

REFOCUSING ON THE FAMILY

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Religion

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

Sean Kwo

May/2014

## Introduction

Focus on the Family describes itself as a global Christian ministry dedicated to helping families thrive. The Colorado Springs-based nonprofit claims to promote morals and values said to be grounded in biblical principles.<sup>1</sup> In practice, Focus has grown to be a formidable political force since its inception as a 15-minute radio show. They have led many political efforts, which one Focus on the Family liaison justified by saying that, “God has mandated that his people be involved with the civil magistrate and that’s especially true when the issues are marriage and the sanctity of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Focus on the Family has inherited fundamentalist views, such as the inerrancy of scripture, which were formed as part of a response to modernization. Such views are deeply formative in Focus’s justification for its actions, especially those thought to protect “the God-ordained institution of the family.”<sup>3</sup> Though Focus traces the beginning’s of the family back to God’s institution of it, the “traditional families” that they mention in their early rhetoric conjure up the images of 1950s sitcoms, as these are the closest approximations to the families they idealize. However, *actual* 1950s families hardly stand up to the ideals that Focus’s language might suggest and were largely unprecedented in their values.

The historians of religion that worked on *The Fundamentalism Project* used the term fundamentalism in their utilization of a comparative approach to describing what they saw to be a global phenomenon. One key aspect to these “fundamentalisms” is the practice of a “selective retrieval” of doctrines, beliefs, and practices by a group that has

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<sup>1</sup> “About Focus on the Family,” *Focus on the Family*, accessed February 2014, [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx).

<sup>2</sup> Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 184.

<sup>3</sup> “The Heritage of Focus on the Family” (Pamphlet, Colorado Springs, 2010), 9.

felt their identity is at stake.<sup>4</sup> Focus exemplifies this notion of “selective retrieval” with their careful selection of Bible verses to justify their familial themes. In doing so, they point to a divine pattern for the family’s existence that is authorized by a sacred origin story from the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Yet, upholding an ideal such as this proves difficult as both the external environment and Focus’s internal dynamics are constantly shifting. Indeed, historians that worked on *The Fundamentalism Project* suggested that movements like Focus that are presumably based on timeless, immutable “fundamentals,” adapt with striking fluidity to changing conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Focus’s evolving discourse exemplifies this mutable aspect of these “fundamentalisms.” As leadership has transitioned from founder James Dobson to current president and CEO Jim Daly, Focus’s discourse has changed as well. Dobson’s discourse was centered on protecting his ideal of the “traditional family,” often using the language of war, as expressed by the title and contents of his 2004 book, *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle* (the book’s cover is not too subtle in its depiction of a pair of wedding rings in the center of cross hairs). He believes the family is part of a “divine plan” that was “revealed to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and then described succinctly in Genesis 2:24...”<sup>7</sup> In his opinion, marriage between a man and a woman is the foundation that “every civilization in the history of the world” has been built upon

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<sup>4</sup> Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Introduction,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>5</sup> “The Heritage of Focus on the Family,” 26.

<sup>6</sup> Marty and Appleby, *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> James Dobson, *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle* (Sister: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 1.

and it has only recently become corrupted.<sup>8</sup> His discourse is concerned with preserving and promoting a family model that is most closely approximated by 1950s sitcoms. One can see his investment in this idea in his response to Hillary Clinton's claim that, "If it ever did, [the American family] no longer does consist of two parents, two children, a dog, a house with a white picket fence, and a station wagon in the driveway." After lamenting the "viciousness hurled at the family through the years," Dobson cited that 75 percent of children live with two parents, and millions of husbands and wives are "deeply committed to one another in bonds of affection that will never be shaken." He concluded by stating that many of them even have dogs and houses with white picket fences, but had simply replaced station wagons with minivans and campers.<sup>9</sup>

After Dobson resigned, Daly announced that the ministry would "forever be committed to the fulfillment of the mission so definitely served by both Dr. and Mrs. Dobson – helping families thrive."<sup>10</sup> This mission appears to be the pivot point that Dobson and Daly hold in common. Still, Daly seems to interpret what it means to help families thrive in a different fashion than Dobson did. Wayne Pederson, president of the media and health-care ministry HCJB Global, said about Daly, "He wants to take Focus back to the original mission of helping marriages and family, distancing themselves from

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> James Dobson, "Traditional Family Still Viable," accessed March 5, 2014, <http://drjamesdobson.org/Solid-Answers/Answers?a=b40de61b-b4ca-43b8-bad8-b8f4803f5a01>.

<sup>10</sup> "Dr. James Dobson Steps Down as Focus on the Family Chairman," *Focus on the Family*, last modified February 27, 2009, [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us/news\\_room/news-releases/2009/20090227-dobson-steps-down-as-focus-chairman.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/news_room/news-releases/2009/20090227-dobson-steps-down-as-focus-chairman.aspx).

the more political emphasis that they had under Dr. Dobson...<sup>11</sup> In addition to scaling back on the political front, Daly has also been more focused on an ecumenical approach, reaching out to those that Focus had previously ignored. Daly disclosed in an interview that he hoped to expand Focus's active mailing list to twenty million names from 2.5 million in 2006 over the course of roughly a decade. "I see greater influence ahead for Focus," he said. "The culture needs help, and we want to be out there.... The question is how do we deliver our content in a way that's listened to and not tuned out?"<sup>12</sup>

Daly embodies a more practical approach, which is also apparent in the way he seems to recognize the realities of modern families and marriages. A 2010 Focus pamphlet available at their Colorado Springs facilities as of February 2014, illustrates this change of pace. A section entitled, "An Impossible Dream?" speaks of how people long for "relationships, connections, continuity, understanding, communication—things we imagine people had in abundance a hundred years ago." Rather than getting stuck on what might be, Focus recognizes the facts of divorce, physical separation, and other conditions that affect families. While people desire an ideal home and family, Focus admits, "the kind of home they crave seems as improbable as a 1945 *Saturday Evening Post* cover." Rather than endlessly searching for a perfect nuclear family, Focus proposes instead to join God's family, as God is the true ideal father.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Refocusing on the Family," *Christianity Today*, last modified July 1, 2011, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/july/focus-on-the-family.html?start=5&paging=off>.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 68-9.

<sup>13</sup> "Coming Home: An invitation to join God's family," (Pamphlet, Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, 2010), 5-6.

As Focus continues to respond to new cultural needs, their discourse has had to adjust to stay relevant. I contend that Dobson's method of inventing and defending an ideal "traditional" family has become largely irrelevant to Focus's constituents and Americans at large, but that in continuing the Focus legacy, Daly has had to creatively reinterpret both Focus's and Dobson's missions in his efforts to validate his own. I draw on Eliade's theory of universal patterns to describe Dobson's mission and Jonathan Z. Smith's ideas about canon and exegetical ingenuity to show how Daly has to reinterpret his predecessors in order to simultaneously follow tradition and be innovative. Finally, I employ the ideas of Talal Asad to show that the fluidity of Focus does not deny that it is a cultural unity, but rather that Focus's struggle to balance contradictions presupposes a unity that, while imperfect, is uniquely Focus's. Focus, like all cultural entities, is working to adapt tradition to modern conditions. The evidence that follows shall confirm this point.

