

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS MESSAGES

DIRECTED AT WOMEN

HONORS THESIS

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by

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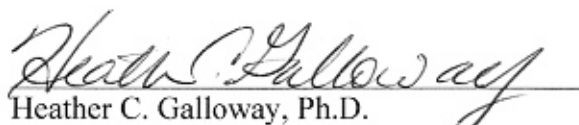
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze and critique the rhetorical messages aimed at women found on the websites of popular Evangelical Christian organizations such as “Focus on the Family” and “Christianity Today,” which produce and publish Christian faith materials such as blogs, podcasts, books, teaching materials and more. These organizations are generations old, “Focus on the Family” being founded in 1977 (Focus on the Family, 2019), and “Christianity Today” in 1956 (Christianity Today, 2019), and are widely used amongst those in the Christian faith. “Christianity Today” claims to reach over 5 million Christians through its network every month (Christianity Today, 2019), and “Focus on the Family” boasts an audience of over 38 million people through their radio and online presence globally (Focus on the Family, 2019). Many of the messages within these organizations specifically target the female audience, and offer advice and solutions for Christian wives, mothers, working women, and young adults the like^[OBJ]. The rhetorical ideological analysis of their websites serves to better understand the beliefs, attitudes, motives, and practices that they are attempting to spread. Coupled with the literature review, this thesis creates a picture of the harm these messages directed at women can cause to their self-image, self-esteem, and general well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history religion has been one of the largest influences on culture, social norms, and societal beliefs. Despite perhaps a perceived decline in religiosity in recent generations, 70.6% of adults in the United States still identified themselves as Christian according to a 2014 study done by the Pew Research Center. Out of those who identified themselves as Christian amongst both genders, 55% (out of 100%) were women (Pew Research Center, 2015). Due to this large population of women self-reporting their religious views, it is important to analyze the messages that they have the possibility of coming in contact with, specifically in regard to organizations like “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family” which have a large impact on Christian culture.

Communication literature has been widely produced on the impact of religiosity on women’s self-esteem, sexuality, body image, and the adverse effects it can have on them. There is also a wide range of rhetorical analyses and critiques of Christian ideology within different organizations, even previous analyses of “Focus on the Family”, which will be discussed here. This analysis however will be focusing specifically on the webpages of “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family”, and what those websites may suggest about their beliefs and values regarding women. These organizations provide examples of messages that have historically been taught to women, and the study of “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family” provides a practical application of the literature. The rhetorical analysis will evaluate the ideological rhetoric targeted to women through these organizations, which as their websites claim, have a combined reach of

over 40 million people between the them (Focus on the Family, 2019), (Christianity Today, 2019). These organizations have the possibility to persuade and influence women en masse, and as such the power of their rhetoric must not be underestimated. The following literature review serves to incorporate the valuable analyses of Christian rhetoric that has already been done and provide justification for the rhetorical analysis of the chosen organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Development of the Organizations' Rhetoric

The important starting point for this analysis is the origin of the rhetoric that has permeated the evangelical Christian right represented in “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family”. The formation of the evangelical movement, as well as the reactionary return to fundamentalist values that coincided with the liberal political movements of the 1960’s-1970’s, were spearheaded by the “Focus on the Family” and “Christianity Today” organizations.

“Christianity Today”, founded in 1956, is credited with bringing the previously considered fringe teachings of evangelism to the mainstream. As Alsdurf (2010) claims, “without question, Christianity Today and its leaders shaped evangelicalism in the last half of the twentieth century” (p. 22), which is bolstered by the rapid growth of monthly lay readers to the magazine, as well as pastoral endorsement, and spread of the publication. Billy Graham, founder of the magazine, paved the way for the evangelical vision, which at the time was relatively nonexistent. Alsdurf (2010) argues that the media representation provided by “Christianity Today” was monumental in the building of evangelism as an ideological and religious philosophy, and as such their rhetoric is fundamental to the evangelical foundation. “Christianity Today”, much like “Focus on the Family”, centers around a conservative fundamentalist tradition and, “rapidly became the voice for conservative Protestantism” (Alsdurf, 2010, p. 31). This places “Christianity Today” in an extremely poignant position, one that has not only heavily influenced Christian rhetoric in the past, but continues to provide a source for evangelical Christian

beliefs and values today. As such, an analysis of their website proves valuable in that they offer an insight into the rhetoric of the evangelical conservative base, and an understanding of an incredibly influential and widely consumed Christian media.

“Focus on the Family” is perhaps one of the only Christian organizations more influential than “Christianity Today”. Focus on the Family has historically not only formed fundamentalist Christian opinion, but has moved so far as to influence public policy and political figures. Their revenue report claims \$93,476,684 in revenue for 2016, \$79,670,015 of which coming from “contributions” (Focus on the Family, 2016), and this money is often used to contribute to political change. The Human Rights Campaign (n.d.) reported the organization donated to conservative politicians campaigns in Illinois and Missouri in 2012, donated over \$115,000 to defeat the Marriage Equality Act in 2009, and has campaigned for conservative political policies such as the right to conversion therapy and labelling of transgender people as “mentally ill.” This places “Focus on the Family” in an extremely powerful position, one they use to spread their rhetoric and influence much of the Christian sphere. This is outlined in Dowland’s (2010) article, *“Family Values” and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda*, which details the rise of the conservative Christian right as coinciding with the influence of “Focus on the Family.” Dowland (2010) refers to “Focus on the Family” as one of two of, “the most important institutions in the contemporary Christian right” (p. 607), and makes note of the organization’s heavy hand in rallying the Christian movement around a return to “family values”. The article outlines a shift from a Christian backing of relatively liberal ideas, to a victimization of the “traditional family,” which armed the Christian right with the power to attack women, homosexuals, and any other version of life that did not

conform to the strict vision of the nuclear family they were providing. Coupled with the power of money and influence, “Focus on the Family” has successfully controlled much of the conservative Christian narrative since their foundation in 1977. The influence and reach of this organization has been analyzed extensively, where this thesis hopes to contribute is to add to the analysis with a focus on their website, which is a hub for their teachings, materials, and ideologies.

