

Fundamentalism and Gender

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American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity

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During a 1989 television interview, Bailey Smith, a fundamentalist and an official in the Southern Baptist Convention, offered his views of women. "The highest form of God's creation," he said, "is womankind."¹

Such pronouncements are so commonplace among American fundamentalists that it is easy to gloss over their significance. Those who purport to be the twentieth-century guardians of Christian orthodoxy—a tradition that, more often than not, has blamed Eve for Adam's downfall—now trumpet the unique purity of women, the "highest form of God's creation."

These encomiums permeate fundamentalist piety. If you page through a fundamentalist songbook, you will find all sorts of examples of women alternately praying and weeping for their children, waiting for wayward, sometimes drunken, sons to come home. "Tell Mother I'll Be There," for instance, is a forlorn, anguished cry from one such son who wants desperately to assure his mother, now "home with Jesus," that her prayers have been answered. These paeans to female piety intensify as Mother's Day approaches each year:

Mother is the sweetest word
You and I have ever heard!
Mother, oh how dear the thought,
A bit of heaven you have brought!²

Or consider the rather **unpoetic** chorus from a song entitled "Praying Mothers" by Tammy Deville:

Praying **mothers**, Christian homes,
 Keeping families together where they belong;
 Teaching **trust**, respect, faith and love,
 Reverence to our God **above**.
 With love to godly mothers,
 We sing this **song**.³

All of this might be dismissed merely as vulgar **sentimentality**, the Protestant counterpart to popular Catholic **pinings** for the Virgin Mary, but the celebration of female piety by fundamentalists has a particular focus in the home. If the Blessed Virgin ever sorted **socks**, scrubbed the kitchen **floor**, or worried about ring around the **collar**, we seldom hear about it, even from her most devoted followers.

Not so for fundamentalist women, who are overwhelmingly white and middle-class. Their identity is tied almost exclusively to motherhood and to what one fundamentalist writer has called "the oft-maligned delights of **homemaking**."⁴ You do not have to look very far in fundamentalist literature to find celebrations of motherhood and female domesticity. "Raising children is a blessing from the Lord, and I can't imagine a home without the mother being there," Nancy Tucker, a "stay-at-home mother," wrote in a fundamentalist magazine.⁵ "Being a mother, and filling **mother's** place, is one of the greatest responsibilities there is in this . . . world," an editorial in *The Way of Truth* proclaimed. "Those who feel that a woman is wasting her time, and burying her talents, in being a wife and mother in the home, are simply blinded by the 'gods' of this world." Such domestic **duties**, the editorial continued, must not be taken lightly:

What a grave and sacred responsibility this is. To provide **food**, clothing, and shelter, may be the easiest part for many couples. To be a true mother goes far beyond supplying these temporal needs. The love, the nurturing, the careful guiding, the moral example, the moral teaching, the training, is the most important of **all**.⁶

An article in *Kindred Spirit*, a magazine published by Dallas Theological Seminary, echoes this theme. "In many ways God measures a woman's success by her relationship with her husband and children," the author, a woman, writes. "Many women ache to learn how to be truly successful in marriage and **motherhood**."⁷

This ideology, of course, is cloaked in biblical literalism. Paul, the apostle, is not usually regarded as a **feminist**, and fundamentalists

generally refuse to see his proscriptions as culturally conditioned. While most fundamentalists have maneuvered around Paul's insistence that women keep their heads covered in church, they cannot **see**—or have elected *not* to **see**—his commands to keep silence and to be submissive as similarly culture-bound. [C]onsequently, fundamentalist women are expected to be **submissive**, to demand no voice of authority in the church or in the **home**. As the article in *Kindred Spirit* puts it, "Young women need to be taught a **biblical view** of their roles and relationships with their husbands in **order to** truly **liberate them to be all that God intended them** to be and to experience the best that He has for **them**."⁸ Paradoxically, then, fundamentalist women are supposed to **feel** a kind of liberation in this submission to their husbands. "In seeking to recognize the crucial role of the husband and father as head of the household," the argument goes, "perhaps we have lost sight of the ways that family warmth is generated by the love and security given by a godly wife and **mother**."⁹