### **The Beginnings of Focus**

Although Focus on the Family is an enormous enterprise today, with net assets worth over \$50,000,000 as of 2011, the organization began with the vision of one man.<sup>14</sup> James Dobson, Jr., was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1936 to James Sr. and Myrtle Dobson, both of whom left him in the care of relatives while they toured the revival circuit. However, his mother quit traveling when Dobson was seven to raise her only child, fostering a welcoming environment and never disagreeing with him, according to Dobson, Jr.'s wife. In 1958, he graduated from Pasadena College, a small Nazarene

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Mellema, "Focus on the Family Federal Tax Form 990, Fiscal Year Ending September 30, 2012" *Focus on the Family*, 2012, <http://media.focusonthefamily.com/fotf/pdf/about-us/financial-reports/2012-990.pdf>.

school outside Los Angeles, where he had majored in psychology and was drawn to Christian psychology by one of his professors. He continued his education, pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Southern California. While completing his doctorate, he took a position with Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and shortly thereafter, he became a professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine. By the time he launched his *Focus on the Family* radio show in 1977, he had already been working in medicine for seventeen years.<sup>15</sup>

Dobson cited his exposure to the increasing numbers of troubled youth during the 1960s as definitive in the formation of his child development theories, “[M]y involvement in the field of child psychology is precisely what convinced me, beyond a shadow of doubt, that the family was in serious trouble,” he wrote in an e-mail in 2005.

He disclosed:

My years at the USC School of Medicine and Children’s Hospital, which came right on the heels of the sexual revolution, only served to confirm my belief that the institution of the family was disintegrating. I worked with children on a daily basis, and saw firsthand how divorce, abuse, and other forms of familial strife were tearing their lives apart. . . . I became convinced that the only hope for these broken and disillusioned kids—as well as for future generations of children—lay in the strengthening of the family unit and returning to the Judeo-Christian concepts of morality and fidelity.<sup>16</sup>

Dobson particularly seemed to have taken the 1960s to be a fall from a primordial state in which the institution of the family was still strong. Historian of religions Mircea Eliade took such nostalgic sentiments to be a yearning for the “prestige of beginnings.”<sup>17</sup>

However, the 1960s not only proved to be formative for both Dobson’s career as many

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<sup>15</sup> Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1968), 36.

American evangelicals at large took this decade to be a lesson in the dangers of moral relativism. It is somewhat unsurprising, therefore, that Dobson's response to the 1960s was *Dare to Discipline*, his first book for a general readership, published in 1970. This book was both a parenting manual and something of anti-1960s response to the "if it feels good, do it" culture, offering suggestions for inflicting minor, temporary pain on children to instill respect for authority. Though few outside the evangelical subculture noticed the work, it quickly sold two million copies to a largely evangelical readership.<sup>18</sup>

Even before *Dare to Discipline*, Dobson was already giving presentations on his parenting techniques to church and PTA groups in Southern California. By 1976, these presentations were so well-received that he took a sabbatical from USC and Children's Hospital to focus on public speaking engagements. He continued publishing books that sold in the millions, while his "Focus on the Family" seminars continued to attract growing crowds. In 1977, while on sabbatical—which also proved to be his retirement from academia and the medical field—he launched his first radio show. His show began as a fifteen-minute weekend program, but expanded to a 30-minute daily format that was picked up by nearly 200 stations nationwide by 1982.<sup>19</sup> Dobson's "folksy style" contrasted with much of Christian radio's "customary fire-and-brimstone sermons" at the time, while his professional background bolstered his authority. He quickly realized the power of his broadcast, which, by connecting him to listeners every day, presented him with a unique opportunity to win their trust and instill in them an orthodox Christian worldview.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 25-26.



Dobson had incorporated his speaking and media projects as Focus on the Family in 1977, but arguably, his most important innovation did not exist until two years later, when he hired five women to help answer the hundreds of letters he had been receiving every week. His many mailers sought to purchase from Focus's extensive media collection or sought advice from Dobson on a variety of issues. Focus also hired a team of part-time Christian therapists to call troubled "constituents," the title Dobson gave to the people that wrote and called Focus. Though Focus never required payment for advice, instead suggesting donations, financial support was not lacking. By 1987, the ministry's budget had outgrown the Christian Coalition's at its high point, almost all of it from individual donors. By the mid-1980s, Focus on the Family had become a full-fledged evangelical media empire. They had collected 700,000 names and addresses by 1985 and would clear two million names by the next decade. By 1988, Focus received 150,000 pieces of mail a month, almost all addressed to Dobson and mostly from mothers and wives. Dobson influence was skyrocketing and politicians quickly took note of this.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the launch of Focus on the Family nearly coincided with the birth of the modern Christian Right in the late 1970s, but Dobson initially took care to distance Focus from partisan politics. Despite being urged by Paul Weyrich to capitalize on his celebrity and take up conservative political causes, Dobson rebutted that he sought to gain credibility with struggling families and could not afford to become politically involved. Even so, Dobson began to make a physical presence in Washington with the delegations

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 26-28.

that he led for top Focus donors who met with congressmen, senators, and White House officials.<sup>22</sup>

As a matter of fact, Dobson began influencing public policy debates since the start of the 1980s. In 1980 when Jimmy Carter announced he would be holding a White House Conference on the American Family, Dobson asked his radio audience to write to the White House and request he be invited. The ensuing eighty thousand letters were enough to convince the conference organizer to permit Dobson to address a preconference event on child development. After the event, the organizer was apparently impressed with Dobson saying, “I didn’t know that people like you from a credible university existed [and] have the kind of views that you have.” The experience motivated Dobson to create the Family Research Council, described as a “Washington-based clearinghouse for conservative professors and researchers who could testify before Congress or provide policy briefings on ‘pro-family’ policy.” Focus only continued to grow more politically active, launching a public policy magazine and a new political radio feature, while Dobson hired Gary Bauer, a top domestic policy adviser to Reagan, to help manage the struggling Family Research Council. By the time Bauer left a decade later, the Family Research Council was the most powerful Christian Right group in Washington.<sup>23</sup>

Though Focus downplays its political involvements, the loyalty of its followers created what became possibly the most effective grassroots strike force in the nation. In 1992, one year after Focus relocated from Pomona to Colorado Springs, Dobson asked listeners of his radio show to back an unlikely amendment to the Colorado state constitution to ban the passage of gay rights laws. After his announcement, the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

campaign's chief organizer recalled, "Our phones began ringing off the wall," to which he added, "We had volunteers suddenly begging to carry petitions." The amendment passed with 53.4 percent of the vote, though it was later struck down by the Supreme Court. Instances of Dobson mobilizing evangelicals on the radio only became more frequent as Dobson became increasingly politically involved. Though, he insisted his forays into national public policy debates were strictly moral, not political. In his eyes, Focus was not changing so much as the culture was growing coarser and more tolerant of behavior once considered taboo.<sup>24</sup>

This brief history outlines how Focus has grown from a 15-minute radio show into a multimillion-dollar enterprise with significant political clout. Yet as Focus has become more complex, it begs the question: what was the unifying vision behind Dobson's Focus? Focus's mission statement offers one answer, which is: "To cooperate with the Holy Spirit in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible by nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide."<sup>25</sup> Yet, this answer begs another question: how did Focus arrive at the understanding that one way to "cooperate with the Holy Spirit" is by "nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family?" If we are to understand this, we must consider Focus's inherited Fundamentalist view of scripture.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 34-37.

