

Evangelical Gender Ideology

A View from Christianity Today Readers

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Abstract

Recent research on evangelicals has led to the conclusion that they are relying upon patriarchal gender ideologies, specifically the male breadwinner and female domestic family, as identity markers to distinguish themselves from others in mainstream America. The evidence from this study supports this notion in that (a) three gender ideology scales constructed of attitudinal items either maintain high levels of or *demonstrate increases* in the adoption of patriarchal gender ideologies in theology, women's roles in the church, and women's roles in the workforce, and (b) identity boundary maintenance concerns familial roles, specifically gender ideology.

Introduction

[1] This study utilizes Subcultural Identity Theory (SIT) to understand changes in gender ideology over the course of two samples of *Christianity Today* (CT) readers, one in 1990 and one in 2001. *CT* markets itself to evangelicals of all denominational affiliations (*CT* website). In analyzing its readers' responses to a variety of gender ideology and domestic task items, one should be able to ascertain how gender ideology and subsequent domestic relations have changed over the last decade for *CT* readers. This information will also provide quantitative data from a definite source of self-identified evangelicals regarding their gender ideologies and domestic relations. This is in contrast to smaller ethnographic studies on evangelical gender relationships (Bartkowski 2001; Bartkowski and Read) and a religious sample (Gallagher; Gallagher and Smith; Smith *et al.*; Smith). This sample is also different from 2 other quantitative studies on evangelical gender roles which are both based either entirely (Ellison and Bartkowski) or in part on (Wilcox) National Survey of Households and Families (NSHF) data. To identify evangelicals in these data bases, respondents are asked (a) to identify themselves religiously (Gallagher; Gallagher and Smith; Smith; Smith *et al.*) (b) about their beliefs regarding infallibility of scripture and other theological tenets (Ellison and Bartkowski; Wilcox), and/or their church attendance (Wilcox).

[2] Smith and colleagues have developed Subcultural Identity Theory to frame the larger sociological dimensions of evangelicalism's engagement with American culture at large. From a sociological perspective, evangelicals, as a subculture, have strong boundaries around a core set of values and a distinct orientation towards the "world." These boundaries are defined symbolically, and they provide a way for determining who is and is not a member of the group, specifically who is and is not evangelical. For evangelicals, boundaries allow them to be embattled yet thriving (Smith *et al.*). Boundaries, especially those describing gender ideology and family practices, provide insight into how evangelicals are actively engaged with the culture at large.

[3] Gallagher describes this phenomenon as symbolic traditionalism and pragmatic egalitarianism. Evangelicals tend to adhere to conservative beliefs in comparison to non-evangelicals (Ellison and Bartkowski; Gallagher; Gallagher and Smith; Hunter 1983, 1987; Smith *et al.*). These beliefs form the

subcultural boundaries evangelicals use for identity boundary maintenance. Evangelicals tend to organize their perceptions of self, other, and relationships using these major identity boundaries. In belief or doctrine, evangelicals know what they should affirm – symbolic traditionalism (Gallagher; Gallagher and Smith) – despite maintaining more progressive divisions of domestic labor.

[4] A possible explanation for the seeming disjunction between gender ideology and gendered behavior consists of boundary maintenance using SIT. That is, evangelicals have focused on the family as *the* ideological ground to distinguish themselves from the culture at large. In the mid 1980s and in research conducted recently, evangelical identity markers have consisted of theological tenets such as views of Scripture, views of evil, views of humanity, and views of sin (Ellison and Bartkowski; Hunter 1983, 1987; Wilcox).

