

ERRANDS INTO THE MORAL WILDERNESS: FORMS OF CHRISTIAN FAMILY WITNESS & RENEWAL

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In 1670, Samuel Danforth preached an “election sermon” in Boston, with the title “A Brief Recognition of New England’s Errand Into the Wilderness.” Like others of its kind, this sermon was a frank appraisal of how well the Puritan commonwealth in Massachusetts and Connecticut was performing.

The word “Errand” is central here. As historian Perry Miller notes, the term then had two meanings: One, a short journey where an inferior is sent to perform a service for a superior (for example, in our time, when a husband runs an errand for his wife); and Two, the word could also mean the very purpose of an action or project, “the conscious intention” of an actor.

It was clearly this second meaning that Samuel Danforth had in mind. For John Winthrop and the other founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, their Errand into the American Wilderness was of enormous importance. As Miller nicely summarizes, their task was not a mere Christian “scouting expedition” for a battered remnant of persecuted Separatists. Rather, “it was an organized task force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions” of the Old World; “an essential maneuver in the drama of Christendom.” They came to America to fulfill the re-formation of the Christian faith, launched a century earlier, but still incomplete in England and Europe.

Their Errand, in the words of John Winthrop himself in his famed Arabella speech, was more specifically “to seeke out a place of Cohabitation and Consorteshipp under a due forme of Government both civill and ecclesiasticall.” This would be a pure Biblical polity grounded in Holy Scripture, as interpreted by John Calvin and followers.

Most historians have focused on the theological and political implications of this project. Of equal importance was its social – and more specifically, its familial – component. Puritan literature from the early 17th Century routinely denounced the moral corruptions – the fornications, the adulteries, the whoring, and the physical cruelties – found in English society. By intent, the Puritans set out to revitalize or reform the Christian family. As Winthrop implied, they sought to “improve” their lives in order to serve the Lord, to increase the body of Christ through the procreation of Godly children, and to preserve and protect this posterity from the corruptions of an evil world.

Seventeenth-century Puritan theology, in both England and New England, was notable for its use of family imagery to describe the true faith. Richard Sibbes, for example, cast God as a stern, disciplinarian father, who nonetheless would never disinherit his true “elected” children. As Sibbes elaborated, “the word ‘father’ is an epitome of the whole gospel.” Other writers described the true Church in the female role. Said Thomas Palmer, “[t]he church is called a woman, or woman in travail,” giving birth to the saints. William Perkins saw the Church as “a mother, which by the ministry of the word brings forth children to God ... and after they are born ... she feeds them with milk out of [her] own breasts, which are the Scriptures.” At other times, Puritan writers emphasized the nature of the Church as the “spouse of Christ.”

This theology contributed to the Puritan strategy of shrinking the role of the parish church while elevating the household into a “family church.” The latter involved frequent family prayer, home Bible study, the singing of hymns, and father-led discussions of sermons. Through strengthened Christian homes, the Puritans believed, corrupt society might be regenerated. The family so served – in historian Amanda Porterfield’s words – as “the nucleus of moral armament and social stability” in the Puritan’s divine Errand.

More specifically, Thomas Cobbett called the family “the Mother Hive” out of which “both State and Church swarmed.” Daniel Rogers held that “Marriage is ... the Seminary of the Commonwealth, seed-plot of the Church, pillar (under God) of the world.” As James Fitch summarized in 1683: “Such as families are, such at last the Church and Commonwealth must

be.”

Did this intentional effort to renew and reform family life succeed? For about two or three generations, yes. The Puritans created a culture of marriage that embraced the whole of their population: never-married adults, men or women, were few. Women married, on average, at age 19 or 20; men at age 24. The majority of husbands and wives lived out their lives together, for the New England climate actually proved to be relatively healthy.

More notable was the boisterous fertility of the Puritan family. Overall, the first two generations of Puritans averaged nine children per couple, most of whom (near 90 percent) reached adulthood.

On occasion, the results were more startling. In the village of Billerica, settled in 1665, there were 26 families with ten children each; twenty families with eleven children apiece; 24 families with twelve children each; thirteen families each with 13 children; five families with 14 children; one family with 15; and one with 21. In total, Billerica counted 90 families with 1043 children, an average of 11.6: a true Kingdom of Children. As demographer Jim Potter nicely summarizes, “The natural growth rate [through fertility alone] of Massachusetts and Connecticut ... in the second half of the seventeenth century was extremely unusual, if not unique, in human history.”