<sup>25</sup> "The Heritage of Focus on the Family," 9.

## Fundamentalism

The term Fundamentalism came from *The Fundamentals*, twelve paperback books issued from 1910 to 1915 that received wide circulation.<sup>26</sup> This set of books was conceived by Southern California oil millionaire Lyman Stewart and written by authors he described as “the best and most loyal Bible teachers in the world.”<sup>27</sup> The books constituted a direct attack on religious “modernism” and gained scholarly support from a J. Gresham Machen, professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, who argued in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), that religious liberalism was not Christianity, but rather a new religion that replaced faith in God with faith in humanity and historical progress.<sup>28</sup> Some three million volumes of *The Fundamentals* were freely distributed to every pastor, missionary, theology professor, theology student, YMCA and YWCA secretary, college professor, Sunday school superintendent, and religious editor in the English-speaking world. Despite not receiving an overwhelming response, *The Fundamentals* became a point of reference for the fundamentalist movement.<sup>29</sup>

These books were part of the culmination of grievances that had begun toward the end of the nineteenth century. At this point in time, the realities of modernization had intensified. Social and economic problems associated with industrialization and urbanization included crowded and inadequate housing, the factory system, a changing family structure, and increasing crime and suicide rates. At the same time this discontent was growing, intellectuals in Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States, were

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<sup>26</sup> Richard J. Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” in *Piety & Politics*, ed. Richard J. Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1987), 12.

<sup>27</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 118.

<sup>28</sup> Neuhaus, *Piety & Politics*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 119.

struggling with the issues posed by modern rationality and religious pluralism. The theological resolution of these problems involved the progressive abandonment of supernaturalism and the recognition of the relativity and equality of all religious belief systems. However, these intellectual changes would not have large effect until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

The more general response to these pressures was gradual and it first appeared among clergy as increasing numbers of Protestants began to advocate a “New Christianity” and a “new theology.” The New Christianity was largely comprised of two closely related movements: the “Social Gospel” and “Cooperative Christianity.” The basis of these efforts was to deal with the growing perplexities of modern life in what its advocates thought to be a creative and responsible manner. Advocates of the Social Gospel replaced an individuated conception of moral and social ills in favor of an interpretation that derived from social, political, and economic realities over which the individual apparently had little or no control. Likewise, these advocates prioritized changing the structural conditions related to social maladies over the revivalist method of purging sin from “the hearts of men.” Their authority for this decision was the Bible, taken almost exclusively as a guide for social reform.<sup>31</sup>

The conservatives were skeptical about the Social Gospel since they thought its social concern was to the seeming exclusion of the spiritual dimensions of the faith. They generally thought that if they could successfully defend the doctrine of the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, they could maintain an adequate basis for dismissing

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<sup>30</sup> James D. Hunter, “The Evangelical Worldview Since 1890,” in *Piety & Politics*, ed. Richard J. Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (Lanham, University Press of America, Inc., 1987), 26.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

all erroneous teachings.<sup>32</sup> This view can be traced back to debates with Roman Catholic apologists on the legitimacy of the Protestant faith.

The defenders of the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries needed to demonstrate the sufficiency of Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice. However, if as the Protestants argued against the Catholics, neither church nor tradition was essential to understanding the Biblical message, then it followed that even simple Christians could understand the essential message of the Bible on their own. In much of nineteenth-century Protestant America, the idea that a person of simple common sense could rightly understand Scripture was rooted in the more general affirmation of the Scottish philosophy that for essentials, common sense could be relied upon. From this understanding, it follows that basic truths are much the same for all people in all times and places.<sup>33</sup>

Another important view tied to the Common Sense tradition was the idea that we are directly conscious of external objects themselves, rather than *ideas* of external objects. This principle could also be applied to memory so that we do not simply remember an *idea* of the past, but rather the past itself. These ideas became increasingly significant with the famous 1881 defense of the inerrancy of Scripture by Princeton theologians, who charged that the “Scriptures not only contain, but ARE THE WORD OF GOD and hence that all their elements and all their affirmations are absolutely errorless, and binding [on] the faith and obedience of men.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>33</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 110-111.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 113.

Viewing truth to be an externally stable entity put an enormous emphasis on written word. If truth were the same for all ages, and if it was most apparent in objective facts, then written word was the most permanent and precise way to display the truth. Religious experiences, rituals, traditions, or even unrecorded words spoken by God or Jesus were all transitory and therefore no one could guarantee that these matters would be objectively apprehended in all ages.<sup>35</sup>

The view of biblical inerrancy would be expanded in 1910, when the Presbyterian General Assembly, in response to some questions raised about the orthodoxy of certain graduates of Union Theological Seminary, adopted a five-point declaration of “essential” doctrines. Summarized, these points were the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth of Christ, his substitutionary atonement, his bodily resurrection, and the authenticity of miracles. These points were not intended to be a creed or definitive statement but because of parallels to various other fundamentalist short creeds and an historian’s error, they became the basis of what were long known as the “five points of fundamentalism,” characterizing the movement as committed to defending a few fundamentals of faith.<sup>36</sup> Each of these five points is expressed (with some additions) in Focus on the Family’s “Statement of Faith,” which they claim is established upon “seven essential tenets of the orthodox Christian faith.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 117. The usual form of the five fundamentals made “the deity of Christ” point no. 2 and combined the resurrection with the second coming as point no. 5. Ernest Sandeen exposes the error of the first historian of fundamentalism, Stewart G. Cole, who attributed the wrong form of fundamentals to the Niagara Bible Conference of 1895.

<sup>37</sup> “The Heritage of Focus on the Family,” 24.

