

**The Family That Prays Together:
A Look at How Gender Plays Out in Evangelical Households**

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Abstract

This study looked at how gender roles and dynamics play out in households that classify themselves as conservative Christian evangelicals. This study looked at what research has been done in the area of evangelical gender dynamics involving implications on spousal relations with one another and expectations of gendered economic functions. Another major focus of this research examined different expectations of roles performed in childrearing and how this impacts and shapes gender ideologies of children as they enter adulthood. Finally, this study looked at the political ramifications of adhering to a conservative evangelical gender ideology and provided recommendations for further areas of research in this field.

Introduction

For a large portion of its history, America has been regarded as a Christian nation. Since the development of the New England Colonies being founded as a place of refuge for the free practice of the Protestant religion, America has been deeply influenced by ideologies associated with Christian theism. The number of people that would identify themselves as protestant in the United States however, has been steadily decreasing. According to Gallup poll data, in 1960 approximately sixty-seven percent of Americans classified themselves as protestant and only two percent of Americans reported not having any particular religious affiliation. By 2014 however, the number of Americans who described themselves as protestant was down to thirty-seven percent and those that claimed to have no religious affiliation increased to sixteen percent (Gallup 2015). Self-proclaimed evangelical Protestants now make up less than half of the population of the United States.

Studying the family and gender dynamics of these evangelical households is important today in recognizing structural strengths and weaknesses associated with these practices as well as bringing further understanding of this ideology to those that do not understand it. It is also important when examining how gender plays out in conservative protestant families to recognize that not all families within evangelicalism function in the same way. There is a certain amount of heterogeneity within this group especially between those who adhere to biblical literalism and those that do not (Hoffmann and Bartowski 2008). This study will look into some of these differences in an attempt to better understand the complex nature of the practice of gender in modern day evangelical households.

Understanding evangelical gender ideologies can also give insight into conservative protestant political ideologies which have a great impact on governmental policies today. Much

of the opposition to gay marriage for example comes from operating within a Christian discourse. Many of these beliefs contradict views of more liberal politicians and their constituents and are therefore worthy of examining on a closer level.

Spousal Relations

Researcher John Bartkowski found that spousal relationships amongst evangelicals from an ideological perspective traditionally have tended to emphasize male headship and leadership within the husband-wife dyad (1998). His study sought to examine the history of evangelical's beliefs on gender and how much beliefs varied from person to person. He found that although in the past most evangelicals adhered to a more conservative patriarchal family structure in both belief and practice, today there has been an increase in egalitarian family structures. In other words, evangelical's beliefs on patriarchal family functions have become more muddled.

Research conducted by Shondrah Nash found that, starting around the women's movement of the early 1970s, some evangelicals have embraced a more egalitarian view on decision making roles in marriage relationships and began calling for a new hermeneutical interpretation of certain Bible passages (2006). For example, another study found that many evangelical feminists argue that in the New Testament the Apostle Paul calls for a mutual submission of husbands and wives (Gallagher and Smith 1999). More liberal theologians would tend to take a similar stance on the issue of female submission and male headship within the family. Nash's research sought to understand how conservative interpretations of the Bible can lead to abuse and oppression within protestant households. Her research studied several self-proclaimed evangelical Christian wives and found that there is a high amount of diversity in the women's interpretation of biblical passages pertaining to gender, but most held to a mildly egalitarian view on what the Bible has to say on gender (Nash 2006).

Gallagher and Smith's 1999 study cited earlier sought to examine gender relations in evangelical marriages. This study used qualitative data from 265 interviews conducted nationally. This study found that most evangelicals hold to a sort of symbolic traditionalism. This means that from an ideological standpoint most evangelicals would assent to being complementarian. Based on the research they examined however, most couples in evangelicalism have a gender role structure similar to the rest of society. Therefore, in many ways most evangelicals are pragmatically egalitarian. (Gallagher and Smith 1999). Civettini and Glass conducted a 2008 study that reinforced this finding. Their study focused on examining the effects of having a conservative protestant gender ideology on the occupations and intra-marriage gender relations. This study found that there is no significant difference in how evangelical families conduct gender to other groups. The only notable difference between evangelicals and other groups in terms of gender and sexuality they found was that the rates of pre-marital sex among evangelicals was much lower (Civettini and Glass 2008).