I present these Puritan fathers and mothers to you as having a place in that Great Cloud of Witnesses that we remember these several days. Facing social disorder and domestic breakdown, a Moral Wilderness, they resolved through divine inspiration to create a better setting in which to bear and raise Christian children. And for several generations, they succeeded.

In doing so, however, they were in some ways simply recovering a much older Christian social strategy. The very early Christian Church – the Church of the First, Second, and Third centuries – emerged within a Roman Empire beset by family and sexual disorders. As historian Robin Lane Fox has summarized, “accepted sexual practice in the Roman Empire had a range and a variety which it has never attained since.” Specifically:

- Greek culture was held in high esteem, and the practice of “Greek Love” – sexual relations between a man and a boy – received literary praise. As Tatian – a Christian who resided in Rome for several decades– wrote, the Romans “consider pederasty to be particularly privileged and try to round up herds of boys like herds of grazing mares.”
- Prostitution was common and socially accepted. The poet Horace held that “young men should drop in there, rather than grind some husband’s private mill.” The women involved included high-end dancers and musicians, and the “two penny” ones who worked in graveyards and at street corners.
- Homosexuality was idealized, and deemed to be natural. It was often associated with the theatre. Male prostitution was also found in the major Imperial cities and judged acceptable.
- There is evidence of religious transvestite practices in Imperial Rome, such as the cult of Elagabalus. Flagellation rituals existed in the cults of Cybele and Dionysius.
- Abortion (if approved by the paterfamilias or father) was legal and surprisingly widespread. Also common were illicit abortions obtained by wives seeking to cover up an adultery. Roman law simply did not consider the fetus to be a person. Those few pagan voices raised against the practice – such as that of the poet Ovid – had little or no concern for the unborn child; they sought to protect the rights of fathers and the interests of the state. [The one prominent exception was the great Stoic moralist Musonius Rufus.] Methods included diluted poisons alongside “abortion kits” containing the familiar frames, blades, hooks, needles, and spikes. Needless to say, many Roman women died as a result of this practice or were left permanently sterile.
- Infanticide was probably more common, and legal under pater potestas, or paternal power. Male babies with less than perfect physical form and many girls were the common victims. Female infanticide was so widespread that for every 100 females in the city of Rome, circa 100 A.D., there were 131 men; elsewhere in the empire, 140. Even in a large Roman family, one historian reports, “more than one daughter was practically never reared.”
- Adultery and infidelity were widespread practices and socially acceptable for Roman men. Women, though, could be severely punished.
- When pagan marriages did occur, the females involved were often very young: 20 percent of such marriages involved child brides of ages 11 or 12; 44 percent of females who married did so by age 14. The men involved were usually twice as old; even so, custom dictated that such marriages be quickly consummated, even with pre-pubescent girls.
- While most birth control methods of the era were ineffective, the practice was widespread. Herbs, ointments, and medicines were used, alongside charms and primitive condoms made of animal parts.
- The relation of Roman husbands to wives was strained. A male culture that celebrated violence and cruelty and that held marriage in low esteem, ready access by the men to prostitutes and slave women, the common age gap between husbands

and wives, the confinement of Roman wives within their homes, and extended male travel on Imperial business: such matters were not conducive to rich, fulfilling marriages.

– Not surprisingly, divorce was also widespread in these centuries. While the laws favored men again, Roman women gained increasing access to the practice.

– Added all together, these characteristics of the Imperial Romans led to a very low fertility level. Already by the dawn of the Christian era, the fertility rate among Roman citizens was well below the replacement level. Julius Caesar (in 59 B.C.) and Caesar Augustus (in both 19 and 9 B.C.) promulgated laws to reward the fathers of three or more children and to punish the childless; however, none of this worked. As the contemporary historian Tacitus grimly recorded, “childlessness prevailed.” Dare I add: this was a social system producing many living human casualties as well.

Into this Moral Wilderness entered the followers of the Crucified and Risen Nazarene. Their number, at first, was small: by 120 A.D. still well under 50,000 ... a tiny figure even when compared just to the four or five million Jews within the Empire. Some Early Roman observers saw these Christians as merely another burial society, sort of an ancient fraternal insurance fund complete with a ritual meal. However, it became clear by the Second and Third centuries that this sect held to startling ideas about marriage, family life, and sexuality: all sharply at odds with the prevailing culture.