### **“Fundamentalisms”**

This process of choosing specific aspects of a “religion” as fundamental, in response to a threatened identity, is what the historians of religion who worked on the Fundamentalism Project coined “selective retrieval.” These historians propose a class of family resemblances seen in “fundamentalisms” across nations that are formed by believers who feel that their distinctive identity is at risk. In order to protect their identity, fundamentalists fortify it with a “selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past.” However, the retrieved “fundamentals” are refined for the sake of pragmatism and accompanied by unprecedented claims and doctrinal innovations. These additions are hoped to be the means by which the fundamentals regain a charismatic intensity akin to that which initially formed the communal identity of these religious communities.<sup>38</sup> In this way, one can better understand why the mythic ideal family was a central organizing principle of Focus. Marty and Appleby note that fundamentalists intend:

[N]either an artificial imposition of archaic practices and lifestyles nor a simple return to a golden era, a sacred past, a bygone time of origins—although nostalgia for such an era is a hallmark of fundamentalist rhetoric. Instead, religious identity thus renewed becomes the exclusive and absolute basis for a re-created political and social order that is oriented to the future rather than the past.<sup>39</sup>

Members of Focus clearly seek to recreate the political and social order and they heavily utilize language of longing for a golden era. Though their mission is circumscribed by modern life, their rhetoric harkens back to a “traditional” America, conjuring up images of happy families and white picket fences.<sup>40</sup> Where did such a notion of the family come

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<sup>38</sup> Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Dobson, “Traditional Family Still Viable.”



from? Dobson claimed that the turbulent 1960s brought a social upheaval and the sudden disintegration of moral and ethical principles, including destroying the notions of absolutes, rules, and traditional beliefs.<sup>41</sup> Presumably before this time, the traditional family was still being upheld.

### **Searching for the “Traditional Family”**

Historian of religions Mircea Eliade proposes that religious nostalgia expresses the “*desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator’s hands.*”<sup>42</sup> The “location” at which the cosmos came into existence and began to spread also provides the possibility of communication with the sacred because it is at this point that the sacred irrupted into the world.<sup>43</sup> Thus, beginnings are regarded with nostalgia and reverence and “*it is the first manifestation of a thing that is significant and valid, not its successive epiphanies.*”<sup>44</sup> Finally, he noted that imitating these paradigmatic divine models expresses both a desire for sanctity and ontological nostalgia.<sup>45</sup>

Focus embodies Eliade’s theories of religious nostalgia in their proclamation, “We believe that the pattern for the family’s continued existence is contained in Scripture’s account of its origins.”<sup>46</sup> According to Focus, this pattern was “instituted and divinely sanctioned in the beginning, when God created one man and one woman,

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<sup>41</sup> Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 65.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 106.

<sup>46</sup> “The Heritage of Focus on the Family,” 26.

brought them together and commanded them to ‘be fruitful and multiply.’”<sup>47</sup> Dobson also claimed that this divine pattern should place the husband of the family as its head, since that is what Bible has ordained.<sup>48</sup> By reaching back to a sacred origin story, Focus claimed sacred authority for their idea of what a family is: based on a monogamous, heterosexual marriage and a patriarchal order.

However, the language that is evoked by the talk of a “traditional family” does not seem to hearken back to the time of the ancient Israelites. Instead, the images and language recall the families of 1950s television sitcoms. It is fitting that a fiction most closely corresponds with this version of the family, since as sociologist Stephanie Coontz disclosed, the “traditional family” is an historical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviors that never coexisted in the same time and place. The idea that traditional families were able to succeed in both intense intimacy between spouses while creating mothers who were totally available to their children combines characteristics of two rival family ideals that valued either the mother-child relationship or an eroticized husband-wife relationship. Though women were expected to fulfill both in the 1950s, the results were not as carefree as the sitcoms might suggest.<sup>49</sup>

Still, the 1950s were, as Coontz put it, “a profamily period if there ever was one.” Statistics bolster this claim with low divorce and illegitimacy rates, the nearly universal praise of marriage, the hailing of the family as the most basic institution in society, and a massive baby-boom that made America a “child-centered” society. At the end of the 1940s, for the first time in over 100 years, the age for marriage and motherhood dropped,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> James Dobson, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women*, (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2003), 67.

<sup>49</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 9.

fertility increased, divorce rates declined, and women's degree of educational parity with men severely curtailed. Between 1940 and 1960, the birth rate for third children doubled and that for fourth children tripled. Between 1945 and 1960, the Gross National Product grew by almost 250 percent and per capita income by 35 percent, and by the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of the population had what was called a middle-class income level.<sup>50</sup>

In light of all of these extraordinary circumstances, most people understood the 1950s family to be a new invention. The values of 1950s families were also new, as "The emphasis on producing a whole world of satisfaction, amusement, and inventiveness within the nuclear family had no precedents." Rather than being the "last gasp" of traditional family life with deep historical roots, the 1950s family was actually the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all of its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life. For the first time, men and women were encouraged to root their identity and self-image in familial and parental roles. The contradiction of "the sexually charged, child-centered family took its place at the center of the postwar American dream."<sup>51</sup>

Not only was the 1950s family hardly "traditional," it was also a historical fluke that was based on unique economic, social, and political factors. During the 1950s, real wages increased by more than they had in the entire previous half-century. This increase coupled with America's competitive advantage at the end of the Second World War, when every other industrial power was devastated, offered a level of prosperity that the "traditional family's" presumed values and strategies are unimaginable without.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 26-28.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

Moreover, not all American families shared the benefits of this fluke. Indeed, 25 percent of Americans were poor in the 1950s and only half of the population had savings in 1959. Additionally, 1950s life was not as white as sitcoms made it out to be. The influx of Mexican immigrants in the two decades after the Second World War was greater than it had been in the previous hundred years. Postwar Puerto Rican immigration reached a level such that more Puerto Ricans lived in New York than in San Juan. These and other minorities were almost entirely excluded from the gains and privileges that white middle-class families experienced.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, the families that did enjoy the prosperity and luxuries afforded by the 1950s were often achieved at tremendous cost to the wife, who was expected to serve both her husband and children. It is notable that tranquilizers were developed in the 1950s in response to a need that physicians explicitly saw as female. Others noted a sharp increase in women's drinking during the decade.<sup>54</sup> In many cases, a woman's designation as a housewife was not of her own accord. During the Second World War, thousands of women had worked new jobs, joined unions, and fought against job discrimination. After the war, management went to great lengths to remove women from automobile plants and other high-paying jobs, but for the most part women were simply downgraded to lower-paid "female" jobs. Though there were more women working at the end of the purge than there were before the war, lower pay and a lack of challenges encouraged women to define themselves in terms of their home and family even when they were working.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 31.

One “family value” that actually was a 1950s innovation was the opinion that to forego motherhood was to partake in a quasi-perversion. The women that failed to meet the new standard of a mother’s role were labeled neurotic, perverted, or schizophrenic and sometimes given shock treatments. It is unsurprising that by 1960 nearly every major news journal was using the term *trapped* to describe the feelings of American housewives. Perhaps this feeling contributed to the fact that between one-quarter and one-third of marriages contracted during the 1950s eventually ended in divorce.<sup>56</sup>

Despite what “Ozzie and Harriet” or “Leave It to Beaver” might suggest about the 1950s, the reality of the matter was much more complex and often much more disturbing. One would be hard-pressed to present this era as a golden age from which the family fell and yet, Focus’s rhetoric insists upon a “traditional family,” conjuring up ideas about a single model that has persisted since the time of Adam and Eve and best exemplified by an idea based on the 1950s. In Dobson’s eyes, things have only gotten worse as time has progressed. At least this was the justification he used for becoming more politically active as he said that Focus was not changing so much as the culture was growing coarser.<sup>57</sup>

### **Transition to Daly**

However, while the culture was worsening, so was Dobson’s health. Since 1990, Dobson has suffered a heart attack, a major stroke, and was treated for prostate cancer. Focus therefore developed plans for a post-Dobson era, taking into consideration the potential volatility of transitions for personality centered organizations such as Focus. In 2003, Dobson stepped down from the presidency and became Chairman of Focus’s

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 32-37.