[5] These markers may have shifted from theological tenets to familism. As Wilcox suggests, the family or what may be termed “family values” has taken on paramount importance among both liberal and conservative Protestants. Identifying the family as a core of evangelical ideology allows for a more nuanced definition of evangelicalism and consequently behaviors associated with evangelicalism. Wilcox uses the term “soft patriarchy” in describing a “softening effect” on men who are regular attendees of conservative churches, shown by greater emotional engagement with the wife and children. This might seem surprising, given that both feminist theory predictions, and popular culture depicts, conservative protestant men as patriarchal. This softening effect is related to familism and its increasing impact on the culture at large. The continued sentiment over the family allows the family to attain higher and higher levels of emotional status. As this emotional status increases, individuals feel discord when their families do not measure up to “The Family” of familism. With increases in familial sentiment, the hard patriarchy associated with more conservative and fundamentalist familism needs to be “softened” to allow Christianity a place in the secular world.

[6] This study will provide an important contribution to understanding on a larger scale evangelical gender ideology and domestic relationships from a sample of self identified evangelicals. We argue that in addition to things like church attendance and holding to the infallibility of Scripture, subscribing to an evangelical periodical such as *Christianity Today* indicates a deeper level of participation and adherence to the evangelical worldview. Therefore, this study provides a novel sample of evangelicals compared to those studies that utilize other sampling methods as well as theological tenets to distinguish evangelicals from non-evangelicals.

Methods

[7] This study is based on secondary analysis of responses to gender ideology questions given by a randomly selected sample of *Christianity Today* readers in 1990 (N = 739) and 2001 (N = 750). Each sample was obtained by randomly selecting on (an “nth” name based) 1,250 names from a list of all *CT* subscribers. One week before the mailing of the questionnaire, and three weeks following, postcards were mailed to encourage participation. The response rate was 59% and 60% for the 1990 and 2001 samples respectively. *Christianity Today* markets itself to evangelicals of all denominational affiliations (*CT* website). The unique advantage of this study is that it provides an understanding of evangelical gender ideology and domestic relationships based on a large sample of self identified evangelicals from a major evangelical monthly periodical.

[8] The demographics for the two samples were in general quite similar, except in regard to income, clergy status, and gender. The higher average income for the 2001 sample is to be expected as a reflection of the higher income for persons in the United States in general in 2001 than in 1990. However, since a greater percentage of the 2001 subjects were male (53% compared to 48% in 1990)

and clergy rather than laity (73% in 2001 compared to 60% in 1990), data analysis will control for gender and clergy/laity status. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is used to test for possible significant differences between 1990 and 2001 regarding gender ideology, and to assess the possible interactive effects between cohort year, gender status, and clergy/laity status. Because attendance at a Promise Keepers event might be a significant factor in effect gender ideology among the 2001 cohort (Bartkowski 2004; Messner), male attendance at a Promise Keepers event was also entered as a control variable only among male 2001 *CT* readers. A two-tailed .05 probability level will be used to assess the significance of a finding.

Measures

Gender Ideology Scales: Gender Role Attitudes Regarding Church, Theology, and Work

[9] The nature of the identical questions asked in the 2 samples allowed for the construction of 3 Leckert type gender ideology scales measuring theology of gender, gender involvement in the church, and gender involvement in work. Participants were asked to respond to each questionnaire item by checking either strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree.

[10] Gender role attitude questions were reversed coded where appropriate and then submitted to a Principal Components Factor Analysis to explore their construct validity for the proposed gender ideology scales. In addition to the Principal Components Factor Analysis, varimax rotation was utilized so that each factor is clearly separated and identified from the others (Kim and Mueller). Factor analysis identified 4 items that loaded on each of the gender ideology scales, where each of the 3 scales can be thought of as gender role ideology traditionalism scales, where the higher the score the higher the traditionalism. We believe a multidimensional construct of gender attitudes is more useful than the typical one-dimensional method of assessing gender attitudes.