Perhaps the earliest summation of the new morality of the Christians appears in the *Didache*: a manual on church life and moral order, with probable roots in the late First Century. Adopting a style of Jewish origin called the “Two Ways,” it contrasts the way of “Life and Light” with the way of “Death and Darkness.” In its exposition of the Second Great Commandment (“Love your neighbor as yourself”), the document includes a list of prohibitions that go beyond the Decalogue. Alongside denunciations of murder, theft, and magic, the *Didache* condemns adultery, sodomy, fornication, infanticide, and abortion. (on the latter, for example, it says “Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion/destruction.”) Note especially how the fetus is now counted as “a neighbor” in the full Christian sense, and as a being distinct from its mother.

Historical sociologist Rodney Stark emphasizes how this emerging Christian culture sanctified the marriage bond. At its core was a new form of sexual equality. Unlike the Romans – and every other ancient culture – the Christians condemned promiscuity among men as well as women. Paul’s words in I Corinthians 7:2-7 laid out a symmetry in conjugal rights that – in Stark’s words – “was at total variance, not only with pagan culture, but with Jewish culture as well.” This had the effect of elevating both the meaning of marriage and the status of Christian women. Reflecting this form of equality: the average age for first marriages rose to 18 for Christian women, compared to 14 among the pagans.

While very early Christian teaching on the use of birth control is admittedly vague, Christians did retain from Judaism a condemnation of onanism and other forms of interference with the sexual act. As Clement of Alexandria would summarize, “Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, or wasted.”

Breaking ranks with both Roman paganism and Judaism, Christians condemned at least most divorce. This transformed marriage vows into something deeper and stronger, and so more effective in the successful rearing of children.

Finally, while Roman pagans faced a considerable shortage of fertile females – due to infanticide and the crippling consequences of botched abortions – the new Christians counted an abundance of young, fertile women. Reliable estimates suggest that the Christian community, in its early centuries, was about 60 percent female. Even after taking into account those who – following the other advice of Paul – adopted celibacy, this was a community relatively open to the propagation and protection of children.

So, how did Christians grow from a negligible presence in 100 A.D. to an estimated 32 million in 350 A.D., comprising over half of the Empire’s population? Conversions, both direct and through marriage (particularly Christian women marrying pagan men): these are part of the answer. While reliable differential fertility numbers do not exist, the circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that novel Christian family and sexual teachings, when combined with the abundance of young Christian women, also resulted in a significantly higher number of births and the survival of more children to adulthood. In Rodney Stark’s words, “superior fertility contributed to the rise of Christianity.”

Writers of the time certainly noted this difference. For example, Minucius Felix, a Christian apologist of the late Second Century, wrote a tract involving a debate between a pagan and a Christian; at one point, the latter states “that day by day the number of us is increased,” which he credits to “[our] fair mode of life.”

Or, as Tertullian wrote in a message to his wife: “To the servant of God, forsooth, offspring is necessary. For our own salvation we are secure enough, so that we have leisure for children! Burdens must be sought by us for ourselves which are avoided by the majority of the [Pagans], who are compelled by laws [to have children], [but] who are decimated by abortions.”

These early Christian husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, are also – I believe – in that Great Cloud of Witnesses, testifying to the potential for social renewal to be found in and through the Christian family.

In a mere two weeks, the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation will be observed. While I do not want to reopen wounds, I would be remiss if I failed to cite the Reformers of the 16th Century as another band of Christians who intentionally set out to re-form the family, for the salvation of souls,... and for the good of all.

As historian Steven Ozment writes in his fine book, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, the early Reformers believed that they confronted “a crisis in domestic relations,” one which grew out of the failing institutions of the Medieval church. Ozment writes: “To correct the situation, they exalted the patriarchal nuclear family as the liberation of men, women, and children from religious, sexual, and vocational bondage.”

By some estimates, up to one-quarter of the early 16th Century adult population in Europe was in celibate orders. The Reformers emphasized the disorders, hypocrisy, and flight from responsibility to be found in many – they said most – of the well-endowed convents and monasteries. They pointed to a popular literature that ridiculed marriage and debased women. One proverb of the time, attributed [fairly or not] to St. Jerome: “If you find things going too well, take a wife.”