It was not always thus in American history, even in the **evangelical tradition**.¹⁰ I have already alluded to the discrepancies between historic Christian theology and the contemporary **lionization** of women by fundamentalists. Through the centuries, Christian theology has often portrayed women as temptresses, the descendants of Eve, the inheritors of a wicked, seductive sensuality that could only be tempered through subordination to men. John Robinson, pastor of the Pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts, for instance, enjoined a "reverend subjection" of the wife to her husband, adding that she must not "shake off the bond of submission, but must bear patiently the burden, which God hath laid upon the daughters of **Eve**."¹¹ The Puritans of New England also imbibed traditional suspicions about women; consider their treatment of Anne **Hutchinson**, their contempt for the Quakers' egalitarian views of women, and the evident misogyny of the Salem witch hysteria. More important, the Puritans regarded the man as both the head of the household and the person responsible for the spiritual nurture and welfare of his children.

Around the turn of the eighteenth century, however, the sermonic rhetoric in New England betrays a shift in sentiment. Women, who joined the churches in far greater numbers than men, began to be extolled as uniquely tender and loving and, hence, as spiritually superior to their husbands, who were increasingly involved in commercial pursuits.¹² Although during the interregnum of the revolutionary era *virtue* was chiefly a political term applied to the fusion of civic humanism with evangelical **ardor**, by the end of the eighteenth century *virtue* had become synonymous with femininity.¹³

The nineteenth century witnessed a domestic revolution in American life, with the romanticization of the home, changes in gender roles, and, finally, the idealization of female piety. While there is some evidence that the republican ideals of the revolutionary era permeated family life and led, at least for a time, to the relative equality of husbands and wives, the real changes occurred during the Second Great Awakening early in the nineteenth century, when women were freed from institutional restraints in the enthusiasm of the revival.¹⁴ The Second Awakening taught that everyone was equal before God, a notion that combined roughly equal parts of republican ideology and Arminian theology. Charles Grandison Finney's "new measures," moreover, encouraged women's participation in revival meetings, and evangelical women began to assert themselves as leaders of various benevolent and social-reform movements.¹⁵ Some women, such as Phoebe Palmer and Margaret (Maggie) Van Cott, became important evangelists.

Despite the temporary loosening of restraints during times of revival, nineteenth-century women rarely ascended to positions of religious authority. Whenever evangelical women aspired to leadership they were met with stern warnings. Presbyterian minister Ashbel Green, sometime president of the College of New Jersey, reminded his auditors in 1825 that Christ framed women "with that shrinking delicacy of temperament and feeling, which is one of their best distinctions, which renders them amiable." Green acknowledged that this female characteristic, "while it unfits them for command" and "subjects them, in a degree, to the rougher sex, gives them, at the same time, an appropriate and very powerful influence." Green concluded that women could not, however, expect that Christ, "who formed them with this natural and retiring modesty, and under a qualified subjection to men, would ever require, or even permit them, to do anything in violation of his own order."¹⁶

Did this mean that women had no spiritual role to play whatsoever? On the contrary, women must assume responsibility for the home and, in particular, for the spiritual nurture of the children. "The female breast is the natural soil of Christianity," Benjamin Rush, a fervent evangelical, opined.¹⁷ "It is one of the peculiar and most important duties of Christian women." Ashbel Green wrote, "to instruct and pray with children, and to endeavor to form their tender minds to piety, intelligence and virtue."¹⁸ Here was the proper sphere of female spirituality—as moral guardians of the home, in charge of the religious instruction and nurture of the children. "The family state," Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in 1869, "is the

aptest earthly illustration of the heavenly kingdom, and in it woman is its chief minister."¹⁹ Nineteenth-century evangelical literature fairly brims with examples of maternal piety and persistent prayers that eventually, sometimes even after her death, effect the conversion of a mother's children.²⁰

This idea of women as spiritual titans was new in the nineteenth century and peculiar to America. "Although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of complete dependence," Alexis de Tocqueville, the peripatetic French observer, wrote in 1835, "I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position." After outlining Americans' distinctive and careful division of "the duties of man from those of woman," Tocqueville attributed America's "singular prosperity and growing strength" to "the superiority of their women."²¹ Ann Douglas calls this development the "feminization" of American culture, the product of a collusion between nineteenth-century clergy, whose power and status were waning, and housewives eager for some emotional outlet.²² Males came to be characterized as aggressive and indifferent to godliness, whereas women became the lifeblood of the churches. They were the repositories of virtue, meek and submissive—like Jesus himself.