The analyzation of previous literature provides three distinct categories for consideration within the scope of this analysis. The use of Christian rhetoric to create a singular, exclusory image of existence for women, to enforce obedience and submission from women, and the use of biological differences as a justification for female subordination. These findings summate the key points of the previous research, and provide an insight into messages that have historically been used by the Christian church.

Singular Option for Identity

A recurring theme among the literature identifies a particular issue within the Christian rhetoric, and specifically within the “return to family values” rhetoric that is utilized by “Focus on the Family” and “Christianity Today.” When discussing the “family” often the vision of family that is curated by Christian rhetoric is one that subscribes to the heteronormative, white-centric, middle to upper class version of what a family is. Author Shaw (2008) outlines this issue in her article by describing the strength of the family as being derived from the strength of the patriarch, because the consensus in the Christian faith is that the man is the head of the house this means the woman, therefore, is the follower. Shaw’s conclusion is that the existence of anything outside of

the traditional, for example, a homosexual woman or a female breadwinner in the family, is a direct threat to the “family” because it is a threat to the patriarchal control that has historically been in place. This article analyzed extensive literature produced by the Southern Baptist Conference, which is one of the largest denominations within the Christian faith and is historically one of the most influential (Shaw, 2008). Performance of gender, especially female gender roles, is essential to the success of the “family,” but the ability of the family to maintain this traditional transcription is becoming increasingly difficult in an economy and landscape that often requires a double income household. As Gallagher and Smith (1999) found in their interview based analysis, many evangelicals still prescribed to the rhetoric of a male lead household, often through the “provider and protector” notion, even if their wives provided a substantial amount of income to the home or performed their gender in a way that did not fit within the typical expression. This highlights the pervasiveness of the rhetoric and ideology surrounding the woman’s role in the family, and as the authors note, “the transformation of headship from authority-breadwinner to symbolic spiritual head and protector continues to provide an ideological framework within which individual evangelicals may maintain a sense of distinctiveness from the broader culture” (p.229). The “family” foundation, as it is represented by this rhetoric, is founded on the success of the male and female to perform their traditional roles.

This is echoed by Gish (2018), in her analysis of purity culture, which takes issue with the narrative that there can be only one type of woman, one type of sexual experience, or one type of family. As she states, “because families in which the heterosexual mother and father are married and living together with their biological

children are most likely to be white and middle class, the argument that this is the ideal configuration for a family further contributes to the marginalization of girls who come from or will become part of nonwhite, poor, or queer families (Gish, 2018, p. 9). This excludes countless possibilities of existence for non-traditional families, and places both men and women into neat boxes that do not allow for deviation. Christian rhetoric in this context does not allow for, or even acknowledge diversity and excludes possible members by alienating them due to their nonconformity.

Obedience and Submission

As the traditional roles of women are integral to the foundation of the family, so is the obedience and submission of the woman to men and or the church/state. In the case of purity rhetoric, a woman must be obedient to her father by remaining pure and then submissive to her husband by providing him with a virginal wife, one who submits to his sexual (and other) desires. This is articulated by the article, “Are You a Trashable Styrofoam Cup?”: *Harm and Danger in the Contemporary American Sexual Purity Movement*, which analyzes Christian literature on purity and sexuality (Gish, 2018). The idea that in order to make yourself as appealing as possible, or even acceptable, to a man for marriage you must remain pure is ultimately one that grants the father, followed by the husband, dominance over the woman. The implication of this is that failure to remain “pure” means a failure to obey, and ultimately failure to man. Even the basic principle of purity itself implies that there is to be a control and repression of sexual desires in order to please one man or another (Gish, 2018). This idea is reiterated by Shaw (2018), in which she describes, “because fundamentalists construct their identities in opposition to an external other, fundamentalist men give great attention to controlling the “other”

among them -- women” (p. 52). In the quest for control, if the traditional fundamentalist Christian cannot control the liberalization or modernization of society, they seek to control what they can: women. This is done through rhetoric that once again places the man at the “head of the household”, or as the “protector” of the woman. If there is a clear line in power division, the woman only has two options: submit or face repercussions. This is an example of the harm Christian rhetoric can bring to women by placing them in vulnerable situations, ones where they can potentially be controlled by men.

Biological Differences

One of the most popular arguments in Christian rhetoric used to get the Christian woman to conform to traditional gender roles is the use of the biological differences to justify said gender roles. Despite the common use of the belief that men and women are equal, the rhetoric used often implies there is still a hierarchy that exists within the gender structure. Shaw (2018) notes the fundamentalist argument that, “women and men are of equal worth before God, but that God has ordained specific gender-based roles” (p. 64). This is common rhetoric within the Christian faith, and it is rhetoric that once again subordinates women, and places them in positions of unequal status. This is also rhetoric that is commonly used within the purity movement, to describe the ways in which men are sexual creatures who react differently to sexual experiences than women, who are regarded as emotional beings rather than sexual ones. This rhetoric often relies on the scientific research that claims women become more attached to men following physical interaction because of the release of oxytocin in the brain, however it fails to recognize the equal ability of men to become attached to women due to the interaction (Gish, 2018).