<sup>57</sup> Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 37.

Board, yielding to former Reagan cabinet member and former Christian Coalition president Don Hodel.<sup>58</sup> Hodel's presidency lasted less than two years, however, and the presidency ended up with Focus veteran Jim Daly in 2005.<sup>59</sup> In 2009, Focus announced that Dobson and his wife had stepped down from the Board of Directors. They said that his other responsibilities at Focus would not change significantly as he would be continuing his "Focus on the Family" radio broadcast and continue to write the Focus newsletter.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, Dobson's last radio show and final newsletter took place less than a year after these announcements on February 26, 2010.<sup>61</sup> The previous November, Dobson said in a recorded message to his radio listeners that he found out at a November 5 board meeting that the board had already decided to ask for his resignation. He confided to his listeners, "The board of directors voted privately, on Wednesday, before we got there, to ask for my resignation, although their request was made with kindness and respect. . . . We can only guess the reason for their decision, because, frankly, I don't fully know. But it apparently had to do with closure on my tenure and the beginning of another." He added, "If I had spoken first, I would have offered three possible dates for our departure, all of them in 2010." Still, he stressed that he was in agreement with the decision and that both he and his wife had "felt the Lord was leading us to the same conclusion."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>59</sup> "Historical Timeline," *Focus on the Family*, accessed March 4, 2014, [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us/news\\_room/history.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/news_room/history.aspx).

<sup>60</sup> "Dr. James Dobson Steps Down as Focus on the Family Chairman."

<sup>61</sup> "The Heritage of Focus," 8.

<sup>62</sup> Art Moore, "Focus Denies Dobson 'Pushed Out' Of Radio," *WorldNetDaily*, last modified March 9, 2010, <http://www.wnd.com/2010/03/127489>.

Though once adamant about avoiding partisan politics, Dobson's views towards the end of his presidency at Focus went through such a massive transformation that in a 2004 interview he stated:

Those issues like the poor and the needy are all important to us. But when you compare those issues...with killing forty-three million babies, it's not in the same league. We're talking the unborn holocaust here... When it comes to preserving the integrity of the family, it's very hard to put anything else in that arena. ... Everything that has been predictable and stable for the last five thousand years has been based on the family. You can't shoot at everything—you won't hit anything. You have to decide the things that matter most and then talk about those. If that makes us sound extreme, I'll take it, brother.<sup>63</sup>

Dobson became uncompromising in his political views, in the name of “preserving the integrity of the family” and some believe that Focus kicked him out in order to change their image to increase their outreach. One man, Reverend Ken Hutcherson, suggested just this and challenged why Focus discontinued Dobson's radio show when Dobson was starting his own separate show shortly thereafter.<sup>64</sup>

Dobson's own words may reveal why Focus began and continues to distance itself from him. “Jim has a forward-thinking spirit of innovation that will only serve to build upon that foundation in the years ahead,” he wrote in a 2005 letter to Focus's supporters. “Specifically, he has an earnest desire, which is shared by all of us, to adapt to the needs of younger families in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to reach out to those who may never have heard of Focus on the Family before.”<sup>65</sup> Reaching out to the younger families may, in fact, be a defining issue for Focus's future. As of 2005, the age of the typical Focus listener had risen to thirty-eight, while the average age of a Focus mailing list constituent

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<sup>63</sup> Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 281-2.

<sup>64</sup> Art Moore, “Focus Denies Dobson ‘Pushed Out’ Of Radio.”

<sup>65</sup> Peter Panapento, “New Charity Chief Executive Keeps Focus on ‘Family,’” *Chronicle of Philanthropy* 17, no. 16:32 last modified May 26, 2005, <http://philanthropy.com/article/New-Charity-Chief-Executive/56449/>

was fifty-two. This does not bode well for an organization that seeks to help parents raise children. Daly recognized the fact that “The people that have connected with [Dobson], they’ve aged right along with him.” He added, “We’ve got to reach a very different twenty-something parent, and to the degree we need to communicate with them differently, that will be the stretch for us.”<sup>66</sup> As of 2010, Focus said its average listener was about 50, and a publisher of the Christian magazine, *Relevant*, said, “I don’t personally know any Christians under the age of 40 who pay attention to Focus on the Family or James Dobson.”<sup>67</sup> In response to how Focus will maintain its influence and donor base after Dr. Dobson’s retirement, Daly responded:

Most of Focus’s activities don’t have much to do with him. Our magazines, our pregnancy resource centers, our pastor-to-pastor outreach... our abstinence and character education, none of that has his stamp on it. None of it except the 30-minute radio show. The rest of it is all managed by our team. That’s what gives me hope that Focus will move forward.<sup>68</sup>

Clearly, Daly seeks to distance himself from Dobson and redefine Focus’s mission, but that task may prove difficult since he has to balance Focus’s legacy and Dobson’s mission with his own aspirations. Historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith’s theory of canon and exegetical ingenuity sheds light on the challenge that Daly currently faces. Smith proposes to conceive of canon, not as a static body, but as “one form of a basic cultural process of limitation and of overcoming that limitation through ingenuity.”<sup>69</sup> He describes how after a culture decides on a canon, or a set of delineating boundaries, they

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<sup>66</sup> Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 66.

<sup>67</sup> Stephanie Simon, “Evangelical Group Seeks Broader Tent,” *WSJ.com*, last modified February 6, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703894304575047500910380386>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 40.



are able to ingeniously interpret a variety of ways in which their limitations may be conceived. Daly is limited by the canon of the Bible and Focus's discourse under Dobson. His challenge has been to consider and creatively reinterpret these canonical elements as he attempts to move Focus in a new direction.

### **Daly's Discourse**

Daly seems to recognize the difficulties of reconciling his inheritances with his own mission when he said, "The challenge for the younger leadership is how do we stay true to the principles while also reaching the younger families."<sup>70</sup> In understanding how he responds to this issue, we shall examine how Daly navigates and creatively interprets these disparities.

As previously mentioned, shortly after Dobson's resignation, Daly announced that the ministry would "forever be committed to the fulfillment of the mission so definitely served by both Dr. and Mrs. Dobson – helping families thrive."<sup>71</sup> Dr. Dobson has made many statements about his positions over the years and throughout his books, but in this pronouncement, Daly simplified the way in which he would be carrying on Dobson's legacy to: "helping families thrive." Still, Daly has proclaimed himself to be both "pro-life" and "pro-traditional marriage"—positions he certainly holds in common with Dobson—and said Focus will "definitely be rigorous in the policy debate."<sup>72</sup>

Yet, Daly clearly seeks to redefine Focus on the Family's mission, as seen in how he reinterpreted the dynamics of Dobson's authority in relation to the Bible. Daly said of

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<sup>70</sup> Panapento, "New Charity Chief Executive Keeps Focus on 'Family.'"