Thus, female spirituality was upheld as an ideal, a notion taken to its extremes in Shaker theology and even in Christian Science, both of which asserted explicitly the superiority of the feminine and linked the perfection of humanity to womanhood. Women were implicitly more spiritual in nineteenth-century America. They were morally superior to men; they had a greater capacity for religiosity. Women, therefore, became responsible for the inculcation of virtue into their daughters, sons, and husbands. The evangelical women of Utica, New York, for instance, organized themselves in 1824 into a Maternal Association that met biweekly and required that each member pledge to pray for her children daily, to read literature on Christian child-rearing, to set a pious example, and to spend the anniversary of each child's birth in fasting and prayer.²³

Other forces besides revivalism lay behind this transition from the spiritual patriarchy of the Puritan family to the evangelical household of the nineteenth century. The early republic witnessed the gradual emergence of a market economy and the stirrings of nascent industrialization. Men began to work outside the home and the farm. They eventually organized into guilds as their labor became increasingly specialized. Traditional family and kinship networks thus gave way to associations among fellow workers. Families were

no longer self-sufficient; they depended on the fathers' wages. Gender roles became more distinct. "From the numerous avocations to which a professional life exposes gentlemen in America from their families," Benjamin Rush wrote, "a principal share of the instruction of children naturally devolves upon the women."²⁴ Men increasingly distanced themselves from domestic chores and activities, and women succumbed to the "cult of domesticity" or the "cult of true womanhood," marked by purity, piety, and domesticity.

Thus sentimentalized, women assumed responsibility for domestic life, especially the religious instruction of the children. For many, in fact, the two were inseparable. In his *Treatise on Bread, and Bread-Making*, Sylvester Graham, temperance lecturer and health reformer, explicitly assigned to mothers the responsibility for both the physical and the moral well-being of their children. It is the mother, wrote Graham, "who rightly perceives the relations between the dietetic habits and physical and moral condition of her loved ones, and justly appreciates the importance of good bread to their physical and moral welfare."²⁵ Indeed, the sphere of domesticity—including the home, the education and nurture of children, and religious matters generally—was the one area where the nineteenth-century woman reigned supreme, her judgments largely unchallenged. "In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergyman, and in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence," Catharine Beecher wrote in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* in 1841. "In all such concerns, it would be impossible to carry a point, contrary to their judgement and feelings; while an enterprise, sustained by them, will seldom fail of success."²⁶

An important theological development—a new focus on religious instruction and socialization—reinforced the importance of female nurture. The tides of revival early in the nineteenth century swept away strict Calvinist doctrines of depravity and original sin, thereby emphasizing the ability of the individual to control his or her spiritual destiny; eventually this downplaying of depravity and the elevation of human volition undermined the traditional emphasis on dramatic conversions. Indeed, Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*, published in 1847, urged that children should be reared from birth as though they were Christian, and insisted that parents should not expect a dramatic conversion experience in their children. Hence, children should be educated and socialized in such a way that they would always consider themselves Christian or, in Puritan terms, among the elect. Who should perform this duty, especially in a soci-

ety with increasingly differentiated gender roles? With men away at the mill or the factory all day, the task of "Christian nurture" fell to women.