For Martin Luther, this new emphasis on marriage had its grounding in Scripture. Writing in his 1521 treatise on *The Estate of Marriage*, Luther argued that God’s words in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth,” represented more than a blessing or a command: they were rather “a divine ordinance which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore.” Addressing the celibate Teutonic Knights, the Reformer also emphasized Genesis 2:18: “It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper who shall be with him.” Luther acknowledged that a small number of persons received true celibacy as a gift from God. However, for the vast majority, “[i]t is not a matter of free choice or decision but a natural and necessary thing, that whatever is a man must have a woman and whatever is a woman must have a man.”

In 1524, the freshly reformed Church in Wittenberg introduced a new marriage service which expanded on the message of Genesis 2. It held that marriage is “a far different thing than what the world presently jokes about and insults.” First, it represents the end of a man’s loneliness, as he and the bride become “one thing, like a cake.” [As an aside, note here how the wedding cake means something more than just a snack after the ceremony; it represents the coming together of two into one thing – U.S. Supreme Court, please take note!] Second, as Ozment summarizes, marriage is “a penitential institution in which the wife freely accepts the pain of childbirth and subjection to her husband and the husband the pain of daily labor and worry over his family’s wellbeing.”

Renewing and reforming the family: this is what the Reformers thought they were doing; this is what they intended in the social side of their project. Having been forgiven for their excesses and mistakes, they too might be found in that Great Cloud of Witnesses.

Are there other examples of intentional Christian efforts to reform and renew family life, projects that might claim success? I offer two other American examples.

First, in the middle decades of the 19th Century, a remarkable effort emerged to construct a rich and sweeping Christian worldview centered on the home. At the theological level, a leading figure was Horace Bushnell. In his popular book *Christian Nurture*, he strove to rekindle “a great and momentous truth” – what he called the Organic Unity of the Family. Rejecting the “modern” notion of individualism, he stressed the extraordinary power of “the spirit of the house” in guiding children toward good living and salvation. As he summarized: “Understand that it is in the family spirit, the organic life of the house, the silent power of a domestic godliness, working, as it does, unconsciously and with sovereign effect – that it is which forms our children to God.”

Giving practical content to this worldview was what novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne called “a damned mob of scribbling women”: female writers who actually dominated American publishing in the Victorian age. They included: Catharine Beecher, eldest daughter in the famed Beecher family and the author of two dozen books and hundreds of articles on the education of women, theology, and the home economy; Sarah Joseph Hale, the editor for over 40 years of the hugely in-

fluent journal Godey's *Lady's Book and Ladies' American Magazine*; and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, the mother of a large family who, in her "leisure" time, wrote 67 books (including a dozen collections of her poems) and over 2000 articles for 300 different periodicals.

Their common themes were: the existence of "separate spheres" of activity for men and women; the role of the home as "the domestic church," and a stress on "true womanhood." They held in highest honor "The Eden Laws." These were the moral and religious legacies of the Garden, still in force after the Fall: specifically, God's creation of human marriage; the Divine command "to be fruitful and multiply"; and sexual complementarity in the home – in Sarah Hale's words: "Man is the worker or provider, the protector and the law-giver; woman is the preserver, the teacher or inspirer, and the exemplar."

Allow me one specific example of their remarkable work. In her 1838 book, *Letter to Mothers*, Lydia Sigourney actually laid out the arguments for home schooling children: arguments identical to those picked up 170 years later by current home schooling parents. Common objections to the practice and Sigourney's responses include:

- Too little time. Her response: Two or three hours of study a day "would be all that the first eight or ten years of life would [need] and much more than they usually obtain."
- I have too much to do. Her response: "Do not be too ambitious a housekeeper Energy, and adherence to system, will accomplish wonders."
- Children require the stimulation found in schools. Her response: "Is this not merely another name for 'envying and strife'?"

Sigourney concluded: "Let us keep our children for our own, during their earlier years. The world will have them long enough afterwards."

Did this movement succeed? The answer is, again, yes. These men and women successfully crafted a fresh culture of marriage, grounded in Christian teachings and yet adapted to new conditions brought on by the emerging urban-industrial revolution.

They enhanced the status of women. As even feminist historian Mary Ryan admits in her book *Womanhood in America*, Victorian wives and mothers "could remain at home and still achieve accolades from popular culture and a real but indirect power in society."

And by the 1850's, these writers and their creed of Christian familism halted four decades of fertility decline in the United States; they succeeded here in pushing back the anti-fertility effects of the urban-industrial revolution. The result was, for a time, larger families ... more children.

