

# Fatherhood in British Evangelical Christianity: Negotiating with Mainstream Culture

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# **Fatherhood in British Evangelical Christianity:**

## **Negotiating with Mainstream Culture**

### **Abstract**

This article explores fatherhood in evangelical Christianity in the UK, using a case study of the evangelical movement Newfrontiers, a network with nearly 200 UK churches that has been relatively successful against a backdrop of declining church attendance in Britain. Material from the movement's public discourse and participant observation and interviews in a local congregation are examined to explore how these Christians understand and practise fatherhood. Like evangelicals in the US, Newfrontiers combine older ideas about responsible, breadwinner fatherhood with new concepts of emotionally-involved fathering. Like American evangelicals, they aim to maintain biblical values while embracing contemporary culture in order to be relevant to society. What is noticeable is that despite the more traditional ideals their leaders advocate, evangelical congregations' fatherhood ideals and practices are very similar to those of mainstream UK society. Thus the article concludes that mainstream culture is exercising a greater influence on British evangelicals than theology.

**Key words:** fatherhood, fathering, religion, gender, evangelical Christianity

The study of fathering practices within contemporary evangelical Christianity<sup>1</sup> is a new field, and one located almost exclusively in the United States. Until recently, scholars studying evangelicalism and gender focused mainly on women (Griffith 1997; Brasher 1998; Baillie 2002), and those addressing fathering subsumed it within discussions of marriage and family rather than making it their central focus (Bartkowski 2001; Gallagher 2003).

The literature that has emerged in the past decade or so was initially concerned with discourses of fatherhood promoted within evangelical texts. Bartkowski (1995) and Bartkowski and Ellison (1995) compare mainstream and conservative Protestant childrearing manuals and identify a reduced focus on affective, egalitarian and child-centred parenting within conservative Protestant discourse. Evangelical authors concentrate on maintaining hierarchical parent-child relations, underscoring the need for submission to authority and gender-differentiated parenting roles. More recently scholars have explored whether and how these discourses are materialised through fathering practices. Bartkowski's work in particular suggests that important tensions exist within evangelical fatherhood discourses and for evangelical fathers. Bartkowski and Xu (2000) note the dual discourses in popular evangelical literature of "distant patriarchs" and "expressive dads". They conclude that in practice the "expressive dads" discourse weighs out: evangelical fathers rank higher than non-evangelical fathers in parental supervision and "affective parenting". Bartkowski's wider research into conservative Protestants and family life demonstrates that among evangelicals there is no consensus about gender and family relations (2001, 163). This is especially evident in the case of fatherhood.

Most research on conservative Protestant masculinity focuses on the evangelical Promise Keepers movement (hereafter, PK) – a movement that emerged in the 1990s to promote Christianity amongst men and, at its peak, attracted approximately one million men to its 1997 "Stand in the Gap" rally in Washington, DC.<sup>2</sup> In respect of fatherhood, Bartkowski (2004) argues that PKs work with four archetypes of godly masculinity: the Rational Patriarch (evoking traditional evangelical notions of defined gender roles and the man as leader and provider), the Expressive Egalitarian, the Tender Warrior, and the Multicultural Man; the latter three have been influenced by the secular and spiritual men's movements of the 1980s and 90s. Offering these differing ideals, he argues, enables PK leaders "to provide an elastic portrait of godly manhood capable of appealing to men in diverse life circumstances" (2004, 20). Indeed, men select from these discourses as they negotiate life in work, home and church aided by local PK accountability groups. Using Christian Smith's (1998) work on American evangelicals, Bartkowski maintains that PK men are engaged in a relationship of

“distinctive engagement” with secular culture. In other words, they embrace many elements and cultural forms such as information technology and therapeutic culture, while also distinguishing themselves from the mainstream by espousing values they consider to be “biblical”, upholding marriage and eschewing sexual license and “gender-blending” (2004, 38). Overall, they are “thoughtful navigators of the tumultuous strait between theological orthodoxy and social engagement” (2004, 145). Bartkowski and Smith’s work can be usefully applied to the evangelicals in my study and will be returned to later.

The theme of cultural negotiation reappears in Lundskow’s (2002) work (although he does not discuss fatherhood as explicitly). For Lundskow (2002, xii), being a Promise Keeper involves men in a “complex interaction of both evangelical and American culture, with particular notions of family and personal social-psychological relationships”. Furthermore, the versions of masculinity PKs create are consistent along class, race and gender lines: “PK men construct various interpretations of the main or most important aspect of being a Promise Keeper, yet these constructions follow more or less consistent patterns that relate directly to their upbringing and experience with race, gender, and especially, economic class” (Lundskow 2002, xii).

Wilcox’s (2004) research extends beyond PKs and focuses on evangelical and mainstream Protestants’ responses to changes in American family life (including the dual-income family, family breakdown and increasingly diverse family forms). The ideologies of fatherhood advocated by these two types of church are distinctly different, Wilcox discovered. Mainline Protestants advocate adapting to social shifts and welcome gender equality and family diversity. Evangelicals, in contrast, resist these changes by arguing that the traditional family with male leader and provider is best. But if these discourses are divergent, the attitudes of Christians in the pews are less so: evangelical men are less conservative and mainline Protestants are less progressive. Moreover, the *practice* of fatherhood in mainline and conservative families contrasts further still. Using data from the General Social Survey, the National Survey of Families and Households, and the Survey of Adults and Youth, Wilcox finds that evangelical men do less domestic work than mainline men and take a more authoritarian stance on child discipline, yet they are the most involved with expressive parenting and

“emotion work” in their marriages. Edgell’s (2006, 59-62) research produced findings consistent with this: men belonging to evangelical congregations do less housework but are more involved with their children. As Wilcox (2004, 13) puts it, “the soft patriarchs found in evangelical Protestantism come closer to approximating the iconic new man than either mainline or unaffiliated men do”. Conservative Protestantism “plays a role in domesticating men” (2004, 14), he concludes.