[11] The Theology of Gender scale consists of the following four items: (1) God made men and women to be equal in personhood and value, but different in roles; (2) Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood; (3) The Bible affirms the principle of male headship in the family; and (4) Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin. The Theology of Gender scale demonstrates adequate "a" reliability ($\alpha = .72$). The Women's Role in the Church scale consists of the following four items: (1) Only men should be ordained; (2) Women may teach adult men and women in the church; (3) The position of deacon in the church should be held only by men; and (4) Women should be silent in the church and not speak. The Women's Role in the Church scale demonstrates adequate "a" reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$). The Women's Involvement in Work scale consists of the following four items: (1) Promotion of women of child-bearing age should be limited because they may get pregnant; (2) Employers should provide women with maternity leave of at least three months with guarantees of the same or equal job upon return; (3) Women should receive equal pay for work that is equal to that of men; and (4) Working women with young children are less effective as employees. The Women's Involvement in Work scale demonstrates an adequate "a" reliability ($\alpha = .81$). (See Appendix A for the full Gender Ideology Survey.)

Results

Gender Ideology Change between 1990 and 2001

[12] Our research found that there is no evidence of any difference between clergy and laity in gender ideology, either in being directly related to any of the 3 measured dimensions of gender ideology or in interacting with any of the other variables. Given this fact, the findings reported

below, and illustrated in Figures 1 through 3, will not refer to clergy/laity status. (See Appendix B for the Factor Matrices.)

[13] In regard to Theology of Gender, there is no evidence of any interaction effect between gender and cohort year ($F [1, 1135] = .07, p = .79$), nor of any statistical differences between participants in the 1990 cohorts ($F [1, 1135] = 1.24, p = .27$). There is also no indication of any statistical differences in gender role ideology between females and males ($F [1, 1135] = 3.00, p = .08$). See Figure 1 for a graphic illustration of these findings.

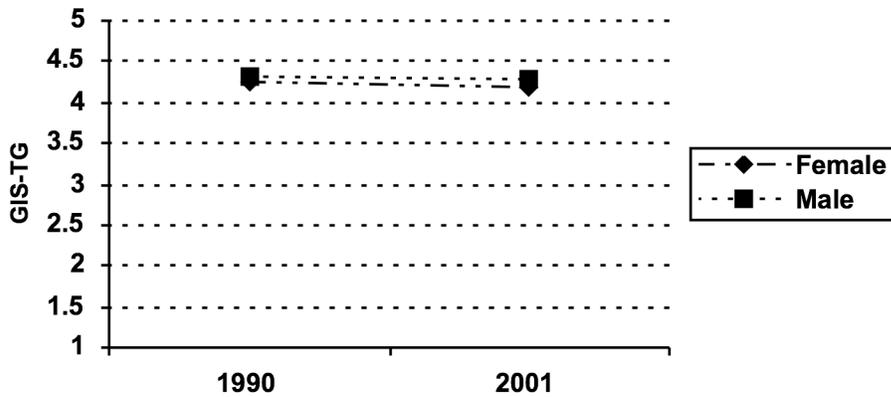


Figure 1. Female and Male Gender Ideology Regarding Theology of Gender by Cohort Year

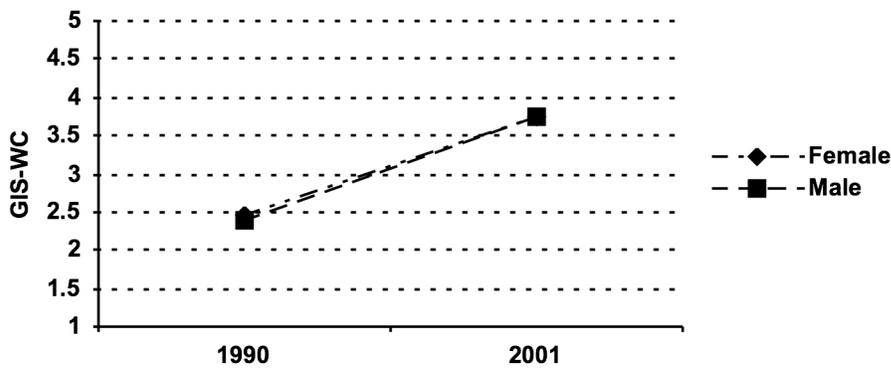


Figure 2. Female and Male Gender Ideology Regarding Women Participating In the Church by Cohort Year

[14] As can be seen in Figure 2, there is no evidence that subjects in the 1990 and 2001 cohorts differ in regard to their view of women participating in the church along gendered lines ($F [1, 1135] = .22, p = .64$). A Two-Way ANOVA reveals main effect increases between 1990 and 2001 *CT* readers for both genders, indicating that *CT* readers in 2001 affirm more conservative attitudes on women participating in the church than those in 1990 ($F [1, 1135] = 369.39, p = .00$). There is no evidence that males hold more patriarchal gender role attitudes than females ($F [1, 1135] = .18, p = .67$).