Gish (2018) summates a common argument, “girls are “wired” differently from boys and thus make emotional connections more easily” (p. 14), which perpetuates the stereotype that women are inherently more emotional than men. This not only harms women by forcing them to believe they are vulnerable to emotional attachment arising from any sort of sexual activity, it also completely negates the ability of men to react emotionally or form relationships from sexual experiences. This argument disadvantages everyone involved, by using faulty examples of scientific research the narrative is controlled to enforce the idea that men and women are practically different species, who do not operate in the same way and thus must be treated drastically different.

Final Evaluation

The final article that will be discussed focuses specifically on the rhetoric of “Focus on the Family”, which analyzes the messages in their politically driven, *Citizen* magazine. Popp (2010) explores the magazine’s use of rhetoric to persuade its readers to take action against the erasure of Christian images in public spaces, and the relationship between media and images and its creation of a perception of the world. Simultaneously images inform our perceptions, while perceptions inform how we view images. This relationship is particularly important to the creators of “Focus on the Family”, because of their belief in the serious importance of Christian imagery in public spheres in upholding the strength and power of Christianity in society (Popp, 2010). The author argues that, “it is important that scholars, critics, and civil libertarians examine how groups use media to construct, maintain, and exercise power over visual culture” (Popp, 2010, p. 512). This call to action is the final piece to the literature review because it encapsulates the goal of

the rhetorical analysis to follow, to understand how the media created by “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family” influence not only the Christian culture, but the culture in general. Their websites offer what could be some individuals first interactions with Christianity, or their first interactions with these organizations, and whatever messages lie below the surface of the cover of their webpages has the ability to create tremendous change (positive or negative).

INTRODUCTION TO IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

In order to provide a fuller understanding of the rhetorical criticism approach and the ideological lens that will be applied the following explanation is provided. Sonja K. Foss's method of ideological criticism as detailed in her book *Rhetorical Criticism: exploration and practice* (2016) will be the primary method of analysis. According to Foss (2016) ideological criticism is utilized by the rhetor when he or she is trying to determine the ideologies being presented by an artifact. Even more fundamental however, is the understanding of an ideology. What is an ideology at its core? Ideology is the beliefs, values, opinions, and perceptions that create a lens with which to view the world. It is, as Foss (2016) states, "a mental framework—the language, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation that a group deploys to make sense of and define the world or some aspect of it." Ideological criticism therefore is the evaluation of that language, it serves to delve deeper into the latent meaning behind the surface and obtain the beliefs and core values the language is aiming to persuade to. Cloud (1998) describes rhetoric as "understood as situated, pragmatic, instrumental, and strategic discourse" (p. 389), which in relation to ideology is, "the structures or systems of ideas within which individual pragmatic speech acts take place" (p. 389), these definitions work together to create a fuller understanding of the goal of ideological criticism, which is to apply the study of discourse to the speech that is being analyzed.

Ideological criticism will be used to analyze "Christianity Today" and "Focus on the Family" because ultimately these organizations' sole purpose is to persuade and influence their readers with Christian ideology. Beyond the basic understanding of the ideology being presented (Christianity), which is especially obvious within these specific

organizations, is the understanding of values and beliefs contained within a certain ideology. Just as there is extensive diversity among religious teachings, such is there tremendous diversity of value and beliefs within these Christian organizations. Ultimately, understanding the latent meaning behind the messages contained within these organizations is the primary goal, along with applying those messages to the previous research which implies an imbalance in sex directed messages.

As discussed in the article *Memory and Myth at the Buffalo Bill Museum* (Aoki, Dickinson & Ott, 2005), those who are presenting information or ideologies have the ability to privilege certain narratives and images over others. In the analysis of the Buffalo Bill Museum a method of collecting, exhibiting, and (re)presenting was found. This means that certain images, artifacts, and stories were selected and placed in more important positions than others, and thus the narratives represented by those artifacts were perceived to be the dominant narrative by those who encountered the museum. This method of analysis is similar to that of the analysis of the websites of “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family”, by presenting information, articles, and topics on their front page and giving privilege to that information, they are creating a dominant narrative. The pages that they provide easiest access to, and promote more heavily on their front page, will likely be the pages that those who go to the website come into most contact with. Those images, ideologies and articles will be the ones selected for analyzation because they represent the dominant messages and rhetoric being curated by the sites. Ultimately, understanding the latent meaning behind the messages contained within these organization’s websites is the primary goal, along with applying those messages to the previous research which implies an imbalance in sex directed messages.

In order to reach that goal, the home pages of both websites will be analyzed, as well as the pages that contain directed content or information for women. Both “Focus on the Family” and “Christianity Today” offer specific pages dedicated to women and or women's issues, and as such will be evaluated for their content and subsequent latent messages. The entirety of these websites could potentially be evaluated, however due to the focus on the messages directed at women certain pages pertaining to sexuality, motherhood, the female body, and relevant female topics are going to be the primary source of analysis. For example the “Women” “Special Section” of “Christianity Today” promoted on their home page, and the tabs “Marriage” and “Pro-Life” situated at the top of the “Focus on the Family” will be examined. The images, content, layout, and presentation of information will all be factored into the analysis, as well as the priority given to certain topics over others. Through the ideological lens every aspect of these webpages is conveying a message, and as such every aspect of these websites will be evaluated and perceived through the rhetorical process.

ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIANITY TODAY

Introduction

“Christianity Today”, a faith based magazine founded by controversial Evangelical leader Billy Graham in 1956, claims to “consistently demonstrate through all its media how the true, good, and beautiful gospel can not only transform lives but bring hope and flourishing to individuals, cultures, and communities”, and boasts to reach over 5 million Christians (Christianity Today, 2019). Their website contains publications, educational materials, podcasts, and an array of other materials. They are one of the largest Evangelical magazines in the country, and they have a range of sister publications and websites that reach an even wider audience. Their website was chosen not only because of their lengthy history within the Christian community and large reach within said community, but also because they offer a specific selection of readings directed at women, an entire webpage dedicated to articles written for and (mostly) by women. They offer advice on relationships, identity, motherhood, careers, and controversial opinion topics, all filtered through the Christian lens. Viewers encounter the entire website, not just certain messages in isolation. However, for the purposes of this analysis the primary focus will be on the “Women” “Special Section” as it pertains primarily to the study of this thesis.

Below is an image of the homepage of “Christianity Today”, and the second image is of the “Women” page, which serve to illustrate both the modern, contemporary presentation of their articles and ideals, and the setup of the layout and articles as similar to a “secular” news site. Due to the fact that this is a current events magazine, they report on current issues, which can be seen in the images, however all of their reporting and

news incorporate Christian theology. This is a dichotomy, in the sense that accurate news reporting is free of bias, and when involving Christian ideology into representation of news this voids the neutrality of the reporting.

The “Women” page represents the traditional ideals that “Christianity Today” promotes, coupled with its attempt to tackle modern issues. Similar to the issue of news reporting wrestling with the inherent bias that comes with filtering news through the Christian lens, so is there dissonance between the goal of “Christianity Today” in promoting traditional values for women when creating conversation about modern issues. This is particularly exemplified by the article “Both Purity Culture and Hook-Up Culture Failed Me”, it suggests the answer does not lie in “secular” answers to sexuality, and addresses the traditional approach as having fault, but upon further examination still promotes “church fellowship” as the solution in the tagline.

Figure 1

8/1/2019
CT Women | News and analysis from the perspective of evangelical women

CHRISTIANITY
TODAY

WHO WE ARE
WHAT WE DO
NEWSLETTERS
GIVE NOW

Explore

CT
CHRISTIANITY TODAY

LOG IN | SHOP

SECTIONS
OUR LATEST
THE MAGAZINE
SUBSCRIBE

WOMEN
Reporting
Opinion
About Us

OPINION | DISCIPLESHIP

I Called Off My Engagement. I Didn't Feel God's Peace.

Looking for the right fit in a spouse is often less important than praying for the Spirit's blessing.

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT

OPINION | CHURCH

Both Purity Culture and Hook-Up Culture Failed Me

Then I found church fellowship.

ABIGAIL MURRISH

OPINION | DISCIPLESHIP

Your Peak Life Now: How to Face Career Decline with Faith

The best way to prepare for our inevitable demise is a healthy focus on death, discipleship, and worship.

MICHELE VAN LOON

INTERVIEW

What the Ordination Debate Misses: Laywomen in Ministry

Complementarians and egalitarians share common ground in lay leadership.

INTERVIEW BY WENDY ALSUP

Current Issue

JULY/AUGUST 2019

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Is the World's Next Missions Movement in Ethiopia?

The Nazis Persecuted Him. The Soviets Killed Him. Today He's Barely Known.

REPORTING

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/>
1/3

Figure 2

Christianity Today Home Page

The home page is cleanly and neatly organized, containing a variety of their most recent articles which provide commentary and insight on current events and Christian issues from “For Jesus Army Must the Wages of Abuse Be Death?” to “Americans Now Have Less Faith in Tech Than Church”. The articles each contain a modern, artistic illustration or high-quality image that represents the content of the article. The tagline for the News section is “important developments in the church and the world”. The majority of the website contains only three colors, red, white, and black, colors that often are associated with the Christian faith. Red representing the blood of Christ, black representing sin, and white representing the cleansing of sin. The use of these colors keeps in theme with the traditional, while presenting a modernized, organized, sleek version of it.

The main push on the home page of their website is to explore their online articles and content, but they also offer a physical magazine subscription which is promoted through the “subscribe” tab on the top of their page. They promote heavily their publications of opinion pieces, news reporting and specialized faith articles. Under their sections tab there is a division between “special sections” and “topics” in an effort more easily navigate the overabundance of articles posted every few hours. The “special sections” category is interesting because it contains sections such as Christianity Today Pastors, News, History, The Exchange (which contains articles pertaining to Evangelization of the non-Christian community), and a section dedicated to Women, however it is important to note there is no dedicated “special section” for articles directed at men. There are a number of resources dedicated to outreach to outsider members of the

community, but ultimately this website is more evidently catering to those already living and operating within the Christian faith, as is evident from the overabundant use of “we” in many of the cover page articles. There are options to donate, to subscribe, to purchase the magazine, but relatively few messages for those who may not already have a strong Christian belief system, for those who are questioning, or resources for a fuller understanding of Christianity itself. Ultimately the site appears to serve primarily members of the Christian faith.

