

Women's VU *m* Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center

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RE-EVALUATING "WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS"

New family models challenge male headship

by **BONNIE MILLER-McLEMORE**
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY DIVINITY SCHOOL

Front-page headlines come and go. So perhaps women readers should simply ignore the imperative in the local paper to "Submit 'graciously'" following a pronouncement by the Southern Baptists during their annual meeting last summer. However, the realities behind the newsprint continue to haunt our lives. Too many women and children still suffer domestic violence within Christian contexts upholding male authority. Too many wives and mothers labor under inequitable divisions of household chores. Subtly and not so subtly, male rule lives on in daily routines of many families.

As I listened to public radio interviews covering the Baptist vote to amend their principles, I was struck by the automatic equation of male headship and biblical truth. One would have thought that "It's what the Bible says," as another headline put it.

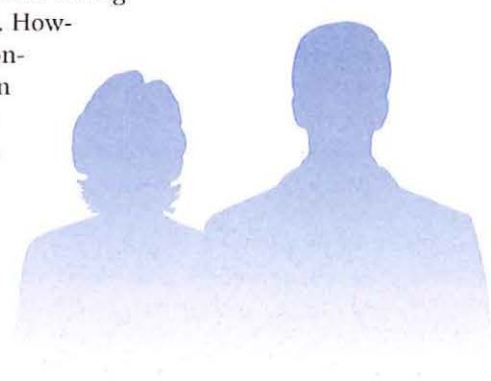
Does Christianity teach male headship? No. But the answer is more complex than that. It is impossible to worship in the vast majority of Christian congregations across this country today, even the more liberal churches, without implicitly or explicitly endorsing male headship. Ideals about gender roles are embedded in formative religious practices of men as elders and priests; prayers, doxologies, and creeds praising a male deity; women as newcomers to sacred rituals; and continued resistance to change in all of these areas. Ideals about male headship are also intertwined with far-reaching historical and religious notions — Jewish and Christian assumptions about suffering servanthood and self-sacrifice, Aristotelian and Christian codes defining the relationship between subordinate and superior family members, and other powerful motifs.

Yet, does the *gospel*, as distinct from *Christianity*, teach male headship? *Should* a Christianity true to its prophetic heritage teach male headship? These are different questions with which many Christian scholars would now take issue. Indeed, the challenge to a religiously-sanctioned male headship is not new. For at least the last two decades, feminist

theologians and clergy have advocated the ideal of mutuality and shared responsibility in parenting and marriage as grounded in biblical, historical, contemporary, and practical studies in religion and theology. Radical mutuality is a transformative Christian ideal with potentially more dramatic consequences for families than sacrificial love.

However, until feminists grapple with the so-called biblical "truths" that are used against women, we will never ultimately challenge the stranglehold of domestic rule. In claiming that male headship is not "what the Bible says," the hardest but perhaps most important biblical texts to contend with are scriptural passages in New Testament

letters attributed to Paul that exhort subordinates (e.g. wives, slaves, children) to obey their superiors (e.g. husbands, masters, fathers). From at least the Reformation to today, these household codes have been used to give supernatural sanction to patriarchal family roles. Contrary to the summer headlines, however, there are sufficient biblical grounds for arguing that these codes were not intended to bolster but to reverse ancient heroic models of male authority in families. In Ephesians, for example, the author borrows and yet transforms the metaphors of the surrounding male culture of strength, dominance, and conflict to suggest new virtues of peace, humility, patience, and gentleness. The husband is



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Challenging male headship *continued from page 1*

called to a kind of mutual subjection and self-giving love not found in comparable Greek domestic codes. Deplorably, it is this Christian accent on male surrender that has been most overlooked in history. Women, rather than men, have absorbed the message of self-sacrifice. Under the social and political pressures of patriarchal society, challenges to male rule in the early Christian community have been obscured.