[15] As illustrated in Figure 3, there is evidence of a slight, yet statistically significant, interaction effect between cohort year and gender status, in regard to attitudes towards women in the workforce

($F [1, 1135] = 4.78, p = .03$). While women in the 1990 sample were slightly more liberal in attitudes towards women in the workforce, women in the 2001 sample were slightly more conservative than men. The most dramatic finding revealed in Figure 3 is the strong main effect for 2001 *CT* readers to be more conservative than those in the 1990 sample regarding women's involvement in the workforce ($F [1, 1135] = 1570.10, p = .00$). There is no evidence of differences between males, $\bar{X} = 2.93, SD = .82$, and females, $\bar{X} = 2.95, SD = 1.05$, in regard to their attitude toward women participating in the workforce, ($F [1, 1135] = .25, p = .62$).

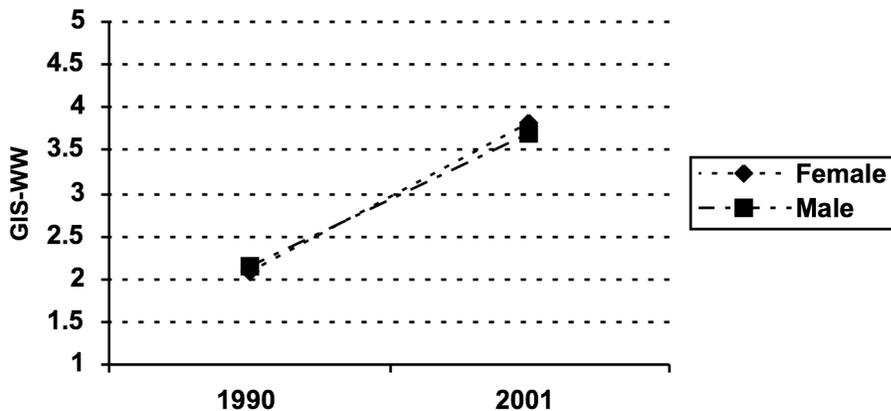


Figure 3. Female and Male Gender Ideology Regarding Women Participating in the Workplace by Cohort Year

[16] There is evidence that those *CT* readers that participated in Promise Keepers had more conservative Theology of Gender attitudes compared to those that did not participate in Promise Keepers ($F [1, 381] = 18.80, p = 0.00$). However, a One-Way ANOVA revealed that *CT* readers that participated in Promise Keepers had more tolerant attitudes towards women's participation in the church compared to those that did not participate in Promise Keepers ($F [1, 381] = 20.88, p = 0.00$). Furthermore, those that participated in Promise Keepers also had more tolerant attitudes regarding women's participation in the workforce compared to those *CT* readers that did not participate in Promise Keepers ($F [1, 386] = 6.61, p = 0.01$).

Discussion

[17] Before turning to theoretical attempts to explain the findings, it may be appropriate to rule out the possibility that the results are due to differences between the two samples. While we took care to control for differences in gender status and clergy/laity status, the level of education and income was higher for the 2001 than the 1990 sample. Secularization theory posits that gender ideology would become more liberal with increased levels of education and income. Yet, the results are in the opposite direction, as the more highly educated and higher income 2001 cohort had more conservative attitudes toward women's participation in the church and in the workforce.