Messages Targeting Women

The page dedicated to women, and its subsequent articles will be the focus of this analysis. There are three sub-pages contained within the “Women” page, a page for opinion pieces, a reporting page, and an about us tab. The modern, sleek, red, white, and black layout from the home page is maintained on this site, as well as a tailored selection of illustrations and images accompanying the articles (nearly all containing a depiction of a woman). They also offer suggestions to other female publications, and a subscription to their specialized newsletter for women. There are endless articles to choose from, from political opinions, sex, to motherhood and everything in-between. The offerings are ubiquitous, except for the fact that they all center around the female perspective.

An important feature of the entire Christianity Today website, and especially its page for women, is its modern, aesthetically pleasing interface. Many of the articles featured on the home page boast advice for the “modern” Christian woman, insight on the balance between career and family life, navigating the taboo topic of sexuality in the Christian faith in a “sex-centered” world, and debate on the abortion issue. Rather than a

“traditional” interface, and “traditional” topics, the website offers a rebranded version of Christianity. One that is inclusive, recognizes the ever-changing landscape of religion in the modern-day world, and, at least on its surface, accepts the modern-day woman for who she is. In tune with the new wave of “hipster” or “cool” Christianity, the Christianity Today website achieves an appearance of a contemporary, stylized, tailored version of Christianity. This website, as it appears, is not representative of the conventional, time-honored version of Christianity of days past, but rather a sleeker, more polished, contemporary idea of Christianity that pairs with its website.

At its surface, the entire “Christianity Today” website presents one very obvious ideology of course: Christianity. However, contained within the philosophy or ideology of Christianity is endless possibilities of beliefs, ideals, and values that can exist. It is simply not enough to present the basic ideology presented by “Christianity Today”. The underlying messages curated and targeted by this organization go far beyond that. Ultimately the two main points that arise from the analysis of this organization is, one, that “Christianity Today” values the woman, but as traditional Christianity also perpetuates, places her in a unique and separate category from men, making her experience inherently “other” from the men within the faith. Rather than place men and women in an equal and impartial category together, it separates them and continues the segregation of the sexes under the guise of perceived differences. This is done through the mere existence of a “Women” category and no category for men. Their website places women into a “niche” category rather than incorporating the thoughts, opinions, and issues women face into the whole of their website on an equal plane. Secondly, “Christianity Today”, although presenting a repackaged and idealized version of

Christianity, maintains traditional values and beliefs that have long been held within the church, and systemically disadvantage women.

Women: Separate but Equal

As can be seen very explicitly in their website, “Christianity Today” places men and women in two very different categories. Instead of one all encompassing “Christian” there must be a Christian man and a Christian woman. The inherent issue here of course is that while there is a blatant categorization for women, as a “special” category, there is no counterpart for the man. There is no specialized category that addresses the unique struggles or challenges of a man, which implies the entirety of the website is targeted to the male audience, with the exception of the “women” specialized content. This places the woman in an outsider position and while it is clear there can be differences in the lives of men and women based upon inherent sociological differences created by humanity, within the confines of the church there should be no inequality.

Historically women within the church have held significantly less power, as reported by Pew Research even in 2012 only 11% of American congregations were led by women, a figure that had not budged since 1998 (2014). The inequality of female leadership in churches across the country, and the power inequality of women compared to men, is one that has been a part of Christianity for centuries. This often comes from the inherent belief that men and women are “equal” while still being distinct, incredibly different creatures. This creates a divide, one that often suggest men are to be leaders and women to be followers. This contributes to the previous research found that cites large disparities between the lessons taught to women, about their bodies, sexualities, and

responsibilities, and the ones taught to men. When there are specialized messages, especially created to, as their About Us page boasts, “fill a unique content niche” (Christianity Today, 2019) it suggests that the broader application of Christianity on their website does not apply to women. It implies that the majority of the content that is created and distributed is not applicable to women within the Christian faith. When discussing controversial topics like abortion, which some argue should be a dialogue restricted solely to women, it neglects the involvement of men in the issue. Particularly with the abortion argument, yes women’s choice regarding the life of her child should be hers and hers alone, however in the context of the Christian belief system this conversation almost exclusively places responsibility and blame on the woman for becoming pregnant in the first place. Women should have the right to make choices about their body, but Christianity should hold both sexes accountable if there is going to be blame placed when abortion is discussed.

Ultimately when women are treated as though they must be special and held in a different, unique regard than men, without their being a similar application to men’s issues it is exclusory. Women are unique, but then so must men be treated in the same way. There is no address of the male struggle with sexuality, or body image, just a blanket coverage of Christianity that sub textually is applied to them.

“Christianity Today also suggests then that issues like feminism, gender discrimination, assault and abuse, issues they boast to be “women’s” issues that have “historically been overlooked” apply solely to women. What then about the men who are performing the gender discrimination? The men who are perpetuating abuse? The men who vilify and attack feminism without fully understanding it’s meaning? Placing these

issues under a label of “women’s” issues, you fail to incorporate men into the conversation they should have always been a part of. These are not women’s issues, they are human issues, and especially when factored into the Christian faith, they are Christian issues. Placing all of these topics under the guise of offering a unique help to women immediately alienates almost all men from ever reading them. If these topics are truly valued by Christianity Today, then they would be offered to all readers, not just its readers of the feminine persuasion.