What about evangelical Christians in Western Europe, and specifically, in the United Kingdom? There is almost no European research on contemporary Christians and fatherhood, so this article seeks to explore this through an ethnographic case study of the evangelical movement Newfrontiers, one of the few recent sites of evangelical church growth in the UK. Unlike PK which is a para-church movement for men that has a specific focus on masculinity, Newfrontiers is a general church movement or denomination with local congregations. This article offers a point of comparison with the existing US research and an insight into the world of a minority religious group who are often misunderstood by outsiders. Probing the relationship between religious and mainstream (or “secular”)<sup>3</sup> understandings of fatherhood, this article provides a description of how an evangelical movement “does” fatherhood and of how its constructions of fatherhood relate to those of its non-religious peers. Like the US research discussed earlier, it explores how these Christians negotiate with their surrounding mainstream culture. Drawing on Smith (1998) and Bartkowski’s (2004) work, I will argue that, in relation to ideas and practices of fatherhood, Newfrontiers are steering a path of “distinctive engagement” with mainstream society.

The UK’s religious ecology contrasts with that of the US. Both are post-industrial countries where Christianity is the largest religion. Both are religiously plural, with substantial and growing immigrant populations (predominantly Jews in the US, and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the UK) who have brought their spiritual practices with them. In the US, the state is secular, with no (official) tie with religion, a foundational belief in religious freedom and a highly developed religious economy where the forms of Christianity on offer are multiple and popular, attended weekly by up to a third of the population and (at least nominally) identified with by the majority. The UK, in contrast, has experienced considerable secularization and the relegation, in large part, of Christianity to the

private sphere. Yet the monarch remains officially the governor of the church and Anglican bishops occupy a privileged position in Parliament. And while over two-thirds of the population claim to be Christian, less than a tenth are regular church attendees (in 2005 6.3% attended church on a typical Sunday (Brierley 2006, 12.2)). Unlike the US where mainline Protestant decline is counterbalanced by evangelical growth (Wuthnow 2007, 72), in the UK churchgoing has experienced long-term decline since the mid 1800s. Decline has accelerated since the 1960s (Brown 2001) and is now affecting evangelical churches too, albeit at a slower rate. Whether this constitutes the death of religion (Bruce 2002) or simply its reformulation as “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994) or “vicarious religion” (Davie 2007) is debated.

Unlike in the US, where evangelicals account for 20-40% of the population (Wuthnow 2007, 264), in the UK they constitute about 2% (calculated from figures in Brierley 2006, 5.7). Evangelicals are therefore far less significant than in the US. Evangelicalism is a form of “individualized” religion, embraced voluntarily rather than as an inherited tradition (Martin 2005, 135). Notwithstanding the work of national body The Evangelical Alliance (which provides an evangelical voice on public policy issues) and social action organizations (e.g. in the homelessness sector), British evangelicals are less sectarian or politically mobilised than American ones (Bebbington 1994). However, the basic evangelical characteristics – identified by Bebbington (1989, 1-19) as Christocentrism, conversionism, Biblicism and activism (mainly through evangelism) – are shared by evangelical believers in both nations.

## **Introducing Newfrontiers**

With 27,000 members in 191 UK churches<sup>4</sup>, Newfrontiers (formerly called New Frontiers International or NFI) is the largest surviving network of what in the 1980s and 1990s was labelled the “House Church movement”, now more commonly called “New Churches” (Walker 2002).

Worldwide, several hundred Newfrontiers churches exist. Newfrontiers began in the 1970s in the UK

as small groups meeting in homes and grew rapidly through the 1980s. Growth slowed in the 1990s and early 2000s, with figures from the last few years suggesting little (if any) growth. Newfrontiers is an evangelical movement, with theological roots in the nineteenth-century Brethren movement and Catholic Apostolic Church, and twentieth-century Classical Pentecostalism. Like earlier Pentecostals, Newfrontiers consider being “born again” essential and practise believers’ baptism in water and “of the Holy Spirit” and spiritual gifts such as tongues-speaking, a feature they share with the Charismatic movement.

Three features distinguish them from their Pentecostal forerunners. First, they believe denominations should not exist and should be replaced by the Church or “kingdom”. The second feature is their ecclesiology. They aim to “restore the church” to what they perceive as the New Testament pattern for church life. This led Walker to name them “Restorationists”. Their literal interpretation of the Bible shares similarities with fundamentalism. In their leadership structure men known as apostles, around whom house churches gathered, oversee networks of churches, which are led by elders. The third is the (often criticised) doctrine of discipleship or ‘shepherding’, in which Christians submit themselves to leaders’ guidance and authority (Walker 1998).

Stylistically, the churches that formed Newfrontiers emerged amidst rapid cultural change. Developing in the 1970s alongside the secular counter-culture and the neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Renewal movement in the mainstream denominations, they both appropriated and rejected cultural change. Like the “new paradigm churches” Miller (1997) studied in the US,<sup>5</sup> their attractiveness for the (predominantly young) people who joined lay in their contemporary worship style and the challenges they posed to traditional religious institutions, combined with their call to embrace biblical principles and reject the currents of sexual liberalism and feminism gathering speed in Western nations. As I will discuss later, their success and significance lies in – to borrow Bartkowski’s phrase (2004, 40) for the Promise Keepers – their “approach-avoidance dance” with mainstream culture.