According to a 2008 study, survey data has shown that approximately twenty to thirty-seven percent of Americans, at least ideologically believe that the Bible should be taken word for word literally and therefore are more apt to interpret it in a more traditional way (Hoffmann and Bartkowski). This study was done to find out which groups within the broader umbrella of Christianity were more likely to embrace a literalist interpretation of the Bible and how this belief also varied by gender. Results from this survey research found that the majority of those that classified themselves as either conservative protestant or black protestant held to a literal interpretation of the bible and across the board women believed in this to a great extent than men (Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008).

Studies have shown that many in evangelicalism today however are pragmatically egalitarian despite most still assenting to male headship in an ideological way (Nash 2006; Denton 2004). In other words, most of the decision making processes in evangelical families are done with both the husband and wife's input and generally are accepted and agreed upon by mutual consensus. Research conducted by Melinda Denton sought to examine the relationship between evangelical's gender ideologies and how this works itself out in practice. Using quantitative data from a 1996 national survey, Denton found that although from an ideological standpoint most evangelicals assent to holding a patriarchal view on gender relations, in practice, evangelical homes do not significantly differ from other households (Denton 2004). Nash however, did find that due to the belief that the husband is still technically the head of the relationship, more of the responsibility for the actions of the couple still rests on him (Nash 2006). While most evangelicals would hold to the idea the Bible is the literal Word of God, many interpret passages in a way that better conforms to the larger society's views on gender relations and in practice are somewhat egalitarian.

However, conservative fundamentalist evangelicals still represent a large portion of the group. According to Hoffmann and Bartkowski's study, individuals believe that the only inerrant source of truth is found in the Bible as God's only existing source of revelation and therefore interpret it in both a literal and historic sense (2008). Biblical fundamentalists tend to hold to a more complementarian view of gender relations meaning that men and women have equal value but fulfill different roles in both the family and the Church. Men's and women's roles thus complement each other. New Testament passages such as Titus 2:4-5 prescribe older women to, "train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled"

(English Standard Version). Reading passages such as this one in a fully literal sense encourage those that put their full epistemological convictions in the Bible to adopt a more traditional complementarian view on marriage relations. Biblical literalists also tend to look at historic understandings of biblical doctrines including differences between men and women. Since Christianity historically has promoted complementarianism, more fundamental evangelicals are more apt to do so as well

Gendered Economic Functions

Most evangelical men support a patriarchal economic structure within the home. According to a 2006 study, approximately fifty-eight percent of male evangelicals with a wife and children agreed with the statement, “it is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family” (Wilcox). This study was conducted in order to examine to what extent evangelical homes adhere to a traditional patriarchal structure. Results showed that from a compilation research that, from an ideological standpoint, most conservative Protestants agree that men should be the economic providers of the family. The study did not however show that there is any link to an increase in spousal abuse as a result of adhering to a complementarian and that, from a pragmatic standpoint, evangelical’s labor distribution does not significantly differ from other religious groups (Wilcox 2006). The segment of evangelicals that do still adhere to a patriarchal division of family labor seems to be decreasing somewhat with the upcoming generation.

According to researcher Curtis Coats, gender roles with the church, especially within younger and typically more liberal evangelicals, remain a touchy issue (2009). Coats’ research was done via interviews and participant observation in a young adult evangelical organization. He found that, being faced with a strongly egalitarian secular western worldview, many young

evangelicals have adopted a slightly more leftist view on gender which generates a discursive discrepancy between generations of evangelicals. It also tends to adopt certain aspects of mainstream feminism including supporting women working outside the home (Coats 2009). Men by and large are still expected to be the primary breadwinners of the family, but women working outside the home for additional income is also now generally acceptable among evangelicals. In another one of his studies, researcher John P. Bartkowski describes this phenomena as “progressive traditionalism” (1999). This study was done qualitatively using interview data from evangelical married couples to understand the division of evangelical household labor. Bartkowski found like most of the other research done in this area that, although most evangelicals hold to a patriarchal division of labor ideologically, in practice, they do not significantly differ from how other groups conduct gender in the United States. This phenomena makes sense when compared to the fact that most evangelicals are pragmatically at least somewhat egalitarian (Bartkowski 1999).