The home thus became the sphere that both defined and delimited female influence. As the Victorian era unfolded, moreover, mechanized production and a commercial economy increasingly eased domestic burdens, especially for the middle-class mother, who often had a hired girl (usually a recent immigrant) to help with household chores. No longer must a woman spend her hours sewing, weaving, making soap, or butchering meat for her home. Instead, her husband's wages and the commercial economy gave her time to fuss over it. A passel of magazines, such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, instructed the Victorian woman on how to decorate her home with ornate wood-working and carvings and a vast array of furnishings—bookcases, clocks, overstuffed chairs—that lay within her budget. The invention of the power loom in 1848 made carpets plentiful and affordable. The parlor organ became a kind of domestic shrine, with its high verticality, its carved, pointed arches, and its nooks, crannies, and shelves for family photographs and mementos. The organ itself, used for family hymn-singing, both symbolized and reinforced religious notions and the ideal of feminine domesticity. *Mother* played the organ and thereby cemented her role as the religious keystone of the family.²⁷

These notions about feminine spirituality have persisted among fundamentalists in the twentieth century. Many of the taboos devised by fundamentalists in their time of beleaguerment in the 1920s and 1930s centered on women. In reaction to the perceived moral laxity of the larger culture, which was careening stubbornly toward judgment, fundamentalists insisted that women forswear worldly adornments, especially jewelry and cosmetics. They devised elaborate parietal rules intended to protect the sexual innocence of their children, especially the girls, who were perceived as vulnerable to the animal cravings of less-spiritual males.

The Victorian myth of feminine spiritual superiority is so entrenched in twentieth-century fundamentalism that many preachers have felt obliged to shake men out of their spiritual complacency.²⁸ Consider, for instance, the machismo posturings of evangelist Billy Sunday, who insisted that in Jesus we find "the definition of manhood."²⁹ "God is a masculine God," the fundamentalist firebrand John R. Rice insisted to a male audience in 1947. "God bless women, but He never intended any preacher to be run by a bunch of women."³⁰ But the intensity of Rice's protestations merely verifies the pervasive-

ness of the myth. Presbyterian preacher Donald Grey **Barnhouse** confirmed this in his characterization of a typical Christian household. "The husband is not interested in the things of God, so the family drifts along without any spiritual **cohesion**," he wrote. "Perhaps they all go to church together on Sunday **morning**, and the wife goes to all the activities of the week, but the husband seems uninterested." Barnhouse then offered a familiar, albeit **paradoxical**, prescription for this malaise: feminine submission. "With delight she learns the joy of knowing it is her husband's house, his home; the children are his; she is his wife," he wrote. "When a woman realizes and acknowledges **this**, the life of the home can be transformed, and the life of her husband **also**."³¹

This notion reached its apotheosis in the 1970s with the enormous popularity of Marabel Morgan's book *The Total Woman*. The answer to a troubled marriage, Morgan preached, lay in becoming a "Total Woman," a wife who submitted abjectly to her husband and who burrowed herself ever deeper into the putative bliss of domesticity. "A Total Woman caters to her man's special quirks, whether it be salads, sex, or sports," Morgan wrote. "She makes his home a haven, a place to which he can run."³²

Against the background of this ideal of feminine domesticity, fundamentalists have found the rapidly changing views of women in recent decades utterly disconcerting. Perhaps **nothing**—not even Darwinism and higher criticism, the issues of the 1920s—has contributed so greatly to their sense of cultural dislocation. American fundamentalists were caught off guard by *The Feminine Mystique*, and the ensuing feminist movement has left them confused and full of resentment because the domestic ideal that fundamentalism has reified since the nineteenth century is now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture. More confusing still is the fact that **many** fundamentalist women, like American women everywhere, have joined the workforce in the past two decades. On the one hand they are beset by calls from feminists for liberation and **self-assertion**, and on the other they are peppered from the **pulpit** by insistent rehearsals of the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity. Those who resist the workplace inevitably feel anger and even shame about being labeled "just a housewife," and they protest loudly about the nobility of tending the home. Often, however, general economic stringency, an unemployed husband, or **divorce** tips the balance in the general direction of the **feminists**. But those fundamentalist women are then left with what Leon Festinger calls cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, the necessity of employment; and on the other, the need they

feel to perpetuate fundamentalist standards. More often than **not**, they feel guilt and confusion for "**abandoning**" their homes and **families**, thereby violating the fundamentalist feminine ideal.