## Methodology

The focus of the study from which this article is drawn was the social construction of gender in Newfrontiers. The study took place over fifteen months in 2000 and 2001 in a Newfrontiers congregation I call Westside, with follow-up visits two to three years later. This congregation was located in a British city.<sup>6</sup> The primary method of data collection was overt participant observation at 43 church “house group” meetings. House group meetings were informal; the two hours each Wednesday evening were spent chatting, studying the Bible, listening to a talk given by a group member, singing (called “worship”) and praying for and prophesying<sup>7</sup> to each other.

When fieldwork began, Westside had twelve adult members<sup>8</sup> (five single women, one single man and three married couples). When I departed fifteen months later membership had doubled, and eighteen of the 24 were women (fourteen single women, two single men and four married couples). Most Westsiders were in their twenties, apart from two couples in their thirties (the leader Chris and his wife Sarah, and supporting leader Mark and his wife Jane), a single woman in her late fifties (Jenny) and a married couple (Harry and Ann) in their early sixties. All but three were white and most were middle-class.

Besides fifteen months at Westside, I attended approximately thirty Sunday services at around ten other Newfrontiers congregations; two two-day “Prayer and Fasting” gatherings for Newfrontiers leaders and full-time workers; Newfrontiers’s summer festival Stoneleigh Bible Week for a day in 2000 and a week in 2001; and a gathering for Newfrontiers churches in the local region. I analysed Newfrontiers’s published literature and audiotaped sermons. At the end of the fieldwork period, I conducted structured interviews with twenty members of the congregation.<sup>9</sup>

My research used a feminist grounded theoretical approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Wuest 1995), in which theory emerged during the process of immersion in and examination of the research field, and was shaped by feminist epistemological commitments. Drawing on Strauss and Corbin’s (1998, 57-241) open, axial and selective coding techniques, fieldnotes and interview transcripts were



coded thematically. This practice revealed several key themes (the gendering of church roles, marriage, masculinity and women's singleness), and a larger number of subthemes, of which fatherhood was one of the most prominent.

Studying fatherhood among evangelicals necessitates examination of discourses of *fatherhood* as well as practices of *fathering* (employing Dermott's 2007 distinction). It also requires analysis of different settings, so the following section examines in turn public Newfrontiers discourse, interviews with local church members and participant observation within the congregation.

## **Fatherhood in Newfrontiers public discourse**

### **Public Newfrontiers discourse**

Unlike in PK, where there is more diversity in gender discourses, Newfrontiers literature and sermons advocate male authority in church leadership and family life. The overarching theme in public discussions of fatherhood at Stoneleigh Bible Week was concern about the absence of fathers from families. Leaders in Newfrontiers perceive father absence as a primary social problem. In the second seminar of a series on masculinity in 2000, entitled "In the Home", David Holden argues that fathers' involvement in their homes is central to "true manhood". He believes society is "at loggerheads" with the Bible: "our culture seems to be saying that this is somewhat archaic, this idea of a man in the home who takes responsibility and maybe takes some form of leadership". He argues that as society has neglected fatherhood, fathers have become passive and distracted, and "suffering" has resulted. Absent, "emasculated" fathers are unacceptable above all because human fatherhood should reflect God's fatherhood. This speech is cited at length to convey the energetic, urgent and persuasive mode of address:

The very root of society, of what we are, is being undermined because nobody's taking responsibility. The whole point was: I am a reflection of the father-heart of God... That's why he created families where our heavenly father could be displayed through earthly fathers. And for us when we become absent – you know what I mean by that: you can be in your home and yet be an absent father because you're not taking the responsibility of true fatherhood. So when I'm tired and I'm fed up and I think “oh I just wanna have some quiet time, I just wanna get away from everything”... something inside me says “now come on, if you do that you are not reflecting God's fatherhood”. [...] God's not like that with me.... He doesn't say “I'm too busy, I can't sort you out”... It's like when you discipline your children. You think “I can't be bothered to bring a line... with my kids or discipline my children when they're younger”. Every time you do that you are undermining the very purpose of God's relationship with us. The Bible says “God disciplines us for our good”. So every time I usurp that, I say “my wife's good at that, my wife's good at that bit, in fact my wife's good at most things about parenting”. So many guys seem to think parenting's left to the wife. Raising the kids? “Oh, that's my wife's interest”. Instructing them? “That's what my wife does”. Disciplining them? “That's what my wife does”. Loving them? “That's what my wife does”. Being affectionate to them? “That's what my wife does”. And every single one of those things it's the major responsibility of us as fathers to do... Why are there so many overbearing mothers today? I suggest to you that sometimes it is because of the neglect of the father. It's time to change. God never intended the father's role to be taken over by the mother. It is part of the function, the responsibility of the man in the home. (Holden 2000)

The equation of masculinity with divinity through human fathering (“I am a reflection of the father-heart of God”) has no counterpart in femininity; as Brickner (1999, 77-103) comments about PKs, this sort of rhetoric suggests an attempt to remasculinize Christianity in a society where church is perceived as feminized and unattractive to male onlookers. The erosion of the mother's role in preference for active fathering is noteworthy, reappearing in the next illustration.