These Victorian Christians too, I suggest, are to be found in that Great Cloud of Witnesses.

The second example of an intentional Christian effort to reform and renew family life in America began much closer to our own time, and actually physically close to this very campus.

I speak of the creation of La Leche League after World War II. All seven founders of the League were Roman Catholic women from suburban Chicago. They had begun to meet as an action cell of the Christian Family Movement. Using a format designed by Canon Joseph Cardijn, the women met to discuss theology and social action, with concern not just for "the betterment of their own family situations but also with the life of families everywhere." As young mothers, they soon discovered in their conversations a common interest in natural childbirth and breastfeeding. This was a time when heavily medicalized deliveries and artificial "infant formula" were the progressive things to do. Seeking a name for a new entity, they responded favorably to a suggestion by one of their husbands, an obstetrician, who commonly gave to his pregnant patients medals from a St. Augustine, Florida, shrine, dedicated to the Madonna: *Nuestra Señora de La Leche y Buen Par-to* ("Our Lady of Happy Delivery and Plentiful Milk").

So constituted, La Leche League – in the words of Lynn Weiner, writing in the *Journal of American History* – "arose to defend traditional domesticity against the assaults of modern industrial life and to dignify the physical, biological side of motherhood in ways that proved to have surprising appeal to many Americans." Where 19th Century notions of "true womanhood" had focused on piety and moral purity, La Leche League stressed naturalism: mother and baby as symbols of simplicity and nature. In this way, the League reinvigorated the American image of motherhood with new language and

intentionality, focused on “the womanly art of breastfeeding.” Thousands of League groups mushroomed across the land, spreading to non-Catholics as well.

This movement contributed to an extraordinary, almost “heroic,” flowering of Catholic family life in America. Although fertility rose for all American religious groups during the 1940-70 period, it rose far more rapidly and continued longer among Roman Catholics. Indeed, there are signs that the celebrated American Baby Boom was largely “a Catholic thing.” Most dramatic was the return of the large Catholic family. In a survey conducted in the early 1950’s, only 10 percent of Catholics under age 40 reported having four or more children, a figure almost identical to the 9 percent for Protestants. By 1959, while the Protestant figure was unchanged, the proportion for Catholics had more than doubled, to 22 percent.

Still more surprising was the nature of this resurgence in Catholic family life. It flourished among the best educated: Catholic women who had attended college were bearing more children than Catholic women without a high school diploma. Increased fertility was also found primarily among younger parents: through 1965, each new cohort of parents was more pro-natalist in its attitudes than the group before. And it had a clear religious focus: more frequent attendance at Mass was related to more births.

I suggest that these “Founding Mothers,” as they were called by the League’s younger members, also now reside in that Great Cloud of Witnesses, that we remember in these days.

At the end, though, an obvious question arises: Why is there a recurring need for renewal and reformation of Christian family life? Once accomplished, should not that be enough? Just hold steady and true!

The answers should also be obvious: original sin; human sloth; the constant temptations of the Way of Darkness; and complacency among Christian leaders, teachers, and preachers. The intentional and often difficult efforts by bands of Christians to build a family-centered order for the effective nurture of children would be forgotten, or even derided as quaint or oppressive.

And so, after several generations – it seems – Christians have had to begin again. In this fallen world, so we are called.

Earlier in my talk, I cited historian Robin Lane Fox: “... accepted sexual practice in the Roman Empire had a range and a variety which it has never attained since.” Now, she wrote that in the mid-1980’s. I wonder if West Europeans and North Americans have since pressed beyond the Imperial Roman culture in their “acceptance” of a multifariously defiled sexuality? Certainly, Western family systems are now in shambles: record-low marriage rates; record-high average ages for first marriage; record numbers of never-married and intentionally childless adults; tumbling fertility; among those births that do occur, a record high proportion being outside of marriage; the commercialization of adultery; and so on.

In short, a Vast Moral Wilderness looms again. Even so, I can predict – or dare I say in this setting, I prophesy – that a successful new Christian Errand to reform and renew the family will arise ... as it has before.

Its specific nature this time I do not know. It will surely adapt in some ways to the times. In the language used and in outward forms, the new Errand may be very different from those that came before. Perhaps it has already begun; we simply do not know yet where to look. I am confident, though, that the Great Cloud of Witnesses – by their example and inspiration – shall play their part once again in its genesis, and victory.