This is not to argue that equality in marriage and parenting represent *the* Christian family any more than the nineteenth-century breadwinner/homemaker comprised *the* Christian family. However, I would argue that in the current context, the ideal of "equal regard" between husbands and wives is the most fitting family model and that it rests on rich resources in Christian scripture and theology. As my co-authors and I argue in *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Westminster John Knox, 1997), one can detect trajectories in Christianity that point toward an egalitarian mother-father partnership. Moreover, our interviews, Gallup poll, and study of the prominent voices in the family debate demonstrate that U.S. society is undergoing a profound revolu-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bonnie Miller-McLemore is associate professor of pastoral theology and counseling at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Her research and writing focuses on such issues as feminist theology, work/family conflicts, and equitable models for household responsibilities. She authored *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* and co-edited *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology: Implications for Care, Faith and Reflection*, to be published next year by Abingdon Press.



tion in its image of marital and family love. In interviews with 27 families from six different parts of the country, we discovered that most people believe that they strive for a more mutual, less sacrificial relationship than their parents, are far less inclined to see the wife's role as one of service to the husband, and have more flexible roles even if wives still do more domestic work. The Gallup survey of 1,019 randomly selected respondents also indicated that mutuality is the dominant model of love for family relationships even if people have trouble implementing it in practice. In a word, mutuality is perceived more positively; self-sacrifice is seen more negatively. But behavior does not always correspond with ideals. At the same time as many perceive mutuality as essential to their lives, they struggle all the more to find the language to articulate it and the means to enact it.

Sharing leadership

Proponents insist that male headship does not mean license for domination; male headship, it is said, simply means the husband has a special role in protecting, leading, edifying, and serving his wife and children. By contrast, the ideal of equal regard asserts that responsibility and leadership must be *shared* and, furthermore, that this position has both biblical warrant in creation and New Testament stories as well as practical benefit for couples, children, and the wider community. Family decisions require a process of equilateral conversation — a give-and-take uncharacteris-

tic of the unilateral process of headship in which ultimately one person, the husband and father, has final power over others.

"Equal regard" does not mean, however, that men and women do not have particular roles and unique contributions. "Equal" does not mean "identical." Women and men have distinctive contributions in bearing and rearing children, and children benefit from contrasts. However, judgments about gender roles remain open-ended, designed to honor physiological difference while not allowing it to dictate the specific behaviors, worth, or destiny of either parent. Determinations about who is ultimately in charge are not made according to sex. Nor is the distribution of privileges and responsibilities in both the public and private spheres of life. Equal regard describes a relationship between husband and wife characterized by mutual respect, affection, practical assistance, and justice — a relationship that values and aids the self and others with equal seriousness.

So headlines from the summer of 1998 are a wake-up call. Those who disagree with male headship and female submission still have our work cut out for us. If it took two centuries or more for this model of family to become entrenched as an unquestioned domestic mandate, creating fresh family models of shared responsibility in marriage will require plenty of time and hard work, and some fresh reading of powerful biblical passages. As far as I'm concerned, let's get on with it!