<sup>71</sup> "Dr. James Dobson Steps Down as Focus on the Family Chairman."

<sup>72</sup> Jim Daly, interview by Jacqueline L. Salmon, *The Washington Post Company*, June 26, 2009, 1,

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/26/AR2009062603908.html>.

Focus's founder, "Though he's no longer directly involved with the organization, I can assure you that I, along with the current leadership team, remain committed to the principles he articulated. That is because they aren't merely *his* principles—they are rooted in the timeless foundation of biblical truth."<sup>73</sup> Here, he has subjugated Dobson's authority to the Bible while assuring readers that Focus is still committed to Dobson's principles. By giving the Bible ultimate authority, Daly gives himself the freedom to emphasize the Biblical themes that he finds fit while creating a figurative anchor point between Dobson and himself. Focus's second core principle also serves to bolster this idea as Focus stated, "This ministry was God's idea, and we do not own it. We are simply the stewards of the opportunities and the resources He sends our way."<sup>74</sup> Having established God as Focus's true founder and the Bible as the "timeless foundation" for Focus's principles, Daly is free to diverge from Dobson's non-essentialized discourse and he has done just that.

Although Daly mentioned that "family is under assault" in his first year of presidency, echoing the language of Dobson, he has since stated that "I think what we've got to do in the Christian community is be far more humble ... and not call it a war, a culture war."<sup>75</sup> In addition to softening the tone of his discourse, Daly also seeks to expand who is part of it. "Maybe we've been looking in the wrong direction and we've got to be more ecumenical," he said. He added that for years, evangelical conservatives

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<sup>73</sup> "The Heritage of Focus on the Family," 4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 29; Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 19. This core principle may be traced to Dobson himself, who understood Focus to be an answer to his father's prayer to "win souls for the Lord."

<sup>75</sup> Panapento, "New Charity Chief Executive Keeps Focus on 'Family.'"; Mitchell Landsberg, "Focus on the Family head takes conciliatory tone after election," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/10/news/la-pn-focus-family-jim-daly-20121109>.

settled with persuading the Republican Party to adopt their social principles. He noted this strategy works well, “except when you don’t win elections.”<sup>76</sup>

Daly’s wider outreach does not seem to end at the edge of political boundaries, however. His call for greater tolerance appears to be part of an outreach effort in many dimensions that partly draws on Biblical sources to authorize his claims. The Imago Dei pledge that Daly has backed and signed states that, “I recognize that every human being, in and out of the womb, carries the image of God; without exception. Therefore, I will treat everyone with love and respect.” Though this may come off as primarily a pro-life proclamation, the campaign has clarified what “every human being” actually means—“For the image of God exists in all human beings: black and white; rich and poor; straight and gay; conservative and liberal; victim and perpetrator; citizen and undocumented; believer and unbeliever.”<sup>77</sup> Daly also mentioned in an NPR interview that, “as Christians we want to be compassionate, we want to express the idea that we’re all made in God’s image.”<sup>78</sup> While Daly is consistent with Dobson insofar as both of them draw from the Bible to authorize their claims, he is not afraid to espouse his different views on subjects outside of what he essentialized Dobson’s mission to be: “helping families thrive.” In this action,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Dias, “The Imago Dei Campaign: Evangelical Groups Say Gays Made in God’s Image,” *Time.com*, January 21, 2013, 1, <http://swampland.time.com/2014/01/20/the-imago-dei-campaign-evangelical-groups-say-gays-made-in-gods-image>; The Imago Dei pledge was created by the Imago Dei campaign, “a new movement of prominent evangelical groups launched on Monday to erode the culture war battle lines that have helped define evangelical discourse for the better part of half a century.”

<sup>78</sup> Jim Daly, interview by Rachel Martin, “Evangelical Leader Suggests It’s Time to Collaborate,” *NPR*, November 18, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/18/165399634/evangelical-leader-suggests-its-time-to-collaborate>

Daly has performed creative exegesis with the fixed canon of the Bible in order to widen Focus's outreach and maintain sacred authority for his positions.

Having softened Dobson's authority, perhaps it is unsurprising that Daly's redirection of Focus has not done quite so well in maintaining the illusion of continuity with Dobson's mission. Towards the beginning of his presidency, Daly echoed Dobson's vision of the family when he said, "...I can *remember* that: dads and moms and the roles they played and the stability of the home and coming home and your mom's there and there's warm cookies. That was me growing up. That was kind of traditional America."<sup>79</sup> However, he has since either abandoned or largely downplayed the role of this type of family. Perhaps, part of this has to do with Daly's upbringing. In his 2012 book, *ReFocus*, he remarked, "From the perspective of family background, I was the antithesis to the organization's founder, Dr. James Dobson, who came from a stable, traditional Christian home...When I think of the Dobsons, I think of a Hallmark Hall of Fame television presentation." In stark contrast to Dobson, Daly's mother died when he was nine and his father died of exposure when he was twelve. His stepfather abandoned Daly and his siblings the day of his mother's funeral, and afterwards he lived with a foster father who accused Daly of trying to kill him.<sup>80</sup> Needless to say, Daly has experience that lies at the opposite end of the spectrum to Dobson's 1950s fiction. Writer Lisa Miller, in a *Newsweek* interview with Daly, sums up Daly's conundrum, saying he is "trying to soften the conservative rhetoric on marriage while maintaining its critical social importance." In contrast to Dobson, Daly believes that success in marriage depends on being honest about it. "There's got to be a better understanding on the right that people

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<sup>79</sup> Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine*, 54.

<sup>80</sup> Jim Daly, *ReFocus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 50.

fail. It's one of the challenges we face: the church tries to project perfection."<sup>81</sup> Indeed, Daly realizes that upholding timeless and baseless ideals is detrimental to *real* people.

Daly also apparently has a better grasp on history than Dobson ever did. In Daly's blog, he wrote about a woman who left her family after deciding she no longer wanted to be a full-time mother. She wrote, "In my part-time motherhood, I get concentrated blocks of time when I can be that 1950s mother we idealize who was waiting in an apron with fresh cookies when we got off the school bus and wasn't too busy for anything we needed until we went to bed." Though he criticized her choice to leave her child as "the epitome of selfishness and narcissism," he noted that she was wrong in trying to emulate the "1950s mother." He adds:

The fact is, every mother falls short by that measure. Why? Because the '50s mother' was a myth. Motherhood has always been difficult. It has always required sacrifice and selflessness. Since time began mothers have always struggled and juggled any number of challenges. Today's mom is no more enlightened than yesterday[']s. As I acknowledged last week, parenting is not easy. Anyone who's ever had children will resonate with the fatigue and failures that accompany the fun. But what a privilege it is to raise the next generation and, for Christians, introduce them to Jesus Christ. Everything else pales in comparison! To those who might be struggling to find your identity, as a mother or father, you would be wise to remember Christ's words in the Gospel of Matthew: 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.'<sup>82</sup>