[18] In our introduction, we suggested that our data might be a suitable test of Subculture Identity Theory. Interpreting the findings through the lens provided by SIT means that evangelicals holding to, or even moving in the conservative direction, could be understood as using gender ideology for boundary maintenance. Within evangelicalism there may be an assumption that with increased secularization in society, there is a general drift towards liberalism (Hunter 1983, 1987). One of the ways evangelicals can *draw the line* against this drift is to affirm conservative views on gender

ideology. Critical engagement by evangelicals with the culture at large occurs through maintenance of traditional religious ideology. Maintenance is demonstrated in this study by the finding that there is no change in theology of gender ideology from 1990 to 2001. The items that make up Theology of Gender scale include statements on both *created personhood* – “God made men and women to be equal in personhood and value, but different in roles,” and “Both Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood” – and *male headship* – “The Bible affirms the principle of male headship in the family” and “Adam’s headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin.” Our evidence provides little support of either a softening or a hardening over time among *Christianity Today* readers on these two dimensions. Parenthetically, it can be noted that these statements are taken directly from a statement formulated by Christians For Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, the more conservative of the two organizations (the other being Christians For Biblical Equality) within evangelicalism focused on gender roles and ideology.

[19] The findings indicate that gender ideology in regard to women’s participation in the church and workplace has become more conservative beyond mere maintenance of gender ideology. Given the perceived and real threat to traditional family life, and assuming that gender ideology is associated with familism, one could expect that evangelicals might react against liberalizing trends that sanction greater participation by women in church and workplace activities. Some evangelicals may be striving to form their identity boundaries around traditional family, of which gender roles are an important dimension. Although women are working more, evangelicals challenge whether this is good for family life. Increases in traditional gender ideologies regarding women’s roles in the church and the workplace provide evidence that evangelicals are resisting gender role changes, perhaps thinking such resistance will serve to support the traditional family model.

[20] In his recent book, Wilcox provides evidence suggesting that involvement in church has a softening effect on patriarchal beliefs and attitudes among conservative Christians. If it can be assumed that subscribers of *Christianity Today* are likely to be highly involved in their churches, our evidence suggests that the softening of gender ideology has not increased, but if anything has remained firm among evangelical Christians between 1990 and 2001.

Conclusion

[21] We conclude with two cautionary notes. First, it should not be assumed that evangelicals constitute a homogeneous community. Not all evangelicals are resorting to a traditional view of gender to maintain their distinctive identity boundaries. Currently there is a spirited debate over gender issues within the evangelical community, spearheaded on the one hand by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and on the other by Christians for Biblical Equality. As evidenced by the two edited books that they respectively sponsored (Piper and Grudem; Pierce, Groothuis, and Fee), each is actively constructing a biblical based gender plausibility structure they think is needed within the evangelical community. That is, there are many gender identity options available for evangelicals to adopt.

[22] A second cautionary note centers on the danger of assuming a one to one relationship between gender attitudes and gender behavior or practice. In her research on household decision-making within evangelical families, Denton suggests that gender ideology should not be equated with practice without first taking into account the broader context and subcultural meaning of the beliefs in question. If what we have identified in our research is a part of the way some evangelicals develop boundary maintenance, as Subcultural Identity Theory might suggest, these attitudes may in fact not be carried out in actual practice. A retreat to a more traditional view of gender ideology by some

evangelicals may be largely symbolic and restricted in its practice – which suggests that SIT is a viable understanding of evangelicals.

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Appendix A

Adam and Eve in America: *Christianity Today* Gender Roles Survey

On the whole, what do you think of women's roles in society?

- 1 They will continue to change
- 2 They have changed as much as they are going to
- 3 They will return to traditional roles

On the whole, what do you think of men's roles in society?