A **question-and-answer** exchange in the May 1989 issue of James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* magazine illustrates poignantly this confusion and **anger**, as well as this pining for a halcyon past. "As a **homemaker**," the question from an anonymous reader **begins**, "I resent the fact that my role as wife and mother is no longer respected as it was in my **mother's** time. What forces have brought about this change in attitudes in the Western world?" Dobson's response is equally illuminating:

Female sex-role identity has become a major target for change by those who wish to revolutionize the relationship between men and women. The women's movement and the media have been remarkably successful in altering the way females "see" themselves at home and in society. In the process, every element of the traditional concept of femininity has been discredited and **scorned**, especially those responsibilities associated with **homemaking** and motherhood.

Thus, in a short period of time, the term *housewife* has become a pathetic symbol of **exploitation**, oppression, **and—pardon the insult—stupidity**, at least as viewed from the perspective of radical feminists. We can make no greater mistake as a nation than to continue this pervasive disrespect shown to women who have devoted their lives to the welfare of their **families**.³³

Dobson, of course, failed to acknowledge that his "traditional concept of **femininity**" (and presumably the one shared by his distraught reader) was a nineteenth-century construct.

More significantly, Dobson's response identified the enemy: "radical feminists," the **women's** movement, and the media. In the face of such a conspiracy, fundamentalists have had to muster their troops, something they have done with remarkable success over the past decade. What is especially striking about the exertion of fundamentalist influence in the American political arena is the extent to which issues of **gender**—the Equal Rights Amendment, private sexual morality—have shaped their political agenda. Fundamentalists regularly attach the sobriquet "**antifamily**" to policies and to politicians they regard as inimical; and they have, curiously, attached singular attention to the issue of abortion.

In recent years, fundamentalists have tried, with considerable success, to propel abortion to the center of political debate. A group of activists calling itself Operation Rescue, many of whose members are fundamentalists, has picketed and blocked abortion clinics in

New York, Atlanta, Wichita, and other cities around the country. Anti-abortion hecklers regularly disrupted Democratic rallies during the 1988 presidential campaign.

The Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision on January 22, 1973, which effectively struck down existing state laws banning an abortion, was initially greeted with silence or indifference by fundamentalists; but by the end of the decade, as they began to mobilize politically, the abortion issue helped to galvanize them into a potent political force. Jerry Falwell, for instance, credited that decision with awakening him from his apolitical stupor, even though he had declared some years earlier that he "would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else—including fighting Communism, or participating in civil-rights reforms." Falwell thereby articulated a fairly common fundamentalist attitude in the mid-sixties. "Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals," he said. "We are not told to wage war against bootleggers, liquor stores, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers, prejudiced persons or institutions, or any other existing evil as such."³⁴

Roe v. Wade, however, together with what Falwell regarded as sundry assaults on the family, triggered an about-face. By the end of the decade Falwell had shed his political naivete and had organized his "Moral Majority to counter the evil influences in American culture that threatened to subvert the fundamentalist ideal of femininity. Other fundamentalist leaders have professed similar reactions and indignation to *Roe v. Wade*, and I have spoken with many fundamentalists who become visibly angry, almost apoplectic, when discussing abortion.

On the face of it, abortion is an odd issue to use as a rallying point. Fundamentalists pride themselves on taking the Bible literally, but, all of their tortured exegeses notwithstanding, nothing in the scriptures explicitly dictates a "pro-life" position. Nor does the fundamentalist fervor over abortion arise from any abstract commitment to the sanctity of all real and potential human life (in that respect, the "pro-life" moniker, which the activists prefer to "anti-abortion," is something of a misnomer). Many fundamentalists who decry abortion will, in the next breath, declare their unequivocal support for capital punishment. And fundamentalists have never been squeamish about the exercise of military force by the United States or its proxies, even when directed against civilians: witness their overwhelming support for the Contras of Central America, the U.S. bomb-

ing of Libya, and the wars in Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf.

Why, then, have so many fundamentalists invested such extraordinary passion into this crusade? Why would hundreds of otherwise law-abiding citizens be willing to go to jail to underscore their opposition to abortion? I do not wish to trivialize fundamentalist convictions on this issue. I find some of their arguments compelling and most of them sincere; but it is difficult, at first glance, to understand the centrality of abortion to the fundamentalist political agenda.