At Stoneleigh 2001, leader Greg Haslam led a seminar on chapter four of the book of Malachi, basing upon it a passionate call for fathers to eschew passivity and absence and take a central role in their children's lives. This section of the Bible is one of the most popular with Christians involved in the American fatherhood responsibility movement, whose biblical rhetoric constitutes an important political strategy (Gavanas 2004b, 100-108).<sup>10</sup> Haslam applies Malachi 4 to the UK. He believes that post-war Britain, like post-exilic Judah, rejected Christianity, with countless negative results (he cites hopelessness, poverty, crime, violence against women, divorce, single parenthood and sexual experimentation). Haslam considers father absence the major cause of social disintegration in the West and "evidence of a curse on our land". Britain, he believes, needs revival: widespread return to faith in God that transforms social behaviour. This ethos dovetails with the Thatcherite individualism that formed the backdrop of 1980s Britain (arguably the peak of Newfrontiers' success); social change happens through individuals deciding to alter their behaviour, but within a prescribed framework.

What will bring this much-needed revival? Haslam asks. His answer equates spiritual vitality and social reform with active fatherhood:

The Bible would give this simple answer to one of the greatest things we could see in our nation today: better fathers. Better fathers. Here it is in Malachi 4 verses 5-6: "Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse". Now that's a statement that will ring long in your ears once you have truly heard it. If you like, it's God's final word to a nation in crisis. And I want to ask "What does it mean?" Well, at the very least it is clear that God views all of human social history primarily in familial terms. And says in words that actually would jar politically correct sensitivities today, that men, particularly fathers, are critical to his designs and desires for our social welfare. There will be no peace on earth until men learn again what it

really means to be a man, as God defines a man to be... This generation has been called the fatherless generation. And the loss of true fathers has had incalculable effects. (Haslam 2001)

Fatherhood occupies centre stage; the father is the linchpin of the family, which is the linchpin of British society, which is the linchpin of “all of human social history”. A contradictory approach to gender is evident: men need to work at, “learn”, “what it really means to be a man”. Haslam’s statement represents an amalgamation of gender essentialism and social constructionism. Along with essentialists who have supported more conservative notions of fatherhood he posits that there is an inner core (“what it really means to be a man”) that is created and defined by God. But whether “how God defines a man to be” points to an essential, pre-existing “nature” or a set of constructions to be assumed socially and discursively is ambiguous. A more solid social constructionism that has more in common with advocates of involved fatherhood active during the rise of 1970s feminism is present in Haslam’s call for men to “learn” their masculinity. As Donovan (1998, 827) suggests of the Promise Keepers, this might be termed “loose essentialism”. It appeals to a natural order, yet leaves room for change (Schwalbe 1996, 63-66). It may therefore be appealing both to those who seek change themselves (e.g., to conform better to the forms of masculinity valued in western cultures), and to church leaders like Holden and Haslam who want to bring about change within others.<sup>11</sup>

Haslam bases a “wish list for better fathers” on his experience of rarely seeing his father since his parents’ divorce when he was a child. Explaining his yearning for “a father who’d affirmed me and supported me”, “a father who’d trained me and disciplined me” and “a father who loved me”, he reveals how he believes his father’s absence affected him:

He wasn’t there when I got 10 O levels and later 5 A levels. He didn’t see me graduate. He didn’t see me when I got my postgraduate certificate and became a teacher. He wasn’t there when my first child was born, nor my second, nor my third. He didn’t see me get married. And he wasn’t there when I felt the call of God on my life to ministry at the age of 27. And he’s never visited the church I’ve pastored for 21 years and he’s only heard me preach one of the

many thousands of sermons I've preached. And that was at the funeral of my older brother. Now fathers, I'm saying to you that you need to be there for your children. Because the thing I've missed most about my father is that he was never there to say 'well done son, I'm proud of you.' But a child needs to hear that with an ache deep in their bones.

Haslam lists seven characteristics of good fathering: commitment; communication; generosity; teaching and guidance; affirmation and support; training and discipline; and love. Relating his lack of each, he encourages men to strive towards them, participating in their children's hobbies, hugging them, praising them and encouraging them spiritually. Father absence may be caused by divorce, over-dedication to the workplace, or laziness. Yet for Haslam it is inexcusable; men must change.

Like the fatherhood discourse advocated by the middle classes in the nineteenth century (Seidler 1988; Davidoff et al. 1999: 135-157; Davidoff and Hall 2002), Holden and Haslam's fatherhood discourse involves responsibility, authority, discipline and economic provision. Yet their emphasis on fatherly affection and participation represents a feminist "new" fatherhood that does not restrict childcare to women and is largely a phenomenon of the late twentieth century (Hearn 1987). Calls for egalitarian fathering produced for a brief period in the early 1980s not only an anti-sexist "new man", but also a "new father", who "is present at the birth", "is involved with his children as infants, not just when they are older", "participates in the actual day-to-day work of child care, and not just play" and "is involved with his daughters as well as his sons" (Pleck 1987, 93).<sup>12</sup>

Holden's commentary can also be located within a post-feminist backlash, however, for he argues that mothers have taken an "overbearing" parenting responsibility when men, to whom God gave primary parenting responsibility, have neglected it. However, while this can be considered an anti-feminist argument, Holden and Haslam are also criticising men. Ehrenreich (1983) argues plausibly that calls for men to take responsibility may in fact be a reaction not against feminism but against a male revolt against the breadwinner ideal that occurred in the 1970s. But the reassertion of fatherhood still contains anti-feminist aspects. If, as Holden argues, "every single one of those things" (including discipline, love, affection, instruction) is "the major responsibility of us as

fathers”, women’s importance is minimised. Although Newfrontiers prefer *mothers* to stay at home with their young children, women are implicitly being told to take a backseat, and that their parenting is less important than their husbands’. Like the 1990s right-wing underclass theorists bemoaning “feckless fathers” abandoning their children to crime and single motherhood (e.g., Murray 1990; Dennis and Erdos 1992; see discussions in Westwood 1996 and Bradshaw et al. 1999), Newfrontiers position mothers as unimportant compared with the indispensability of active fathers, on whose presence social health depends.