- 1 They will continue to change
- 2 They have changed as much as they are going to
- 3 They will return to traditional roles

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

(Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- 1 There is a lot of confusion about male and female roles in the Christian world today
- 2 Redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation
- 3 God made men and women to be equal in personhood and value, but different in roles
- 4 Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood
- 5 Many Christians today do not think highly enough of the values of motherhood and vocational homemaking
- 6 Many Christians today do not think highly enough of the values of fatherhood and active involvement by fathers in raising their children
- 7 Only men should be ordained
- 8 Women may teach adult men and women in the church
- 9 The position of deacon in the church should be held only by men
- 10 Women may hold the position of elder in the church
- 11 Women may hold the position of deaconess in the church
- 12 Women should be silent in the church and not speak
- 13 Christian leaders need to speak out on proper roles for men and women
- 14 The issue of gender roles has caused strife in the church I attend
- 15 The Bible affirms the principle of male headship in the family
- 16 Married women should participate in family decision making in the home
- 17 When both husband and wife work full-time they should share equally in parenting and household tasks
- 18 Since the Fall it's God's intent that every *woman* be married
- 19 Since the Fall it's God's intent that every *man* be married
- 20 It is God's intent that every married couple have children
- 21 Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin
- 22 The husband holds ultimate responsibility for all major decisions in the family and the home
- 23 Women on the job have the same chance of being promoted to executive positions as men do
- 24 Promotion of women of child-bearing age should be limited because they may get pregnant
- 25 Employers should provide *women* with maternity leave of at least three months with guarantees of the same or equal job upon return
- 26 Employers should provide *men* with paternity leave of at least three months with guarantees of the same or equal job upon return
- 27 Employers should offer day-care benefits as part of their benefits package in order to keep or attract qualified *women*
- 28 Employers should offer day-care benefits as part of their benefits package in order to keep or attract qualified *men*
- 29 Women should receive equal pay for work that is equal to that of men
- 30 Working women with young children are less effective as mothers
- 31 Working women with young children are less effective as employees
- 32 Married women with young children should not work outside the home

Appendix B

Factor Matrices

Principal Components Analysis - Communalities of CT Survey Items for Patriarchy and Theology

Initial Statistics

CT Item #	Communality	Factor	Eigenvalue	Pct of Variance	Cum Pct
3	1.00	1	2.23	31.87	31.87
4	1.00	2	1.42	20.29	52.16
15	1.00	3	1.01	14.36	66.52
16	1.00	4	.78	11.15	77.66
17	1.00	5	.66	9.39	87.05
21	1.00	6	.53	7.62	94.67
22	1.00	7	.37	5.33	100.00

Rotated Factor Matrix

CT Item #	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
3	.81		
4	.51	.46	
15	.84		
16		.79	
17	-.15	.77	.11
21	.75	-.12	
22			.99

Principal Components Analysis - Communalities of CT Survey Items for Women and the Church

Initial Statistics

<i>CT</i> Item #	Communality	Factor	Eigenvalue	Pct of Variance	Cum Pct
7	1.00	1	2.47	41.23	41.23
8	1.00	2	1.40	23.25	64.48
9	1.00	3	.87	14.50	78.98
10	1.00	4	.64	10.62	89.60
11	1.00	5	.36	6.01	95.61
12	1.00	6	.26	4.39	100.00

Rotated Factor Matrix

<i>CT</i> Item #	Factor 1	Factor 2
7	.68	-.31
8	.86	.11
9	.79	-.26
10	-.17	.78
11	.11	.75
12	.76	.28

Principal Components Analysis - Communalities of CT Survey Items Gender Ideology Scale for Women and Work

Initial Statistics

CT Item #	Communality	Factor	Eigenvalue	Pct of Variance	Cum Pct
23	1.00	1	3.12	1.21	31.21
24	1.00	2	1.77	17.73	48.94
25	1.00	3	1.53	15.27	64.21
26	1.00	4	.88	8.75	72.96
27	1.00	5	.81	8.14	81.10
28	1.00	6	.70	7.00	88.09
29	1.00	7	.43	4.32	92.42
30	1.00	8	.41	4.09	96.51
31	1.00	9	.19	1.88	98.39
32	1.00	10	.16	1.61	100.00

Rotated Factor Matrix

CT Item #	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
23	-.51		
24	.88		
25	.73	.35	
26	-.16	.23	.48
27	.22	.92	
28		.94	
29	.89		
30			-.85
31	.53	.19	.27
32			.84