Competing gender ideologies are also evident in the division of domestic labor and household economics in evangelical homes. A more recent study by researchers Ellison and Bartkowski sought again to examine the division of household labor in evangelical homes (2002). This study used data from the National Survey of Families and Households and found a number of things. While more conservative evangelicals adhere to complementarianism and thus relegating more everyday domestic tasks to women, there is a sizable amount of married evangelicals that embrace egalitarianism when it comes to performing household tasks. There is however, a sizable amount of heterogeneity within evangelicalism within evangelical couple’s gender based differences in performing domestic tasks. This study reinforced earlier research and found that, with the exception of the most conservative minority, evangelicals divide household

labor in a comparable way to the rest of society as a whole. In general, this still tends to favor a patriarchal division of tasks in which females do the majority of household work, but evangelicals for the most part do not tend to be much more patriarchal than the rest of society in this regard (Ellison and Bartkowski 2002).

Gender in Evangelical Parent-Child Relations

Gallagher conducted a 2004 study to look at how feminism is viewed in evangelicalism. Her research used 1996 national survey data. She found that, in general, evangelicals have a negative opinion towards the idea of feminism. Like the majority of other articles in this area she found that most evangelicals tend to be somewhat egalitarian in practice however. This study did show however that the majority of tasks directly related to childrearing in evangelical households are relegated to the mother. This however does not significantly differ from the rest of society.

Ellison, Musick, and Holden conducted a 2011 study which found that, typically, families within conservative Protestantism elect to implement corporal punishment more often than more other religious groups in America. This research was done longitudinally using data from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. This study sought to understand the effects of corporal punishment on children in conservative protestant homes. This study found that the punishment most often is inflicted via the mother. This study also found that although corporal punishment of young children in general has a negative impact on child outcomes, conservative Protestantism acted as a moderator to these negative effects. (Ellison, Musick, and Holden 2011). In other words, children who experienced maternal corporal punishment within evangelicalism experienced less negative long-term consequences as a result.

Evangelical Protestant's relationships between parents and adult children also vary on the basis of the child's gender. A 2004 study conducted by researcher Scott Myers used data from a

1997 national survey in order to examine how different generations of conservative Protestants support each other financially. This study also examined how levels and types of support varied on the basis of gender. Myers found that in evangelical families, parents are typically more likely provide financial support to daughters in varying levels on the basis of her religiosity. Financial support to adult sons was, in general, less dependent on the extent of his current religious devotion (Myers 2004). Therefore, because most evangelicals hold to some variation of complementarianism ideologically, it manifests itself, in part, in different treatment of adult children on the basis of gender.

It has also been found in a 2009 study that children raised in evangelical households are more likely themselves to maintain strong relationships with their parents into adulthood and thus are more likely to further perpetuate conservative gender ideologies (Bryant). This study's main focus was on how collegiate evangelical institutions perpetuate a conservative patriarchal gender structure. Bryant's research looked at individuals in a campus evangelical organization from their freshman to senior years qualitatively to examine how their beliefs in regards to gender changed through their involvement in this organization. She found that many women involved in this group came from an evangelical background and held to a sort of "Incongruent Complementarianism" where they held to complimentary gender structures in the church but questioned it (Bryant 561). Over time, she found that students often diverged while in college. They either adhered to a more secular view of gender relations due to their exposure to many of the ideologies the university promoted while others became more devoutly conservative. Many of the groups attempt to reinforce hegemonic traditional gender beliefs and are often supported in part by parents of these emerging adults (Bryant 2009). This is one form of essentially parenting children to adhere to certain religious beliefs and practices.

Political Implications of Evangelical Gender Ideology

One of the most interesting topics in studying evangelical gender ideologies for many people is how this manifests itself in the political realm. One 2012 interview study that focused on how evangelical college students view gay rights issues found that Evangelical students in general hold very negative opinions towards expanding gay rights (Wolff et al.). This study sought to determine whether or not adhering to a conservative evangelical gender and sexuality ideology played a role in their more direct outward political beliefs on the subject. This research also found that evangelical students who had close associations with a person they believed to be gay or lesbian, their negative opinions towards gay rights were not as severe (Wolff et al. 2012). Again, based on Hoffman and Bartowski's work mentioned earlier, it can be concluded that those that hold to a more literalistic interpretation of the Bible would have more conservative political as well as ideological tendencies and would therefore be less likely to welcome more gay rights policies (Hoffman and Bartowski 2008).