Holden and Haslam’s discussions of father absence closely echo British New Right discourse of the 1980s and 1990s. Like the Australian fathers Lupton and Barclay (1997, 144-145) studied, these middle-aged Newfrontiers leaders are the children of men their generation identifies as being particularly absent, whether or not correctly. Such men apply to their own fathers this absent father discourse, criticising absence and choosing instead a slightly amorphous notion of “being there” for their own children. Holden and Haslam’s conception that they are constructing a “biblical” fatherhood in contradistinction to the absent fatherhood favoured by contemporary Britons is questionable for two reasons. First, in the UK father absence is rarely suggested as preferable, except by those concerned about individual men who abuse female partners or children. Second, Holden and Haslam’s fatherhood ideal in fact closely resembles popular contemporary ideals.

Overall, Newfrontiers’s public discourse is primarily traditional in the sense that it seeks to restore an older discourse of fathering as responsibility and discipline. Influenced by a conservative political backdrop (the UK’s Conservative Party were in government from 1979 to 1997 – the very years when Newfrontiers grew, became established and honed its theology and social values), it draws on right-wing fears about father absence and the importance of re-establishing nuclear family values. Yet there are elements of a softer, more emotional role for the father that draw from the contrary egalitarian “New Man” discourse and assert the importance of fathers being more involved with their children and providing love and affirmation. Newfrontiers leaders fuse biblical material with insights that seem to have come from the mainstream or political discourses influential as they established themselves as a movement.

## Interviews in a local congregation

Wilcox found that his interviewees had less traditional views of fatherhood than church leaders and spokespeople. Because of differences in the research methods and how questions were constructed it is not possible directly to compare Wilcox's and my research, or the views of Newfrontiers leaders and congregation members.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, out of twenty church members questioned about whether they believed there should be a difference between men's and women's roles in marriage and family life, seven raised the issue of fathering, arguing that fathering is a distinctive role that should be valued. (Two thirds said they supported differences in marital roles – see Aune 2006). The relatively few comments about fatherhood may indicate that for them, the husband-wife relationship is the paramount setting for gender differences to be displayed; alternatively, it may be that because only three couples in the church had children, parenting was not uppermost in most people's minds.

Concerns about fathers' absence from families expressed in Newfrontiers's public discourse resurfaced in interview responses. For Rachel (aged 28):

I do think there are big differences between the role that particularly mother and father take in the lives of the children and I've spoken to my mum quite a lot about it and, and I think I tend to agree with quite a lot of what she says, and I think, um, that when, when you have children the mother is much more involved in the day to day, the nitty gritty [...] But generally the father's at work so he's not providing that sort of hands-on sort of micro parenthood, and I think the role of the man is more to give stability, to give, to provide security, to provide, um, sort of just... provide stability and an environment where the family is safe and secure and um...I mean...I think, um the, well the more you sort of meet and talk about these things with other Christians and hear talks and things the role of the father is so undervalued and underplayed so often in [...] families and the affirmation of the father is just so massively important and it's overlooked and it concerns me a lot what sort of effect that's going to have

on our society [...], with absentee fathers sort of almost the norm now and the whole role of the father being lost, um, and I think that it's very easy to sort of throw the baby out with the bathwater with this whole feminism thing because although you know there, there are things that have been wrong in the male-female relationship there are some things that are good and, and all the differences shouldn't be thrown out just because some of them are bad.

For Rachel, men's involvement as a strong and stable anchor is crucial, but mothers perform the "hands on" "micro parenthood" tasks. Others concurred: the father is a strong, guiding influence but mothering (notably breastfeeding and nurturing very young children) is a crucial activity only women could fulfil. As children grow, especially boys, the father's active role was deemed to become more important. Harry (aged 62), who has adult children, thought that fathers give stability and rationality to children and help to develop their sons' sporting prowess:

I see the man as a non-emotional person and the female as an emotional person and within a marriage it's, it's good that, um, they understand this and work within the roles that they have, um, without trying to manipulate uh or control and as far as, um, children are concerned I think that children need both a male and a female, um, because the man if he has a son can play, um, team games with, with the boy and, and teach him, er, what, what er a man does in sport and that. And a woman gives the boy or the girl the emotion that they must feel as well and therefore I feel that um, a, a perfect marriage really has male and female, er, sharing the responsibilities.

The leader of Westside, Chris (aged 35), argued that responsibility for financial provision lay ultimately with the man, but that he should also be emotionally involved with his children:

...in terms of a boy I would see the, the dad's role as really important in terms of when the boy gets to a certain age for there to be a real kind of bonding between the dad and the son and an



almost like calling out type thing to to manhood, kind of, certainly when they reach puberty a real kind of calling out to manhood, and I don't think a mother can do that.

About a third of the congregation, while they did not mention fatherhood specifically, held to an egalitarian conception of family life that did not necessitate gender roles or different activities for men and women.

