"And this is the very idea of Christian education, that it begins with nurture or cultivation" (12). “Multitudes of parents who assume the Christian name, have yet the practical sense of the intensely religious character of the house, or the domestic and family state” (150). “They want their children to shine, or be honorable, or rich, or brave, or fashionable” (151). These statements were published in 1847, yet seem quite relevant for many Christian families today.

Part of Bushnell’s thesis is that parents are responsible for the spiritual development of their children; he argues that Christian nurture begins in the home. Thus far, contemporary evangelicals would agree. Bushnell’s rationale for his argument, however, is problematic. Despite attending Yale Divinity School at the same time as Nathaniel W. Taylor, Bushnell was a leading proponent of liberal theology and denounced not only the older New England Calvinism but also Taylor’s New Haven theology.

According to Bushnell, children are born with God’s grace and primarily need Christian nurture to live as Christians. Hence, he emphasizes the power of a godly home and godly parents (55). The “organic power of character in the parent” awakens the child’s realization of the Spirit of God (13). Throughout the book, Bushnell bases the power of parents’ influence on his “organic” view of the family. Differing with the individualism of the modern philosophy in his time, he views children as having an organic connection with their parents (18).

In many ways, Bushnell’s exhortation to parents seems refreshingly applicable to Christian parents today. Bushnell’s work, however, misleads parents to believe that faithful Christian parenting somehow ensures faithful Christian children. God commands parents to be faithful nurturers and uses them in the lives of children, but he alone saves. Faithful parents should be honored but God receives the glory in salvation. Bushnell’s theological leanings blind him to the need for personal conversion— from his perspective, a child’s Christian faith needs merely to be nourished and nurtured, not animated and recreated like a corpse being brought from death to life.

In the second half of the book, Bushnell devotes more sections to practical matters of Christian nurture.
Section 15, for example, is full of helpful parenting tips (e.g., parents as spiritual examples; husbands and wives honoring each other; children obeying at an early age). Still, the book as a whole will be a ponderous read for contemporary persons. While heartily agreeing with Bushnell’s emphasis on the role of parents, it is crucial to recognize how his theological liberalism moves his foundations far afield.

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In the early twentieth century, Henry F. Cope attempted to present what was known at the time related to religious education in the family. The book was intended to serve as a guide to parents, churches, institutes, and organizations who desire to study systematically and scientifically the problems of the family (viii, ix).

The central idea of the book is that the family is the life-school of the child, central to the all-rounded development of the child. Cope argues that parents should take seriously the responsibility of raising children as persons of spiritual character. “There is a danger that our emphasis on child-welfare may be that of the tools instead of the man; that we may become enmeshed in the mechanism of well-being and lose sight of the being who should be well. To fail at the point of character is to fail all along the line” (4).

Stating the religious purpose of the family, Cope says that the family has the purpose of “giving to the world children who are adequately trained and sufficiently motivated to live the social life of good-will.” He argues that the family is the most important religious institution because it has the power of serving as a small group for character development (28), it affords the best agency for social training (29), it sets initial spiritual values in children (30), and it has the power of developing in children love, loyalty, and sacrificial living for others (31-33).

Cope argues that Christianity is essentially a religion of ideal family life that is connected with the teachings and the ideals of Jesus (43). Explaining what a Christian family is like, he says, “The Christian family is a type peculiar to itself, not as a new institution, for it has developed out of earlier race experience, but as controlled by a new interpretation, the spirit and conception of the home and family given in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth” (41).

Cope argues that the family is educational in function and religious in character; it is essentially an institution for religious education (46). He defines religious education as “the training of persons to live the religious life and to do their work in the world as religious persons” (48). A home should be a place where children develop their character. Cope discusses how families should use storytelling, book reading, family worship, and Bible readings to develop the religious life of their family. He also suggests ways of meetings the special needs of boys and girls and the youth in the family. Since the church is the other great social institution that is engaged in the development of religious character of people, Cope argues that the family ought to develop a very close relationship with the church and the church ought to focus on the education of the family.

Though there is mention of the teachings of Jesus as well as human depravity and the need for character, the teachings of Jesus are not viewed as inextricably bound with the person and the work of Jesus. As a result, the issue of sin—for example—becomes merely a “moral crisis.” Additionally, the work is decidedly Western and, to some extent, distinctly American. Nonetheless, this work does provide valuable insight into family ministry ideals in early twentieth-century North America.

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First published when Ward and June Cleaver were icons on Leave It To Beaver, this compendium on help-
ing families still speaks today. A recognized leader in Lutheran education, Oscar E. Feucht asked participants in several family life workshops for real-life feedback on a variety of issues. His systematic treatment is designed to help church leaders to prevent ordinary problems from becoming life-threatening crises. Topics include the Christian family, families in need, church and family guidance, and family counseling.

The book is not distinctively evangelical. The first chapter builds a plausible theological framework for understanding God’s plan for families in a fallen world. Less developed is a biblical worldview that recognizes God’s prescription for marriage, children, and family as central to his conciliatory meta-narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. At times, religiosity is reduced to the means by which familial relationships are strengthened. In sharing the secrets of a successful marriage, one contributor falls back to sociological studies showing how “religion” creates a family bond, provides emotional stability, and develops responsible parents.

The shortcomings of some chapters do not, however, completely overshadow the redeeming qualities of other chapters. In particular, the primer on premarital education remains ahead of its time. The landscape painted by Edwin Fritze three decades ago still rings true:

The rapid and depersonalized pace of life, the unclear and consistently changing systems of values, the earlier maturation of young people, the high degree of mobility of families, the insecurities brought about by an almost constant warfare among nations and cultures and races, and the incomprehensibility of the rapid advances in scientific and industrial discovery and development have caused people, almost unconsciously, to move into directions, relationships, and associations with a much greater lack of concern about the consequences than the strength and stability of homes and a nation can afford.