Daly is perfectly content to shatter the ideal that Dobson based his discourse on, while still advocating for mothers and fathers to raise their children. He traces the challenges

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<sup>81</sup> Lisa Miller, "Marriage Is Hard," *Newsweek* 154, no. 16 (2009): 25, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=bc48f45b-1994-47d5-b1ef-84b042c2d7f0%40sessionmgr113&vid=4&hid=118&bdata=#db=a9h&AN=44624638>

<sup>82</sup> Jim Daly, "The Myth of the 1950s Mother," *Focus on the Family*, last modified March 21, 2011, <https://community.focusonthefamily.com/b/jim-daly/archive/2011/03/21/the-myth-of-the-1950s-mother.aspx>.

current mothers face to “[s]ince time began,” giving a sense of sacred authority to the realities of parenting. He also connects raising children with the evangelical mission of sharing the Gospel in saying what a privilege it is to introduce children to Jesus Christ. Finally, he calls on Jesus’ purported words from the Gospel of Matthew to validate his claims. In doing so, he uses Jesus’ words to confirm his call to parenthood, demonstrating exegetical ingenuity in defining a notion that directly countered Dobson’s.

Daly’s realism is also seen in one of his blog posts, in which he carefully navigated supporting stay-at-home mothers. After a short anecdote about a woman who confessed, “*I’m really grateful that my husband and I have fallen into traditional gender roles without conflict,*” Daly qualified his support by noting that “stay-at-home mothering is very often an amazing blessing borne of a prosperous culture and particular circumstance.” He stated that not every family is in a position to “have a mother work full-time in the home,” and that every must family must make this decision for themselves. Most significantly, he noted, “stay-at-home mothering, which we often call ‘traditional,’ is still a relatively new dynamic. Before the industrial revolution, families farmed together or ran small businesses. Not only didn’t the father leave the home (he worked it!), the mother also assisted in the family enterprise, in addition to raising the children.”<sup>83</sup> This pronouncement seems to conclude any remaining debate that Daly’s discourse is centered on Dobson’s mythic “traditional families.”

So far we have seen how Dobson based his discourse on a mythic ideal of the “traditional family” that was traced back to Adam and Eve and best exemplified by 1950s

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<sup>83</sup> Jim Daly, “Have You Heard About Feminist Housewives,” *Focus on the Family*, last modified March 20, 2013, <https://community.focusonthefamily.com/b/jim-daly/archive/2013/03/20/have-you-heard-about-feminist-housewives.aspx>

sitcoms. After Jim Daly assumed Focus's presidency, he has been forced to reinterpret the Biblical canon and interpret how he is continuing Dobson's legacy. Daly has diminished Dobson's authority by asserting that Dobson's principles came from "the timeless foundation of biblical truth," and he has essentialized Dobson's mission as "helping families thrive." Additionally, Focus's second core principle states that their "ministry" was God's idea rather than Dobson's, further allowing the reader to reimagine Dobson's role in a post-Dobson Focus. Each of these claims helps to legitimate Daly's authority as he redirects Focus while still upholding the Biblical canon and to a far lesser extent, Dobson's discourse. It is important to note that Daly was hired, in part, to help keep Focus relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and some may see his struggles as an effort to adapt tradition to modernity.

### **"Tradernity"**

However, it would be an oversimplification to assume that "tradition" and "modernity" are inherently in opposition. In response to the idea that religious convictions are more rigid than secular arguments, anthropologist Talal Asad noted that, "Religious traditions have undergone the most radical transformations over time. Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretation are endless."<sup>84</sup> Asad echoes Smith's idea of canon and exegetical ingenuity: that through "the ingenuities of human interpretation," religious traditions may be adapted to different, even modern contexts. If traditions are being reinterpreted to fit present situational contexts, then not only is it wrong to assert that tradition and modernity are strictly in opposition, but one is also left unable to draw a clear distinction between the two. Some may now propose that

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<sup>84</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 235-6.

Focus has no “true” cultural identity because of the diverse origins of their discourse. Asad is quick to brush such claims aside in saying “to speak of cultural syncretism or cultural hybrids presupposes a conceptual distinction between preexisting (“pure”) cultures. Of course, all apparent cultural unities are the outcomes of diverse origins, and it is misleading to think of an identifiable cultural unity as having neutrally traceable boundaries.” Asad demonstrates that if we measure the legitimacy of a cultural identity by how singular and pure its origins are, all identifiable cultural unities will fail because they each draw on diverse origins.

He also argues that culture must be seen as a process but that this does not exclude the possibility that it is unified. “A coherent cultural process is not necessarily one without contradictions; rather, relations of contradiction between cultural elements themselves presuppose an embracing unity, however temporary.”<sup>85</sup> This final observation rings especially true for Focus as they struggle to adapt their inheritances with continually changing conditions. In theory, Focus is committed to upholding both the inerrant canon of the Bible, as well as Dobson’s reading of it as an authorization for his myth of the ideal family (if they are to honor Focus’s institutional history). Though Focus may fall short of maintaining consistency in their various ministries and massive media collection, the very fact that contradictions exist presupposes that Focus has brought them together so that they clash.

In actuality, Focus on the Family since Daly’s time *has* fallen short in reconciling the ideas of its various “ministries,” websites, and informational pamphlets. Therefore, while Daly has strived to eliminate Focus’s previous use of war rhetoric, their most

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 263



recently available (as of Feb. 2014) informational pamphlets mention that, “Focus on the Family feels that our culture is engaged in a battle of historical proportions.”<sup>86</sup> Daly has signed the Imago Dei pledge that announced all humans, including homosexuals, carry the image of God. At the same time, a page on “Revisionist Gay Theology” on Focus’s website has used the same image of God doctrine in justifying opposition to gay marriage. “Focus on the Family is dedicated to defending the honor, dignity and value of the two sexes as created in God’s image – intentionally male and female – each bringing unique and complementary qualities to sexuality and relationships.”<sup>87</sup> Other contradictions are subtler. Daly publicly stated that he would not endorse political candidates and has downplayed Focus’s partisanship, but one interviewer for the Colorado Springs Independent noted that Focus was criticized in the 2012 election cycle for ads campaigning for political candidates while laying off 20% of its workforce. Daly responded, “That is probably more CitizenLink’s budget than Focus’[s] budget but the answer to that is still, even in difficult economic times, the company or the organization is still going to do things to promote its cause, or its agenda.”<sup>88</sup> CitizenLink is Focus’s legally independent political arm that the organization rebranded from its previous title, “Focus on the Family Action,” in efforts to downplay Focus’s political emphasis.<sup>89</sup> Daly noted that while Focus on the Family is a 501(c)(3) organization, CitizenLink is a

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<sup>86</sup> “The Heritage of Focus on the Family,” 27.

<sup>87</sup> Dias, “The Imago Dei Campaign: Evangelical Groups Say Gays Made in God’s Image.”