False Promises

The second issue that arises with the layout and surface of Christianity Today’s website is that presents a false sense of revolutionized Christianity. Repackaging and refining an image does not in fact change the underlying message. The articles in Christianity Today contain many of the same traditional ideologies and values you would expect from a Southern Baptist congregation, but are reconfigured to appeal to a younger, more liberalized audience. This is a tactic churches and organizations across the country are taking, with the rise of the “hipster” mega churches, and the broader enticing of those outside of the faith with bright and shiny new pastors and faces, churches are able to draw in audiences that previously rejected Christian faith, only for them to realize the teachings have remained the same. This problem is discussed in George Sanders article *Ironically Religious, Blandly Fashionable* (2016), where he states, “hipster churches have co-opted cool (allowing participants to brand themselves as Christians-with-cachet) there is a cultural contradiction. Hipster churches are imbricated in a structural complacency that is leveraged by an assurance of personal salvation. After all, what is hipster cool if

not a blasé shoulder-shrug combined with an ironic acceptance of the status quo?”. The hipster church provides the façade of a shiny new religion without a revolutionary fundamental change that a new religion would require. An example of this arises in one of their most recent articles. A woman discusses her struggle with the purity culture of her past, as well as the secular “hook-up” culture she experienced in college, in which she describes both as leaving her feeling “hollow”. In the article she arrives at the conclusion that the choice of purity is one that is liberating, but in the end, it is still a message that promotes purity. The pathway you take to arrive at the same destination does not change the destination, it merely appears slightly different while you are traveling there.

This is the same for the writings and teachings of Christianity Today, although on the surface it may appear as though they are promoting an acceptance of any lifestyle that one may already live, in the end the judgement, and ultimately shame is delivered all the same. Calling those who have sex for pleasure “hollow” or accusing those who do not regularly attend church services of being Godless (as can be found by a simple couple of clicks on their site), are the same coming from a newly developed sleek website or an old, unseemly one. The issue here is not in Christianity itself, but rather the facade that the “new” Church is trying to present. It entices the masses with the promise of progressivism and freedom that comes with new forms of spirituality, but at its core continues teaching the same messages of condemnation, conformity, and guilt, which almost always disproportionately (and especially is the case with “Christianity Today”) target women.

The messages in the articles targeted to women continue to perpetuate the culture of shame and guilt regarding women’s choices. While they address the issues of a

modern woman, they force the issue into the traditional framework that systemically shames women. Articles regarding abortion, through their title appear to accept choice and female autonomy, upon further inspection condemn the right to choose and create shame and guilt in those who may believe the contrary. Women are encouraged to follow their career dreams, as long as at the end of the day they return to their loving husband and labor for their children. It is the hipster Christian way of implying that as long as you are complying to the same traditional rules and roles, in a modern way, you are accepted.

ANALYSIS OF FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

Introduction

“Focus on the Family” is a conservative Christian organization founded in 1977 by James Dobson, a psychologist and world-renowned Evangelical leader. His organization “Focus on the Family” has attempted to influence almost every aspect of American life, through radio shows, teaching materials, books for adults and children, to marital counseling and beyond. They also own and operate the website Plugged In, a website which informs parents of any suggestive content that may be in movies, TV, and other media and provides a recommendation as to whether or not it is appropriate for children. “Focus on the Family” is one of the most profitable and prolific Christian organizations in the United States, boasting over \$515 million dollars in revenue over the past five years (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). Their main goal, as is clear from their organization title and their slogan, “Helping Families Thrive”, is to offer support and guidance to families within the Christian faith, and as evangelicals, to bring other families to the comfort of Christ. “Focus on the Family” is a self-proclaimed “conservative” organization, and promotes traditional family values, and strict biblical interpretations. Their reach, spreading across countless platforms and mediums, is incredibly large, includes outreach all across the globe, including Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. It is an organization that impacts and influences all around the world, as well as heavily in the United States, and provides some of the most heavily used materials and media for Christian conservatives. Their topics of focus and importance are front and center on their websites home page, which are located below for reference.

Helping Families Thrive™

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“Focus on the Family helped me through very difficult times”
– Ruth Ann

GIVE NOW!

Hurting people like this need you. Give them hope today. Thank you.

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Give a single gift **OR** support family ministry monthly by joining *Friends of Focus on the Family*.

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Researchers found that it's important for couples to share the load of doing the dishes. Here's my takeaway: Women who had a husband who helped with washing dishes were happier in their marriage.

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ARTICLE:
Negotiating Chores With Your Spouse

EPISODE:
Roles and Chores in Marriage

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DalyFocus: Jim Daly's Blog

August 01, 2019

Facing Confrontation with Grace

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Figure 3

Focus on the Family Home Page

“Focus on the Family’s” website presents a rather different image of Christianity than the home page of “Christianity Today”. Much of their home page is dedicated to selling products, contributing donations (even setting up monthly donations), and promoting involvement in the many branches of the “Focus on the Family” organization. The upper right corner of the website in a much larger tab than the rest of the selections is the option to donate, there is also a dedicated shop for buying their materials. Their front page holds previews of marriage materials that range from \$15.99 to \$47.99, and the first selection from their online reading materials previewed are articles such as “Negotiating Chores in Your Marriage” and “Roles and Chores in Marriage”. They have a variety of topics highlighted at the top of their page, including marriage, parenting, life challenges, faith, social issues, and finally pro-life. The illustration next to their name is of a small child holding hands with two adults. It is extremely evident from every aspect of this page what the goal of the organization is: to promote traditional family values.