I think the answer to this conundrum lies more in the realm of symbols than in ideology, and it relates in particular to the historical circumstances of fundamentalism in the twentieth century. For much of the century, fundamentalists have felt beleaguered and besieged by forces beyond their control. Whereas in the nineteenth century evangelicals had shaped much of the nation's social and political agenda, by the late 1800s rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the massive arrival of immigrants (most of them non-Protestants) made America look a good deal less congenial to evangelicals than it had during the evangelical heyday earlier in the century. Teeming, squalid tenements no longer resembled the precincts of Zion.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moreover, evangelicals felt the sting of evolutionary theory, which, pressed to its logical conclusions, undermined literal understandings of the Bible. The Scopes trial of 1925 finally convinced many fundamentalists that American culture had become inhospitable, even hostile, so they retreated into their own subculture of denominations, publishing houses, mission societies, Bible camps, and Bible institutes.

Although other factors played a role in their reentry into public life in the mid-1970s—a resurgent patriotism after the national ignominies of Vietnam and Watergate and following the presidential candidacy of a Southern Baptist Sunday-school teacher (whom they later abandoned)—fundamentalists latched onto the abortion issue with a vengeance. Given their own history, however, their identification with the fetus is not surprising. For fundamentalists, the fetus serves as a marvelous symbol, not only because of its Freudian or psychoanalytic connotations of crawling back into the womb to escape the buffetings of the world, but because they see it in their own image. "Abortion is the symbol of our decline," Randall Terry, head of Operation Rescue, told a reporter for the *New York Times*, "the slaughter of the most innocent."³⁵ Nothing is so pure and untainted

as an unborn child; **fundamentalists**, in turn, view themselves as the guardians of moral purity in an immoral world.

At the same time, nothing is so vulnerable as a fetus, and fundamentalists for decades have seen themselves as vulnerable. "We are providing a voice and a defense for the human and civil rights of millions of unborn **babies**," Falwell wrote in 1987, explaining the political agenda of Moral Majority.³⁶ "The most dangerous place to be these days is inside a **mother's** womb," an anti-abortion activist in Iowa told me just before the precinct caucuses in February 1988. Many fundamentalists, I believe, readily identify with that sentiment. Despite their political successes in the past **decade**, contemporary **fundamentalists**, like their predecessors in the 1920s, still see American culture as alien and their own existence as precarious. They must exercise extraordinary vigilance lest the forces of evil and darkness, usually identified as "secular humanism," overtake them. In a fund-raising letter issued after the Supreme Court's *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* decision, which allowed the State of Missouri to impose new restrictions on the availability of abortions, James Dobson reminded his readers that "the pro-life movement is only part of a much larger conflict that rages today. What is really at stake is the future of the **Judeo-Christian** system of values in this country." Dobson concluded the letter by assuring his readers (and contributors) that "we will fight to the death for the moral values in which we **believe**."³⁷

Abortion, moreover, violates the cherished fundamentalist ideal of feminine domesticity. If women guarded their purity and contented themselves with their divinely ordained roles as mothers and housewives, abortion would never be thought necessary at all. For **fundamentalists**, the very fact that abortion is a political issue in the first place provides an index of how dramatically American **culture** has deserted their ideal of femininity. The roots of the "disorder," then, can be found in female restiveness, a popular unwillingness to accept the role that God had designed for women. According to Susan Key, a homemaker from Dallas, Texas, who devised a course for women called *Eve Reborn*, God gave women "a unique capacity for submission and obedience and when this capacity is thwarted by rebellion and deceit, it becomes a capacity to destroy which begins to work within her heart and then sulks out to her intimate relationships, widens to her acquaintances, to **society**, and then into **history**."³⁸

But if benighted and wayward women contributed to the massive cultural malaise that fundamentalists so decry, women also, because

of their exalted spirituality, hold the key to redemption. " **firmly** believe the role of a woman today is to nurture our next generation," **Maxine** Sieleman of Concerned Women for America said during the 1988 **presidential primaries**, thereby echoing nineteenth-century evangelical notions of virtue. "She has the power within her hands to either make or break a nation. A good woman can make a bad man good, but a bad woman can make a good man bad. . . . Women are the real key for turning this country around. . . . I firmly believe that God has always worked through **women**."³⁹ Phyllis **Schlafly**, who almost **singlehandedly** defeated the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, said it more succinctly in *The Power of the Positive Woman*. The ideal woman, according to Schlafly, was not merely a housewife but a "patriot and defender of our Judeo-Christian civilization." Moreover, "It is the task of the Positive Woman to keep America **good**."⁴⁰ Compare the sentiments of Catharine Beecher in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, published in 1841:

The mother writes the character of the future **man**; the sister bends the fibres that hereafter are the forest tree; the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same.

