

Confronting the idolatry of family: A new
vision for the household of God.

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Confronting the Idolatry of Family: A New Vision for the Household of God

by [Janet Fishburn](#)

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SUMMARY

(ENTIRE BOOK) By analyzing attitudes about church and family and by illustrating how our “biblical values” are often too closely related to the “American Dream,” Fishburn offers sharp insights into the changes currently underway in our culture, churches, and families. Fishburn proposes a new agenda for the church — an agenda that can create a healthy context for traditional and non-traditional families.

Chapters

- Prologue: Protestant Ideals and Historical Realities

This Prologue summarizes the book. There are three parts: Part 1 is an analysis of the origins of current attitudes about church and family. Part 2 is a discussion of the way values often believed to be “God-given and biblical” are related to the values of the American Dream. In Part 3, describes the role of church leaders in planning educational programs that are supportive of members of traditional and nontraditional families, but not dependent on “the Christian home” as the primary agency of Christian spiritual formation.

- Chapter 1: The Church in Domestic Captivity

Americans tend to uncritically identify loyalty to family with loyalty to church. Congregations in which loyalty to church and family are virtually synonymous are engaged in an American form of religious familism.

- Chapter 2: “The Family Pew” and the Church Today

This chapter is about the way “the family pew” ethos affects program planning and leadership roles in congregations. If family loyalty controls the events that matter most in the life of a congregation, the faith commitments of that congregation are misplaced. If love of family is stronger and deeper than love for Jesus Christ, this is family idolatry.

- Chapter 3: The Effect of Family Idolatry on a Congregation

The focus on ministry as spiritual direction requires the pastor to become the servant of all, the person who enables the ministry of every other member of the congregation. To accomplish this objective would require a redistribution of work in most congregations. In that process, both pastor and congregation will find that their understanding of the nature and mission of the church is changing.

- Chapter 4: A Biblical Critique of Family Idolatry

The habit of associating biblical concepts like the Providence of God and the election of Israel with a nation and Protestant Christianity has greatly influenced the way American Protestants regard the nations of the world, the church, their families, and themselves.

- Chapter 5: The Christian Life, Spirituality, and Sexuality

Where the longing for God is satisfied, human sexuality is enriched because

spiritual discipline gives form and direction to desire. The mystery of sexual union is heightened for partners who love each other in Christ.” Conversely, exaggerated or compulsive love of any kind is a sign of alienation from God, of a lack of spiritual direction.

- Chapter 6: Family-related Ethical Issues

The inability of many congregations to address the life experience of the post-sixties generation realistically could be one of the reasons that so many young adults who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s are not found in “the family pew.” Parents who were reared to believe that the values of “the family pew” are the only option for Christians are confused when they discover that their children do not conform to those ethical values.

- Chapter 7: New Life in the Congregation

The Protestant ideal of family is inadequate when dealing with life in a changing culture and can mislead the thinking of pastors about Christian spirituality.

- Chapter 8: Spiritual Formation Through Family Ministries

Good relationships with parents, children, siblings, or life partners are of great importance to most church members. Yet, many congregations, these issues are treated as private or peripheral to the life of faith. As the designated leader of a congregation, the pastor is expected to interpret the meaning of the Christian life. That means that the pastor can influence the way the people of God think about the church, ministry, their families, and all of life.

- Chapter 9:

The church today is in no position to condemn the evils of “the world” unless members can do so with spiritual integrity. If the dream, identities, and behaviors of church members are not distinguishable from the American Dream of togetherness, successful careers, and upward mobility, the church in the United States can hardly offer justice to victims of cultural oppression. If congregations continue to reflect the racial and sexual prejudices of American culture in the way they define membership, authority, and power, the church will have very little credibility as a prophetic voice in God’s world.

- Epilogue: The Servant Role of a Pastor

Pastors are not exempt from the temptations of the American Dream — an idolatrous love of family, career success, and a high standard of living. The desire for success, defined by the size of a congregation, can blur the spiritual vision of a gifted pastor. Most do not realize that the battle for the hearts and minds of church members is being waged against the power of a civil religion that forms the life commitments of most church members. A life committed to Jesus as Lord of all life does not preclude loyalty to nation, family, and church. But it does mean a reorientation of the heart so that commitment to nation, family, and church are expressions of love of God.

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