This (albeit limited) interview data suggests that while fatherhood is not at the top of church members' agendas, some of the ideas articulated by Newfrontiers leaders are nevertheless trickling down to local congregations. There is some concern amongst several members that, in a society where many fathers are absent or do not have distinctive tasks, men's role as responsible fathers and role models needs to be restored.

## **Participant observation at the local congregation**

Extensive data on the gendered division of household labour or parents and children's private interactions was not readily available as I spent most of my time observing Westside's church meetings. Often these house group meetings took place in the evening in the homes of leader Chris and his wife Sarah or of Mark (one of two supporting leaders) and his wife Jane, so I was able to glean some information, for instance on who provided the refreshments. Both couples had young children, so I could sometimes observe the end of the children's bedtime routine.

Bartkowski, Edgell and Wilcox's US research indicates that Conservative Protestant men do less housework but undertake more parenting, discipline and emotional nurture. It is not possible to draw conclusions about housework, but a surprising finding was that men made refreshments at the start of meetings far more often than their wives did. Proportionate to their attendance, men were more than three times likely than women to make tea and coffee. Sometimes this occurred because their wives were upstairs putting their children to bed, suggesting a division of labour where women

care for children and men care for visitors. But this was not always so. The men sometimes put their children to bed; at other times this task had been completed and both spouses were downstairs talking with church members.

Notions of new fatherhood were in evidence, but so were traditional conceptions of the father as provider and authority figure. Observing meetings at Newfrontiers's festival Stoneleigh Bible Week, where thousands of people gathered for worship, I noted that young children were almost always held by their mothers, leaving fathers free to worship unencumbered. In these larger public settings, men seemed less involved with children than they did at Westside. Westside members perceived women as more interested in children than men, but also argued that it was important for men to participate in their children's day-to-day nurture. Within group settings men occasionally made jokes distancing themselves from close association with children, but these were simultaneously undercut by others' disapproval. One evening the group treated Harry and Ann's arrival with surprise: their daughter had just given birth and Westsiders expected them to be at the hospital. Harry said that he had not yet seen the baby, commenting "when you've seen one baby, you've seen them all", to which someone replied: "that's the sort of thing a man would say". The women laughed, making disapproving noises. Similarly, when Jane told the group that their child was teething and she wanted to soothe the pain with medicine, Mark commented: "you should get a scalpel and open it up so it can come through properly". While no one called this comment masculine, it can be read as the fathering of a tough, unemotional patriarch. And yet Mark and Chris, the only men in the congregation with young children, were observably affectionate and nurturing towards their own children.

Westside's agreement with egalitarian approaches to fatherhood centres on the liberal feminist ideal of increasing men's involvement in nurture. Westside encourage men to decide to give more time to their own children but do not consider socialist feminist arguments (e.g., Segal 1990, 25-59) for the restructuring of work and home. This reflects what Gallagher (2003, 55) calls "an evangelical penchant for advocating personal rather than structural solutions", but in a society where direct challenges to capitalist social organization are rare, it is also an assumption prevalent outside

the church. During one house group, Rachel read out an email she had received listing ways “the devil stops us being effective”. One was the devil’s tendency to make men “give their whole lives to their careers” and neglect their families. While this hints at social structural issues – the linkage between masculinity and work, the temporal demands of postindustrial capitalism – the conclusion that individual fathers must try not to stay too late at work is, like the structure it critiques, individualized.

Despite Westside men’s lesser connection with their children than their wives”, the two men with young children took an active role in their upbringing. Mark and Jane told me that when their children wake at night, they take it in turns to get up. And while Jane’s part-time job takes place during the evenings, making it convenient that she looks after their young children during the day, Mark is evidently involved in childcare and domestic tasks. When Mark was offered a promotion, Jane said she did not want him to accept it if meant longer working hours: Mark currently gets home in time to make the children’s meal and help put them to bed. Once, Jane told me that friends of theirs had recently moved to a “huge” house in the countryside. Their distance from the city where the man now works requires him to leave at 5.15 each morning, which means “he never sees his children”. While she did not question his breadwinner role, she regarded the move as “ridiculous” because it was important for fathers to spend time with their children.

Chris and Sarah followed a similar pattern. Chris works full-time and Sarah, until the child’s first birthday, stayed at home. Sarah then returned to work part-time. Chris makes sure that work does not take over his family life, refusing to stay at work beyond 5.30pm; given the tendency for those in his profession to work long hours, sticking to this decision is, he admitted, difficult, and sometimes makes him unpopular with colleagues. Chris and Mark (and their wives) considered their focus on their family greater than their non-Christian peers’. Yet it may also be, as Gallagher (2003, 118) remarks, that these men’s turn to involved fatherhood “is not just a trend among evangelicals but is part of a larger shift towards reassessing the centrality of careerism in men’s lives”. Men can justify escaping from the demands of work by asserting their need to be involved fathers.

If examination of public discourses and interviews with church members reveal how fatherhood is thought and talked about, observation of the meetings and lives of church members reveal how fathering is lived. Fathering practices evident at Westside involved financial provision and responsibility (the breadwinner role) and a high degree of emotional involvement and nurture. Westside men believed that they were different from mainstream society in spending more time with their families and focussing less on making money. But on the whole, they did not evoke theology in their talk about fatherhood, seeming instead to draw on the sort of ideas about men's role that circulate in many middle-class British communities.