Beecher added that "the **formation** of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female **hand**."⁴¹

The political agenda of contemporary fundamentalists, then, represents a desperate attempt to reclaim the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity both for themselves and for a culture that has abandoned that ideal. For American **fundamentalists**, women serve as a kind of bellwether for the culture at large. If women allow themselves to be seduced by "radical feminists" into abandoning their "God-given" responsibilities in the home, America is in trouble. If, however, women cling to Victorian notions of submission, nurture, and domesticity, the future of the republic is secure. Far from the temptress of earlier Christian orthodoxy, the contemporary woman, in the rhetoric of American fundamentalism, can be a redeemer. What better demonstration of her superior spirituality?

Such notions, however, face tough opposition in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Despite their recent political success, American fundamentalists remain on the defensive, trying to shore up what the broader culture now considers a quaint, anachronistic view of women. Whatever the merits of their arguments, the fundamentalist political agenda and particularly their struggle against abor-

tion may represent, at some (albeit subconscious) level, a battle for their own survival as well as a struggle for the preservation of a nineteenth-century ideal.

Notes

1. Bailey Smith, on *Larry King Live*, March 21, 1989.
2. Edward M. Brandt, "Mother," *The Way of Truth* 47 (May 1989): 2.
3. Tammy Deville, "Praying Mothers," *The Way of Truth* 47 (May 1989): 2.
4. Barbara A. Peil, "A Seasoned Approach," *Kindred Spirit* 11 (Spring 1987): 13.
5. "Motherhood in the '90s," *Focus on Family* 14 (January 1990): 2.
6. "Mother/The *Way of Truth* 47 (May 1989): [ii], 1.
7. Peil, "Seasoned Approach," p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
9. *Ibid.*
10. I shall use the term *evangelical* to refer to conservative Protestants of the nineteenth century. Because fundamentalists derive their name from the series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915, it would be anachronistic to refer to their nineteenth-century evangelicals forebears as *fundamentalists*, even though the two share many beliefs in common.
11. Cited in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women and Religion in America*, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981-1986), vol. 2, p. 161.
12. Gerald F. Moran, "'Sisters in Christ': Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century New England," in Janet Wilson James, ed., *Women in American Religion* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 47-65; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," in *Women in American Religion*, pp. 67-88.
13. Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of *Virtue* in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13 (1987): 37-58.
14. See Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 44 (October 1987): 689-721.
15. Susan Juster writes: "The restoration of agency is the key to understanding women's experience of grace. . . . these women were empowered by recovering their sense of self through the assertion of independence from others." "In a Different Voice: Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America," *American Quarterly* 41 (March 1989): 53.
16. *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, p. 34.
17. *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, p. 402.
18. *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, p. 36.
19. Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home; or, Principles of Domestic Science; being a Guide to the*

Formation and Maintenance of Economical Healthful Beautiful and Christian Homes (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869), p. 19.

20. For one particularly well known example, see *The American Woman's Home*, pp. 28-29. See also Sandra S. Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), chapter 4.
21. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Henry Steele Commager (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 401, 403.
22. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).
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29. Quoted in Douglas Frank, *Less than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 192.
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31. *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 3, pp. 261, 262.
32. Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), p. 55.
33. "Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions," *Focus on the Family* (May 1989): 8.
34. Quoted in Frances FitzGerald, "A Disciplined, Charging Army," *New Yorker*, May 18, 1981, p. 63.
35. Tamar Lewin, "With Thin Staff and Thick Debt, Anti-Abortion Group Faces Struggle," *New York Times*, June 11, 1990, p. A11.
36. Jerry Falwell, "An Agenda for the 1980s," in Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie, eds., *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Funda-*

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