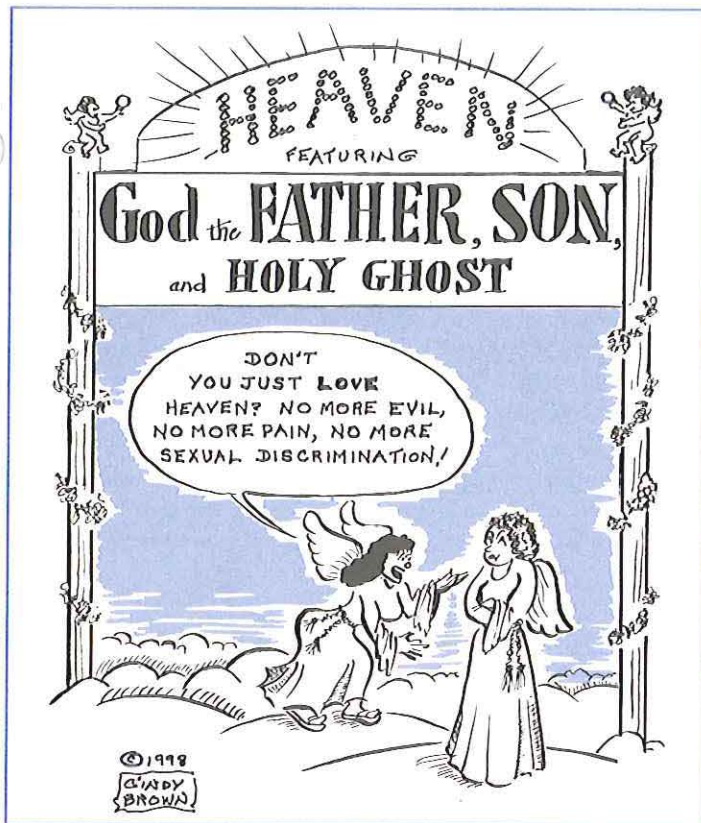


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Campus address: Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row.
Mailing address: Box 1513, Station B, Nashville, TN 37235.
Phone: (615) 322-4843. Fax: (615) 343-0940.
E-mail: womenctr@ctrvax.Vanderbilt.edu.

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Communication strategies for couples

Dr. Curtis Lucas and Dr. Karen Silien, from the Psychological and Counseling Center, will offer a presentation and discussion for graduate students, faculty and staff on Thursday, Dec. 10 from 5 to 6:30 p.m. at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center. The presentation will focus on communication strategies for spouses and partners to enhance communication and understanding. The program is offered free of charge and is part of a monthly series presented by the Psychological and Counseling Center. In January, Silien and Dr. Rhonda Venable will discuss "Talking to Your Children About Sex."

Support group for sexual assault survivors

In October, the Women's Center was a co-sponsor of Take Back the Night, a march and speak-out to protest violence against women. This event was well-attended and powerful in giving victims of sexual assault and domestic violence a sense of solidarity. As a follow-up to the march, the Psychological and Counseling Center is interested in offering a support group for survivors of sexual assault. The group would begin early next semester. If you are interested in joining the group or obtaining more information about it, contact Dr. Karen Silien at 322-2571.

December 1998

"A Universe of Associations: Symbolic Paintings by Victoria Boone" is on display at the Cuninggim Center through Dec. 28. The center is open weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Tuesday, December 1

Creative Life Planning Group. Noon to 1 p.m. *Cuninggim Center.*

Monday, December 7

Book Group meets to discuss *She Walks These Hills* by Sharon McCrumb. 5:15 to 6:15 p.m. *Cuninggim Center.*

Tuesday, December 8

Creative Life Planning Group. Noon to 1 p.m. *Cuninggim Center.*

Women and Investing Series. Winnie Forrester, a financial consultant from Wheat First Union, will explain socially responsible investing, including its methodology, past performance, current trends and how it affects our world. 5:30 p.m. *Cuninggim Center.*

Wednesday, December 9

Brown Bag Lunch for Lesbian and Bisexual Women. Monthly meeting for faculty, staff and graduate students who identify as lesbian or bisexual. For information, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or e-mail hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu. 11:45 a.m. to 1 p.m. *Cuninggim Center.*

Tuesday, December 15

Creative Life Planning Group. Tracy Barrett, a lecturer in the department of French and Italian, will discuss Hildegard Von Bingen. Noon to 1 p.m. *Cuninggim Center.* *The group will also meet Dec. 22 and 29.*

**Margaret
Cuninggim
Women's Center**

Calendar of Events

PLEASE SAVE AND POST

For more information on the events listed, call 322-4843.

Shifting perceptions of gender differences

How different are men and women, other than the obvious biological differences?

A psychologist who spoke at Vanderbilt in November argued that gender differences have been exaggerated by social scientists and the popular media.

"Differences between men and women are almost always differences in *degree*, and not differences in *kind*," said Dr. Lucia Gilbert, who delivered the 1998 Margaret Cuninggim Lecture. The endowed lecture is given annually on a topic related to women in culture and society.