Summary of Existing Research

This review of conservative evangelical gender ideologies and practices has provided a fairly thorough examination of the current research that exists on this subject. Most evangelical households mentally assent to holding a complementarian view on gender roles within the family. In practice however, most research shows that many evangelicals are pragmatically egalitarian when it comes to household decision making processes (Bartowski 1998; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Nash 2006; Denton 2004). Those that hold to a more literal interpretation of biblical texts tend to be more likely however to have complementarian ideals of male headship actually played out within the home in the husband-wife dyad (Hoffmann and Bartowski 2008; Bartowski 1998).

There is also a fair amount of research in terms of how evangelicals distribute economic and domestic labor tasks. As one would expect based on how spouses tend to associate with one another in evangelicalism, from an ideological standpoint, most conservative protestants agree that ideally the man should be the primary breadwinner and do most of the work associated with acquiring economic resources (Wilcox 2006). In the past, this ideal was often met without the need of a dual income. In today's economy however, increased need for more than one income for most professions has led to most evangelicals embracing a sort of "progressive traditionalism" where men still classify themselves as the provider but women can and often are encouraged to do some work outside of the home for profit (Bartowski 1999). In regards to domestic labor divisions, evangelicals tend to place slightly more of the burden of performing household tasks on women than the rest of society at large, but from a practical standpoint, most often these differences are not significant.

Research on gender based parent-child relations within evangelicalism have shown that there is a difference on child treatment in evangelicalism on the basis of gender. Going along with what Ellison, Musick, and Holden found and that most domestic tasks should be accomplished by the mother, females tend to be the main source of corporal punishment as a task related to childrearing (2011). In his 2004 study, Scott Myers clearly demonstrates that there is unequal treatment of male and female adult children by their parents when it comes to allocation of financial support. It was also found that treatment varied on the marital status of the parents and from which parent the financial support was obtained (Myers 2004).

Holding to a biblical discourse of gender and sex related beliefs also was found to have certain ramifications on the political opinions of many evangelicals. A 2012 study showed that in general, most conservative Protestants do not support an increase in gay rights as it conflicts with

evangelical gender and sexuality beliefs (Wolf et al.). Evangelicals seemingly are becoming somewhat more liberal in general so the prevalence of the opposition to gay marriage may be subject to change in the near future.

The majority of the findings in this set of research reinforced each other and there was very limited contradiction among the major points of the research suggesting that these findings are very accurate.

Recommendations for Further Research

The majority of the research that has been done over the past twenty years that have studied gender in evangelical families, have focused on assessing the relationship between husbands and wives and how that spousal relationship functions in comparison with the rest of society. However, there is little research in the way of parental treatment of non-adult children on the basis of gender. Therefore, I would recommend that a more thorough study of how conservative evangelical parents interact with children of both genders and how they may or may not be treated differently. This research can help to gain better insight into evangelical child outcomes and how they act socialize once they enter adulthood.

It would likewise be beneficial to see how children in conservative protestant churches interact with one another and observe if there is any hierarchy that children's cultures develop on the basis of both age and gender. I believe that more research should be done in general on childhood peer relations and I believe that studying how evangelical children interact with one another and how that is dependent on age and gender would be helpful in understanding the complex dynamic of evangelical gender relations.

I also think that further research into the conservative protestant church as an institution should be examined more closely to gain insight as to how ecclesiological authorities view

gender within their ideological framework. Once this is better understood, it would be much easier to see how evangelical families develop their own more personalized understanding of how they divide labor and authority on the basis of gender. If we understand what evangelical leaders believe is the ideal way to express gender then we can reach a better understanding of individual's conservative beliefs as well.

Finally, I believe that further research should be conducted on relations of how coming from a conservative evangelical background affects one's political leanings in regards to topics of gender and sexuality. This issue has been widely talked about in political circles but surprisingly has had little research done on it sociologically. Reaching a better understanding of the topic can be used to help implement a healthier conversation and relationship between two largely competing ideologies in America today when it comes to gay rights and political implications pertaining to the family.

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