When clicking on any of the topics presented at the top of the webpage the website takes you to a variety of articles, blog posts, radio segments, and once again at the bottom of the page promotes their purchasable content about any possible topic. Under marriage is a pre-marital counseling kit and a book on how to be a “wholehearted wife”. The top of the page for marriage has a segment dedicated to “God’s design for marriage”, as well as a “dating your spouse” tab. There is an abundance of advice on how to cultivate a healthy marriage, how to prepare for marriage, and how to deal with marital issues. The impression is that if there is a question relating to marriage, this page provides an answer.

There is also advise for parents, which can be tailored by age depending on your child. There is a page dedicated to life challenges which offers advice on abuse, addiction, loss, trauma, and homosexuality. There is a social issues tab which covers a variety of controversial topics right on the front page, such as transgender and homosexual issues, physician assisted suicide, and a range of political movements occurring currently. Each tab contains the same layout, articles to read, radio segments to listen to, and materials to purchase. Each of their articles maintain the same format, a catchy title with a matching stock photo. Much of the website is the same blue/green color, accompanied by green accents and a white background. The site is not particularly modern, sleek or elegant, but it does not appear to be extremely dated. There is certainly a plenty of free materials that can be accessed. However, it is apparent from the sheer number of references to money that this organization is focused on selling products that boast their ideology.

The website contains a special tab dedicated to the pro-life argument, and when you click on the tab it refers to abortion as the killing of the “pre-born”. They boast their “Declaration for Life”, which you can sign as a petition to “be a voice for the pre-born and the sanctity of all human life.” This tab also offers counseling to women who have received abortions and feel “guilt and pain” regarding their action. This tab features almost exclusively photos of women, and material for women.

Return to Tradition

Once again, the ideology of Focus on the Family is not one that is secret, and in fact in comparison to the website for Christianity Today, is extremely foreword about its

beliefs and fundamental values. One of the main takeaways from this organization's website is a return to tradition, a return to "traditional" family values, and an extreme emphasis on the heteronormative, nuclear family. "Focus on the Family" leaves no room for question on where it stands about divorce, homosexuality, transgender people, sex before marriage, or abortion. Despite the fact that their fundamental goal is "helping families thrive," they exclusively refer to a family as marriage between a man and a woman, and their children. "Focus on the Family" wants to help your family thrive if your family conforms to the conventional, Biblical norms that it enforces.

As Christianity has historically maintained, the majority of the weight for conformity to traditional ideals is placed on the woman. Their marriage page promotes marriage materials, but only a book about how to be a better wife, not a book on how to be a better husband. Although the information offered about marriage is only slightly troubling, where these issues ultimately come to their most distressing head is in the issues of abortion and sexuality.

In their discussion of abortion, they cite endless accounts of women who received abortions and went on to live guilt-ridden, miserable lives until they realized the errors of their ways and admitted their crime. They recount the horrific trauma that people who were involved in abortions live with to this day. Most importantly they suggest vehemently that abortion is absolutely not, under any circumstances, an option. Whether or not you believe that a fetus in utero is a "pre-born" baby or a clump of cells is negligible, what is however important is the overarching and heavy message of guilt, shame, and regret surrounding the discussion of abortion. For women who have received abortions, whether for health issues, complications with the baby, or otherwise, it places

them in an impossible situation, one where they are met with judgement and shame. It is the message that so many women report, that they feel as though their bodies are not their own, and when the right to choose is turned into a bargaining chip for redemption, the only person who suffers is the woman. “Focus on the Family” does not allow for the autonomy of a woman, her body is not her own, but rather a host for a precious “pre-born” and any harm brought upon this baby is detrimental to the woman. Rather than meeting the women in these impossible situations with love and understanding, they offer humiliation and sin. This even further places an undue burden on women to regulate sexual activity and monitor sexuality as to avoid humiliation and shame.

Equally as harmful as their messages to women about abortion are the materials regarding homosexuality. Under their “life issues” page, there is a frequently asked questions tab regarding “Focus on the Family’s” answers to questions about homosexual people and their lifestyles. To name a few of the topics they address there is, “parent concerned that teen might be homosexual”, “parents concerned about young kids interacting with gay neighbors”, “deciding whether to attend a same-sex wedding”, “struggling with same-sex attraction”, and “responding to child who says he’s gay”. What is overwhelmingly clear from their materials and teachings, is that to be gay is to be wrong. They offer redemption stories of Christians who have “struggled” with same sex relationships but have come to find solace in the comfort of God (and in heterosexuality). The message here once again removes the autonomy and requires full submission to traditional values for acceptance. Any woman, or man, who exists outside of the heteronormative spectrum, whether that be sexuality or gender identity, is not accepted.

This message, that if you are a woman who does not marry a man, or you are identifying as a woman regardless of birth assigned sex, or you are a woman who exists outside of the traditional expectation for women, you have no option but to correct in order to receive the acceptance of the Christian church, is one that has been harming women for centuries and is perpetuated by the teachings of “Focus on the Family”.