## **Discussion**

The fatherhood discourses articulated by Newfrontiers leaders become diluted as they are interpreted and shaped in practice, in the opinions formed by believers and the fathering practices they adopt. The forms of fathering adopted by evangelical Christians are somewhat softer than those advocated by their leaders. Financial provision was important, but not at the cost of a man's estrangement from his children. Perhaps these younger men have heeded their leaders' warnings about father absence. Or perhaps they are less pessimistic about the state of British society, less convinced of the supremacy of fathers as moral centres of family, church and nation.

How should these evangelicals' approaches to fatherhood be understood? Are these British Christians approaching fatherhood in a similar way to their US counterparts? Material from Newfrontiers indicates engagement with both theological and cultural discourses of fatherhood, so how should this interaction between theology and culture be interpreted?

In what he refers to as "the 'subcultural identity' theory of religious strength", Christian Smith (1998, 118-119) argues that:

Religion survives and can thrive in pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging... In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural.

The evangelical movement, Smith maintains, is successful because it steers a path of “distinctive engagement”; it “has managed to formulate and sustain a religious strategy that maintains both high tension with and high integration into mainstream American society simultaneously” (Smith 1998, 150). He explains:

...evangelicalism maintains its religious strength in modern America precisely because of the pluralism and diversity it confronts... Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest, *thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat... [T]he evangelical movement’s vitality is not a product of its protected isolation from but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity. (Smith 1998, 89)

Rather than assuming that evangelical identity requires isolation from the mainstream and that incorporation of wider cultural values is a form of secularization or compromise, as theorists previously did, scholars like Smith argue that evangelicals’ strength and vibrancy depends on a progressive engagement between theology and culture; theirs is what Edgell (2006, 42) terms an “evolving orthodoxy”. Bartkowski (2004) applies Smith’s ideas to evangelical fathering, arguing that conservative Protestants appropriate cultural forms but also distinguish themselves by embracing “biblical values” such as marriage and the nuclear family and defined gender roles (albeit in theory more than practice).

This, I suggest, is what is occurring in Newfrontiers: Newfrontiers has been successful because of its simultaneous distinction from, and engagement with, UK society. Since its beginning in the 1970s its members have established firm boundaries around gender roles and sexual behaviour, privileging marriage and parenthood and marginalising family forms that do not fit that pattern (Aune 2008). Yet Newfrontiers is a modern, culturally accessible movement whose members integrate well with non-Christians. Evangelism through friendship is advocated, and they socialise frequently with people outside the church. Newfrontiers is the success story of Britain's "House Church" or "New Church" movement: while other New Church networks declined, fragmented or split from the 1990s, Newfrontiers grew, establishing themselves successfully in most major towns.

When I returned to Westside two years after finishing fieldwork, I discussed my emerging findings about the similarities between their approach to gender and that of mainstream Britain with Chris. "Yes", he said, "we want to be normal people doing normal jobs and living normal lives, but also being Christians".

The sorts of things said and done by Westside members undeniably resembled "normal" or mainstream British society, as evident through observation and analysis of recent sociological literature. In fact, the close resemblance between their treatment of fatherhood and that found elsewhere in British society was striking.

The two trends evident in discussions of evangelical fatherhood – traditional authoritative breadwinner fatherhood and new egalitarian fatherhood – are not unique to evangelicalism; moreover, they are noted by scholars as typical of late-modern approaches to fatherhood (Hearn 2002). On the one hand is a continued support for what may be called "separate spheres" notions: fathers as breadwinners, authoritative heads of the household and absent. These notions were stressed during the development of industrial modernity and reasserted as part of a backlash against feminism from the 1980s. On the other hand, feminist movements have in the last few decades advocated fathers' increased practical and emotional involvement in their children's lives. These two trends exist simultaneously in men's lives; being a father requires the negotiation of this uneasy dualism.

Furstenberg (1988) has identified the “good dad-bad dad” dichotomy in late 1980s American fathering discourses and practices. Feminist notions of nurturing, involved fathering are upheld and mirrored somewhat socially by slightly increased male participation in domestic labour, yet they coexist with images of “deadbeat dads” refusing to share parenting. Furstenberg suggests that the discourses that create this dualism are present in fathers’ everyday lives. For instance, while many men are now more involved during childbirth, supporting their female partners in the delivery room in a way that would have been unheard of in the nineteenth century, they are also more absent – increased rates of relationship breakdown mean many men are less involved in their children’s lives (Marsiglio 1995).

Lupton and Barclay highlight the “paradoxes and tensions” within meanings of fatherhood affecting fathering today. The central tension they describe thus:

Fatherhood...is commonly portrayed as a major opportunity for modern men to express their nurturing feelings in ways that their own fathers supposedly did not, and to take on an equal role in parenting with their female partners. This is the archetype of the “new” father which, many argue, is changing family lives and challenging traditional notions of masculinity... This “new” father archetype, however, is only one of the dominant notions circulating in relation to how men are expected to fashion and present themselves. Men are generally still expected to participate fully in the economic sphere, to act as providers for their families, and are encouraged to construct their self-identities as masculine subjects through their work role. (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 1-2)

Men appropriate feminist notions of involved fatherhood, but are also tied to notions of fatherhood as breadwinning and partially absent. This tension is exemplified by differential parental leave policies that assume women are the primary carers. Collier (1999, 49) similarly identifies “a fundamental paradox at the heart of the ‘new fatherhood’ ideology”. He suggests that the “values of autonomy, control and separateness through which cultural understandings of the ‘masculine’

continue to be made sit most uneasily with the qualities of the ‘everyday’ nurturing and sacrifice implicit in the ‘new fatherhood’ ideology”.

