition. Or as Betty Friedan puts it in *The Feminine Mystique*, motherhood and the home do not present the modern, well-educated housewife with an adequate challenge.⁴

Assuming the politics of absolute equality or identity and a psychology of self-assertion,

contemporary feminism has consistently disdained the role of a mother. This also largely explains the importance of the freedom of choice to have an abortion within the women's movement; not to possess this "freedom" threatens a woman's absolute right to dispose of her own body in whatever way she chooses. This right is a pre-emptive one, having precedence over the claim of an unborn fetus/child to life.

It is not difficult to demonstrate how, in each of these instances, contemporary feminism reflects an anti-normative spirit and an individualistic view of a woman's freedom. On the one hand, it rejects most traditional views of the family as hopelessly patriarchal and oppressive and argues for new forms and types of relationships between men and women. On the other hand, it represents a radical form of individualism, wherein the prerogatives and needs of an individual woman take clear precedence over the commitments and obligations associated with marriage and family.

There is little doubt that this spirit also threatens the family within the Christian community. For example, why are we unable to accept readily or find a mutually agreeable understanding of "headship" within marriage? Why do we so often become uneasy or apologetic when the honor and dignity of being a mother is upheld? Why are we fearful to give offense by saying what must be said against the spirit and practice of contemporary feminism? Probably because this spirit has made deep inroads into our thinking and practice. It is important that we acknowledge this fact and openly discuss the extent of this influence. For in many respects, a biblical view of marriage and family is at stake. It is indeed the case, as the following comment in *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* indicates, that the spirit of modern feminism is antithetical to a biblical approach to the family: "Feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible."⁵

Materialism

Lastly, the spirit of *materialism* which

characterizes North American society has had a corrosive effect upon the family and threatens to undermine biblically directed family life.

A "spirit of materialism" means that in our society, the individual's happiness is identified with his accumulation and enjoyment of goods and possessions. Indeed, no society in human history has attained the wealth or the economic well-being that characterizes North America. Nor has any dedicated itself so energetically to the production and consumption of goods, even if they are not necessary or intrinsic to human fulfillment. The production of the greatest quantity of goods, with the least amount of effort expended and in the shortest time, seems to be the goal of our economy. Ours is a consumer society in which a person's value and worth is measured in economic terms, and in which personal success and individual achievement is gauged by such things as career advancement and annual income.

It is not necessary to our purpose here to describe or to develop the thesis that our society is gripped by the spirit of materialism. The lyrics of the pop singer, Madonna, "I'm just a materialistic girl, in a materialistic world," capture the point nicely! What does concern us, however, is the way this spirit threatens the family.

One way in which it threatens the family has to do with the modern notion of and emphasis upon a person's *career*. Whereas we have traditionally referred to our "calling" and "office" before and under God, today we speak of our "career." Men and women both seek their identity and have their highest aspirations fulfilled by means of their careers, not by their faithfulness in the discharge of a calling or office as husband or wife, parents or child. The measure of a husband's or a wife's worth is not so much a function of their responsible stewardship of a calling, as it is of their success in the world of the modern economy. However important it may be to be a husband or wife, a parent of children, this may not unduly interfere or take precedence over one's career ambitions. Fathers *and* mothers must work in the marketplace, not only to secure their financial well-being, but also to establish their creden-

tials as worthy participants in the economic community.

The effect that this emphasis upon career has had upon marriage and family in our culture is immeasurable. The phenomena of "latch-key" children, working and over-working parents, parents resentful of their children's interference in their career advancements, parents who value their career above their children's nurture and discipline, and parents who provide their children with material prosperity only—all bear eloquent testimony to the threat this emphasis poses to the family.

However, the spirit of materialism also adversely affects the relation between parents and children, particularly in the area of nurture and discipline. On the one hand, parents who pursue material prosperity above other goals are apt to forget their calling toward their children. Fathers, for example, who think it is their calling within the family only to "bring home the bacon" oftentimes fail miserably in the discharge of their responsibilities toward their children. "Providing for their children" becomes a substitute for proper parental nurture and instruction. And, on the other hand, a family pervaded by a materialistic or hedonistic outlook cannot convey to children a view of life informed by a biblical perspective. Many of the sad features of contemporary family life confirm this, for example, neglected and unsupervised children, unduly influenced of the mass-media, and alienated young people abusing alcohol and drugs and living by an ethos of fun.

Wherever the spirit of materialism predominates, it becomes quite impossible for husbands and wives, parents and children, to fulfill their mutual obligations to one another and their calling before God. Marriage and family—where the norms of mutual love and sacrificial commitment, of faithful nurture and reverent submission, should prevail—become the victims of materialistic pursuits and interests.

Conclusion

Because these four "spirits" influence our

time—lawlessness, individualism, feminism, and materialism—we are witnessing a serious breakdown and crisis within the family. This holds true also within the Christian community to the extent that it has been affected by and accommodated to the temper of the age. Who could argue that Christian marriages and families have not been adversely affected by those features of modern life that bear the stamp of these spirits? The confusion that sometimes prevails over the issue of the structure of and norm for the family, the self-assertive and self-fulfilling approach often taken to one's marriage and family, the repudiation of biblical directives for husband-wife relationships and the declining status of motherhood, the materialistic "busyness" of many fathers and mothers—these trends suggest that Christian communities and families are not immune to the threat of these powers.

Does this mean there is little hope for the family? Certainly not. But it should call us to self-examination and a testing of the contemporary spirits as they impinge upon the family. And it should send us afresh to the Word of God for direction within our marriages and homes. For within that Word we find a ready-to-hand antidote to these spirits. Through that Word we are called to acknowledge the will and command of God the Creator and Lord for our marriages and families. We are also promised the re-ordering and healing power of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone by His Word and Spirit is able to consecrate them to the service of God's Kingdom.

ENDNOTES

¹"Children Having Children—Teen Pregnancy in America," *Time Magazine*, Dec. 9, 1985, p. 79.

²Robert N. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985).

³Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1970), p. 230.

⁴Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963).

⁵Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon Press, 1985), Introduction, p. 1.