The overwhelming message that women are being inundated with here, is that in order to receive acceptance in Christ you must relinquish your autonomy, sexuality, and personal desires. Their website offers hundreds of articles that supposedly hold the solution to any of the “problems” women could possibly face. There is a blueprint provided here for women within “Focus on the Family’s” version of Christianity that offers no allowance for deviation. Rather than teach the message of Jesus’ redemptive, radical love, they offer solutions to “problems” that are ultimately just fundamental pieces of women’s identities. What is troubling here is that “Focus on the Family” presents the idea that it holds the ultimate solution for women. The tab labeled “Life Challenges” located at the top of their website offers solutions if you say make a mistake and have sex before marriage, if you “struggle with homosexuality”, or feel as though you do not fit within this mold, “Focus on the Family” will provide you the materials to transform yourself into their pristine idea of a Christian woman. Their “Pro-Life” tab and general focus on the topic contained within the website’s homepage presents the single and only solution to abortion, do not have one. This ultimately cultivates feelings of insecurity, in the self, in relationships, it does not hand these issues to God as Christianity traditionally does, but provides a neatly packaged pamphlet to guide you.

Christianity as Consumerism

Another incredibly troubling aspect of the “Focus on the Family” organization is their overwhelmingly consumeristic application of faith. They offer hundreds of different books, studies, and other purchasable materials that in one way or another suggest they hold the answer to all of life’s problems. If your marriage is suffering, there is a group study for that, if you want to become a better wife, there is a book for that, if you want to know how to argue with a pro-choice woman, there is a pamphlet for that. There is an endless selection of materials that will supposedly teach you how to be the perfect woman, the perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect Christian. In the end regardless of the quality of the materials, this is troubling because it suggests a necessity for wealth. As historically has been an issue with religion this places religious interpretation in the hands of the wealthy and powerful. Through “Focus on the Family’s” lens, it is not only important but necessary to indulge in their materials to ascend to a higher knowing and understanding of Christian faith. The following book titles further demonstrate this point, books like “The Wholehearted Wife” which suggests in order to be a “wholehearted wife” not only do you have to subscribe to the Christian worldview, but that “Focus on the Family” has the insight into how to be a better, more dedicated wife, without factoring into account the limitless possibilities for ways women can be wonderful wives. The book “Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments”, which creates a victim out of the Christian follower, one that is being beaten down by the secular world, and the only weapon of protection needed is “Focus on the Family” produced content. Finally, “The Truth Project”, which ultimately suggests one single truth, and through their materials you will find this singular truth. These materials are promoted at every opportunity, and

there is not a page on the website that is free of an advertisement for some sort of lesson plan or book that will provide you with the knowledge and wisdom you need to become a better Christian.

Conclusion

In order to better understand the depths of the dangers of the messages propagated by Christian organizations a much lengthier and in-depth study must be conducted, however it is apparent from the evaluation of these websites that “Christianity Today” and “Focus on the Family” are continuing trends within Christianity of messages directed at women that ultimately victimize them. Despite its modernized and revived facade, “Christianity Today” perpetuates harmful stereotypes about women and men. It is essential to recognize women’s rights as human rights, rights that exist not just for discussion and understanding by women, but by all people. Until this happens, they will continue to be ignored and the status quo will be maintained. This is also tied to “Christianity Today’s” misleading representation of its values and beliefs.

Despite appearances, “Focus on the Family” and “Christianity Today’s” fundamental beliefs do not differ very much. No amount of repackaging can alter the subsequent underneath of the organizations. “Focus on the Family”, though more upfront and transparent about their values, promotes the same beliefs as “Christianity Today”. Harmful beliefs that have been inundating women with guilt and shame for decades. “Focus on the Family” represents and presents a singular and exclusive mode of existence, one that ostracizes and excludes the experiences of large majorities of people. Their harmful tactics and teachings about sexuality, gender, and abortion cultivate the

same feelings represented by study after study, that women are not allowed to make choices about themselves and their identity, and if they do they must live with the guilt and shame that comes with it. It places extreme value on conformity that sets women up to fail, failing at being a woman, failing at being a wife and a mother. It sets unrealistic expectations and provides a mold for life that many women simply will never achieve, or do not want to achieve.

Taken together, this rhetorical analysis suggests that Christianity does not allow for female failure. It places the value of a woman on her purity, on her duty as a wife, on her ability to create life. These religious organizations do not teach women the value inherent within them, but instead on what they can offer to the world. Why do so many religious women report low self-esteem? Struggles with sexuality and body image? Because just like the rest of the world, Christianity has created a set of values it believes women should abide by at all costs, and when those values cannot be met or upheld, the identity crumbles. Instead of embracing the biblical teachings of forgiveness and grace as exemplified in Ephesians 1:7 (New International Version), “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace,” it demands strict conformity to traditional values that does not include space for mistake or deviation. It creates a culture of excluding women and subsequently women’s issues, leaving women to feel trapped within their own sex. There is absolutely value and importance in religion, many find comfort and hope and life within the Christian faith, which is not to be discounted, but this does not mean it does not deserve criticism.

The research analyzed in the literature review provides a more expansive range of experiences, and ultimately a deep examination of teaching materials and articles

published by these Christian organizations may provide a more inclusive view of where these experiences spark from. It is with a great deal of hope that this research continues a conversation about the surface messages that Christian organizations send and how their underlying values can have negative impacts on women. It is not the point of this analysis to determine if these organizations intentionally send these messages or not. However, until the disconnect between what they say on the surface and the values they suggest below the surface are recognized, it is hard to imagine any real change occurring.

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