Gilbert noted that "difference sells." Books such as *You Just Don't Understand* by Deborah Tannen and *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* by John Gray landed on the best-seller lists by emphasizing the different ways in which men and women communicate.

For social scientists, difference between the genders is an "easy comparison to make" when analyzing data, said Gilbert, who is professor of educational psychology and director of the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Gilbert said it is important to consider such studies in light of the "Iron Rule of Social Science Research": For any psychological or cognitive variable studied by social scientists, the difference *within* each sex is always greater than the difference *between* the two sexes.

In fact, the only sizable differences scientists have found between men and women are in two areas: aggression and sexuality. Men tend to be significantly more aggressive than women, to masturbate more frequently, and to have different attitudes toward casual sex. In other

areas frequently cited as having a gender gap, such as mathematical aptitude, the differences between men and women are actually quite small.

Gilbert noted that perceptions about gender are shaped by social structures, by language and discourse, and by interpersonal processes. She stressed the importance of the "dominant discourse" in defining what we see as desired characteristics for men and women.

"The dominant discourse represents a way of thinking about

something that reflects and sustains certain world views," Gilbert said. For example, the dominant discourse indicates that women's lives revolve around men; women need men, but men don't need women. In the dominant discourse, care-taking men are often treated pejoratively, as on a *Newsweek* cover that showed stay-at-home dads in aprons. Although much progress has been made toward gender-neutral language, Gilbert noted that many objectionable phrases remain. For example, the term "working mothers" is frequently used, but men are almost never referred to as working fathers.

Gilbert emphasized that it is difficult to alter the dominant discourse on gender. Her recent research has focused on adolescents and their ideas about gender and

family roles. Many of the teens in the study were horrified at the suggestion that girls might pay their way on dates to promote more balanced relationships.

There are other hopeful signs, however, that some ideas about gender are changing. In one set of studies, Gilbert said, more than one-fourth of couples questioned identified themselves as having a "post-gender marriage." These couples do not consider gender when determining appropriate household and parenting roles.

Gilbert has received the Caroline Wood Sherif Award for excellence as a scholar and teacher in the psychology of women and is the author of several books, including *Men in Two-Career Families: Current Realities and Future Prospects* and her latest work, *Gender and Sex in Counseling and Psychotherapy*.



Dr. Lucia Gilbert
Margaret Cuninggim Lecturer



NANCY RANSOM, former director of the Women's Center, is applauded by current director Linda Manning as she receives the 1998 Mary Jane Werthan Award for her contributions to the advancement of women at Vanderbilt.

(Photos by Billy Kingsley)



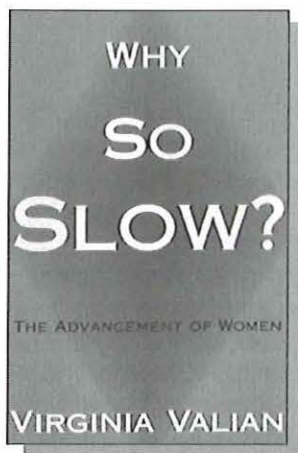
How gender stereotypes block advancement of women

Despite the great advances made by women in recent decades, there are still comparatively few at the top levels of professions and in other positions of power and prestige. Exactly what is holding women back? Virginia Valian examines this vexing topic in *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (MIT Press, 1998).

The writer, a professor of psychology and linguistics at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center, believes that "a set of implicit, or nonconscious, hypotheses about sex differences plays a central role in shaping men's and women's professional lives." These *gender schemas*, which are shared by women, men and children, give us different expectations of men and women and cause us to evaluate their work and achievements differently. Valian shows how this consistently causes men to be overrated and women to be underrated. Little by little, the advantages of being male mount up and translate into better jobs, more promotions and higher salaries. Even those who have egalitarian views hold gender schemas and are usually unaware of their invisible biases.