<sup>88</sup> Simon, “Evangelical Group Seeks Broader Tent”; J. Adrian Stanley, “Change of Focus,” *Colorado Springs Independent*, (Colorado Springs, CO), June 9, 2011, <http://www.csindy.com/coloradosprings/change-of-focus/Content?oid=2244124>

<sup>89</sup> Bailey, “Refocusing on the Family.”

501(c)(4) so he and the board of directors felt, “that it would be good to let CitizenLink do more of the heavy lifting in that regard.”<sup>90</sup>

Having created a sense of distance with Focus, it makes sense that CitizenLink’s mission, to “continue equipping concerned citizens to make a difference in politics and culture on behalf of life, marriage, and the family,” is not perfectly consistent with Daly’s claims of political de-emphasis.<sup>91</sup> Senior vice president of CitizenLink Tom Minnery recognized the difficulty that others had in understanding Focus’s new angle, “The media is having a tough time figuring us out.” “They say we’re changing in tone and say, ‘Aha! They’re in a Rick Warren or Joel Hunter cubbyhole.’ Then we are active in the defense of traditional marriage, which is seen by the media as hateful and homophobic, so they scratch their heads and say, ‘Wait, I thought they were changing their tone.’”<sup>92</sup>

It is no wonder that people have had a hard time understanding Focus’s new agenda since it does not seem to be entirely consistent. While Daly has redefined Focus’s mission and exercised exegetical ingenuity in doing so, there are still contradictions between Focus’s different branches and inconsistencies among the materials of their vast media infrastructure. Still, Asad assures that though there may be contradictions, these do not render Focus completely incoherent. The very fact that these contradictions exist, presupposes a unity that is uniquely Focus’s. One final consideration to entertain is whether or not it is even worthwhile for Focus to attempt to unify their myriad endeavors.

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<sup>90</sup> Stanley, “Change of Focus.”

<sup>91</sup> Jim Daly, “Focus on the Family Action Changes Name to CitizenLink,” *Focus on the Family*, last modified 2010, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/articles/weekly-alert/2010/20100521-focus-action-name-change.aspx>.

<sup>92</sup> Bailey, “Refocusing on the Family.”

### The Medium is the Message

Technology and culture writer Nicolas Carr has noted that, at a time when information is so fragmented and Web pages are increasingly crowded with hyperlinks to other websites, “Our attachment to any one text becomes more tenuous.” He adds to this, “Searches also lead to the fragmentation of online works. A search engine often draws our attention to a particular snippet of text, a few words or sentences that have strong relevance to whatever we’re searching for at the moment, while providing little incentive for taking in the work as a whole.”<sup>93</sup> It would, in fact, be difficult to take in any text “as a whole” in ten seconds or less, the amount of time that most users spend on a single Web page, according to the findings of one study. The same study also reported that fewer than one in ten page views extended beyond two minutes, and that a significant number of these cases seemed to involve “unattended browser windows...left open in the background of the desktop.”<sup>94</sup> Studies such as this suggest that if the Internet continues to play a central role in many people’s information consumption habits and Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism, “The medium is the message,” has some degree of validity, then it may not be worth Focus’s efforts to try to work out inconsistencies that people are unlikely to notice.<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps they would better direct their attention towards adapting to the shifting culture. One might arrive at this perspective upon hearing the words of Dean Merrill, a former publishing executive who worked at Focus from 1989 to 1996. He noted, “People

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<sup>93</sup> Nicolas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 90-91.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 135. The study monitored the computers of twenty-five people for an average of about 100 days each, tracking the time the subjects looked at some 50,000 webpages.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

have only so much time and money and hours in a day to listen to the radio.” Also, today’s parents “are not nearly as attuned to expert advice from an authority” as parents of previous generations. “They’re more likely to jump on Facebook and see, ‘What do my friends think?’ That’s a cultural shift that’s not working in [Focus’s] favor.” Larry Eskridge, associate director of the Institute for the study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, thinks the more connected the generation, the more likely it is to find advice from a mishmash of outlets. He added, “It raises the question of whether you can ever again build entities this large in such a culture that’s so segmented and so individualized for communication and connecting.”<sup>96</sup>

Focus seems to have recognized at least some of these realities in their informational pamphlet, “Reaching Today’s Digital Family.” They state, “We have always committed to meeting families exactly where they are—and as you can see from the numbers, today’s families are online.” Their response is “The Listening Center,” Focus’s recently created “online Family Help Command Center.” The Listening Center is made up of “Family Help Specialists,” who offer help to “hurting people who are online looking for answers.” In short, these workers search through Internet forums and websites for people who have asked such questions as “Should I get an abortion?” and provide “help, resources, prayers, and counseling referrals.”<sup>97</sup> The Listening Center serves as an example to show that Focus adapts to address families “exactly where they are.” They are willing to respond to the needs of families. In an age where increasing numbers of people

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<sup>96</sup> Bailey, “Refocusing on the Family.” Perhaps the cultural shift towards segmentation and the decline in radio explain why Focus granted Dobson a million dollars for his new ministry and radio show, “Family Talk.”

<sup>97</sup> “Reaching Today’s Digital Family,” (Pamphlet, Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, 2013), 7-11.

are turning to the Internet for advice, one could hardly designate systematic consistency as a need of most families or perhaps most people, for that matter.

### **Conclusion**

We have examined how, as Focus has responded to cultural needs, its discourse that is presumably based on timeless fundamentals, has shifted with striking fluidity. While Focus's early discourse under Dobson was centered on a pattern for a "traditional family" that drew its legitimacy from a biblical sacred origin story, the families that most closely resembled Dobson's rhetoric were from 1950s sitcoms. Indeed, even Dobson's early discourse sought to adapt tradition to more modern conditions. As culture has continued to change, Dobson's notion of the "traditional family" has become increasingly irrelevant and the latest president, Jim Daly, has been faced with the task of reinterpreting Focus's traditions. Daly is certainly committed to upholding the biblical canon and at least theoretically bound to maintaining certain aspects of Focus's institutional history. In upholding aspects of these canonical elements, he has exercised what Smith called "exegetical ingenuity," in his attempts to imagine different explanations when limited by a closed set of constraints.

While the results have been imperfect, I contend that Daly is willing to settle for a certain degree of ambiguity about what Focus stands for, while he focuses on more pragmatic matters. Even if Focus's contradictions *could* be reconciled, it hardly seems necessary with the way that information is being consumed today. Additionally (and assuming it is possible), if Daly did go through the trouble of systematically unifying Focus's various endeavors, it would only be a matter of time before some new condition forced Focus to adapt and once again, struggle to balance contradictions. Focus, like all

cultural entities, is struggling with the Sisyphean task of adapting tradition to modernity. While the results are imperfect, as Asad has shown, the contradictions of Focus are actually what define its unique identity. Finally, while Dobson sought to adapt real families to his “traditional” rhetoric, Daly is attempting to adapt Focus’s traditional rhetoric to real families. In doing so, I believe Daly will be far more efficacious in carrying out what Focus has presumably stood for since its inception: helping families thrive.

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