More recently, Dermott (2003) has contended that “involved fatherhood”, comprising emotional openness and a close, affectionate relationship, is a goal most men strive for, and that breadwinning has diminished as an ideal (if not as a practice). But her research with fathers suggests that the ideal of the intimate father is not effectively practiced – men did not have a clear idea of what “involved” meant practically. They would assert that they were “involved” without carrying out much in the way of practical parenting tasks. To return to the Christian fathers in Newfrontiers, it appears that while they talk about fathering in a similar way as the fathers Dermott studied (who were also in professional or managerial occupations), it also may be that, like American evangelical fathers, British evangelical fathers are more actively involved in childcare and forging emotional bonds.

This review of sociological research on fathering reveals strong commonalities between evangelical and mainstream fatherhood. In fact, to return to findings from Westside, within the congregation there was more engagement with mainstream or secular ideas about fatherhood than with biblical ones. Westside may well have more in common with their non-believing urban middle-class neighbours than they would have with a strict or fundamentalist evangelical group.

## **Conclusion**

The data gathered at Newfrontiers demonstrates that along with their less religious peers, Newfrontiers are negotiating the tension between older authoritarian and a newer egalitarian fatherhood. Aligned also with a recent backlash against new fatherhood, Newfrontiers leaders have placed greater emphasis on restoring the breadwinner father to prominence within his family. While their public discourse concentrates on maintaining gendered parenting divisions and giving fathers the key role, their congregational settings demonstrate greater flexibility and intimate fathering; as



Gallagher (2003) finds, evangelical gender and family discourses are more traditional than their practices. The negotiation of fathering ideals occurs both in the public context of the national Newfrontiers movement, where traditional and feminist portrayals are amalgamated, and in the more private local church where church leaders' pronouncements are moderated and secular ideals and practices take precedence over religious ones.

What stand out are the similarities between fatherhood discourses and practices in evangelicalism and in late modern UK society. Whatever their claims concerning adherence to scripture, the imperative to return to a New Testament tradition, or to openness to the direction of the Holy Spirit, these evangelicals conceptualise fatherhood in profoundly contemporary terms. In living out the tension around fatherhood, they mirror rather than challenge their more secular contemporaries.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Evangelical Christians are conservative Protestants; these terms are used interchangeably throughout this article. They believe in the authority of the Bible, Jesus Christ's divinity and 'the efficacy of Christ's life, death, and physical resurrection for the salvation of the human soul' (Hunter 1983: 7). Behaviourally, evangelicals manifest an individual and experiential attitude towards salvation, and seek to spread the message of Jesus to those outside the church.

<sup>2</sup> For research on Promise Keepers dealing less explicitly with fatherhood, see Schwalbe 1996, Brickner 1999, Williams 2000.

<sup>3</sup> I use 'secular' to mean pertaining to British society. My use of the word is not intended to indicate a position within secularisation debates in the sociology of religion.

<sup>4</sup> The latest figures are from 2006 as cited in Brierley 2008: 9.12. Figures supplied by Newfrontiers to me in 2004 put 2004 membership at 28,000 in 246 churches. Brierley's figures for 2004 are lower: 23,000 people in 176 churches (Brierley 2008, 9.12).

<sup>5</sup> Miller believes that new paradigm churches have taken up 'the *therapeutic, individualistic* and *anti-establishment* themes of the counterculture', 'but have simultaneously rejected the narcissism of these countercultural orientations' (1997, 21-22), especially by affirming conservative biblical doctrine.

<sup>6</sup> In order to protect anonymity I use pseudonyms when referring to the congregation and members.

<sup>7</sup> A prophecy is understood as a message for others that God impresses upon an individual.

<sup>8</sup> By ‘members’ I mean regular attendees. Westside had no formal membership policy.

<sup>9</sup> Of the four members I did not interview, one was a marginal member who attended rarely and I had barely spoken to. One was a regular member who chose not to be interviewed. Two were very new, having joined within two months of me beginning my interviews.

<sup>10</sup> In her research on contemporary US fatherhood politics, Gavanas (2004a, 2004b) identifies pro-marriage fatherhood politics as one wing of the fatherhood responsibility movement. From the 1990s the fatherhood responsibility movement emerged with the claim that eschewing absence and restoring responsible fatherhood (framed in terms of masculinity and heterosexual partnership) were crucial to social well-being. Masculinizing domesticity and domesticating masculinity were key to this enterprise. Christians constituted a major grouping within the pro-marriage wing of this movement, which used both sport and religion (notably in the form of the Promise Keepers movement) as arenas for these processes of masculinization and domestication. Gavanas considers the fatherhood responsibility movement ‘a multidimensional response to changing patterns of family formation as well as gendered and sexual practices’ (2004b, 28) that is not simply about rejecting feminist challenges in favour of a ‘return’ to traditional notions of fatherhood. Rather, responsible fatherhood also represents a continuation of century-old presentations of fatherhood – which contained calls for authoritative leadership *and* nurture – and includes points of agreement with feminism.

<sup>11</sup> Holden and Haslam’s efforts to persuade men to be more masculine could also be interpreted as displays of hegemonic masculinity (cf. Connell 1987, 1995); these leaders may be asserting and validating their own masculinity by subordinating that of absent, less involved or less dominant fathers.

<sup>12</sup> How far the new man existed, or remained a media projection, is disputed (Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003, 50-53).

<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, my interview schedule did not include a specific question on fatherhood. The data on fatherhood presented in this section comes from responses to the question ‘Do you think men and women should have different roles in the family and marriage? (If so, what should the differences be?)’

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