The author shows how gender stereotypes permeate society and affect us all from infancy onwards. She illustrates how biology is not necessarily destiny, how males are perceived as the norm, how women and girls are devalued and how stereotypically-male traits are valued more highly.

The final chapter is devoted to suggestions for remedying gender inequity in the workplace. One key solution



would involve those who are in positions of evaluating the performances of males and females; all men and women must be made aware of how gender schemas affect their judgment.

Carol P. Christ grew up in a Christian family and earned her doctorate in religious studies at Yale. While in gradu-

ate school she became increasingly convinced that something was wrong with the traditional image of God as a judgmental old white male. She felt that this God certainly preferred boys and men, that she was never going to be "in his image" and that theologians were incorrect about women's nature.

In *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Routledge, 1997), Christ traces her discovery of a female-friendly deity. She describes how she found the Goddess and how this spirituality has changed her life and

the lives of others. Goddess worship has become more popular in recent years in many western countries. While many believers are women — often feminists — there are increasing numbers of male adherents.

The writer illustrates how different forms of Goddess worship have existed from the Paleolithic era to the present. She explains the significance of contemporary rituals and shows why they appeal to many believers. Modern Goddess spirituality centers on female power, nature, the cycles of life, the earth and the changing seasons.

The author, who lives in Greece, is the director of the Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual.

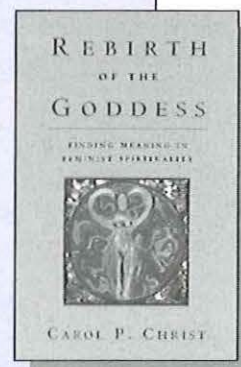
New arrivals

Other new acquisitions in the Women's Center library include:

- *Breasts: The Women's Perspective on an American Obsession* by Carolyn Latteier
- *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* by Linda K. Kerber
- *Dangerous Relationships: Pornography, Misogyny, and Rape* by Diana Russell.

"Several years of graduate study in theology convinced me that there was something wrong with the traditional image of God. My questioning began with theologians' words about women. Woman was body, man was soul; woman was flesh, man was spirit. Because of her lesser rational capacity, woman was persuaded by the serpent; because she could not control her passions, woman was seduced. I was a woman and try as I might, I did not see myself in this picture."

— CAROL P. CHRIST IN *REBIRTH OF THE GODDESS*



Announcements

- A Women's Studies Conference on **Women and Power** will be held February 19-20 at MTSU in Murfreesboro. In addition to morning panel sessions, the conference will include talks by several women authors, including: Elaine Brown, first and only woman to lead the Black Panther Party and author of *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*; Ninotchka Rosca, Philippine novelist and former political prisoner; Dorothy Shawha, author of the novel, *Lizzie*, about a feminist newspaper editor in 1920s Mississippi; and Ellen Wolfe, who wrote *A Personal Journey: Hiking the Appalachian Trail*. Advance registration is \$45; \$15 for students. Registration forms are available at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center or call 898-5174 for more information.
- A new web site shows women how much money they can expect to lose over a lifetime due to the gender gap in wages. At the site, women can select their age, income level and education and receive an estimate of their lost income. Access the site at www.aflcio.org/women/ and click on "How much will the pay gap cost you?" The site also has data on wage gaps by state and by occupation.
- A special conference, **Blacks & Latinos in Higher Education: Coalition or Competition?** will be presented at Peabody via satellite on December 2. The conference will focus on forging alliances between the two largest minority groups in America and resolving inter-group tensions. The program can be viewed in the Rotunda of the Social-Religious Building from noon to 2 p.m. For more information, contact Shederick McClendon at 322-8400.

Call for works by women artists

The Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center is accepting proposals for exhibitions for the 1999-2000 academic year. The gallery at the Women's Center is an intimate space with approximately 40 running feet. The Women's Center Arts Committee is interested in reviewing strong two-dimensional work by emerging female artists in the Middle Tennessee area who have not had much exposure. Proposals are due by February 1, 1999. For additional information, call 322-4843.



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Box 1513, Station B
Nashville, TN 37235

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