Of all its themes, observations regarding the role of the church in equipping healthy families remain most relevant. In recent years, recognitions of the need for family training in the church as well as the importance of such practices as family worship have rallied researchers, church leaders, and parents alike. Feucht, writing from the 1950s through the 1970s, seems to have glimpsed the importance of some of these issues several decades ahead of others.

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A professor of Christian Education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Charles M. Sell recognizes the frailty of the family inside and outside of the church (20-21). Sell addresses the needs of every form of family from the strong family to the divorced family, as well as the dysfunctional family (301, 322). In this second edition, Sell strives particularly to bring attention to the power that the church has to help the family (20). He readily admits the difference between his two editions, pointing out that the latter edition contains more programming ideas and more information on the administration of family ministry within a church (9).

As a basis for the text, Sell establishes a theology of family ministry. Some of the important factors that Sell promotes in his theology are that a family is composed of husband and wife and that this is the best context in which to raise children (78). “Marriage and family are based not merely on the creation of God, but on the very person of God” (83), and strong families must be built on strong marriages (145). Sell also points out that the family is instituted by God and that parents are called to teach their children about God (77). Later, Sell also recognizes the church itself as a family-like institution, paving the way for his position that the church and the home are to nurture the children of the church in partnership (149-152).

Sell defines family ministry in this way: “Family ministry involves communicating to people of all ages, in as many ways as possible, the biblical and practical truths related to family living” (137). Using this definition and the programs outlined in the chapters of his text, Sell presents family ministry as something that is
conducted by the church for the benefit of families (20, 71, 129). Sell compartmentalizes the ministries of the church in an effort to reach every specific need of the representative families (131). In this regard, Sell takes a very therapeutic bent on family ministry. His text as a whole and the programs in particular place far more emphasis on the church ministering to families rather than equipping families to become units of ministry and discipleship (140-141).

Sell does not, however, ignore the essential role of parents or the biblical call for parents to disciple their children. He points out early in his text that one of his goals is to equip churches to train parents to disciple their children in the Christian faith (10, 17). He later points out that for a church to successfully accomplish this, the church will need to select church leaders who are already leading in their own homes (150). Through this process, the church will be in a better place to promote a cooperation of church and home.

In the opening pages of his text, Sell admits that one facet of family ministry is evangelism (17). Later in his text, Sell promotes basic parent education (see 259-286). Sell even develops and promotes the concepts of family devotions and family worship (293). These are all positive and good. Sell occasionally misses the mark, however, by failing to present clearly the central motivation and foundation for these practices. According to Sell, the three biblical objectives for child rearing are to first instill a reverence for God, second to produce self-respect within the child, and third to develop a respect for others (273)—all of which could be done without reference to Jesus or to the gospel.

There is much positive in Sell's text. He raises good points concerning our society and the church at large, addressing family needs as well as the church's unique ability to reach families. When read in dialogue with other texts, Sell's text could be quite helpful to a minister attempting to equip and to develop parents.

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Diana Garland offers a work that is mammoth, practical, and at times insightful—see, e.g., the section on channeling the energies of anger to solve problems not attack people (153ff). Yet substantive concerns will limit the usefulness of this text among evangelicals. At times, Family Ministry misses biblical goals, addressing mere symptoms instead of fundamental problems.

Garland helps families by tackling "the basic engineering of our social systems" (231). According to Garland, problems are emotional or psychic injury (234), social and economic forces (76, 272, 300), or social stresses and psychological factors (61, 152, 593). Missing from these analyses is a biblical notion of the pervasiveness of sin; even when its effects are obvious, sin is not mentioned (cf. 55, 58, 64, 124, and 147). Chronic family stress, for example, is not what is "insidious" (65); sin is (Titus 3:3). Misdiagnosis inexorably invites wrong solutions.

Family ministry becomes "the church version of community mental-health services" (300) or the challenger of an oppressive economic system that requires "two spouses to work" (82). Instead of addressing matters of sin, repentance, and forgiveness from the perspective of Scripture, Garland offers "negotiating relationships" and "crisis intervention" (132, 133) through "self-help literature" (135).

Contrary to the claims of this text, the primary goal of family is not merely to "navigate safely the passages of life" (231), to cope with stress (237), to meet personal needs (266), or to provide a context for focusing on children (272). These gains without Christ are loss (Matt 16:26). Family life has been given a greater purpose—the opportunity to encourage people to pursue God as their treasure, Jesus as their joy, the Holy Spirit as their comforter as they live in relationships modeled by the Trinity (Eph 5:22-6:4).

Arguments surrounding gender roles are presented as false dilemmas and ad hominem attacks—one is either egalitarian and kind, or one is complementarian and cruel (184-85). Thus, complementarians are made to hold an extreme position (husbands are "overlords,"
181, and wives “underlings” or “vassals,” 182)—a straw man that is easily defeated. Moreover, the arguments fall prey to the erroneous belief that role equals value (182, 190, 195, 197, and 204). These faults consistently cloud content.

If the purpose of family is to meet personal needs, then potential conflict flourishes when those needs go unmet. If, on the other hand, a family’s goal is to please God (2 Cor 5:9) and then to serve one another (Matt 22:39), an entirely different dynamic is present—problems have a purpose and God is the One who is pursued for peace and for help.

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In the opening chapters of this book, the editor recognizes that there is a movement within evangelical churches to minister more effectively to families; he has aided our understanding of this movement through the contributions of three pastors who are serving “in the trenches.” The format of _Perspectives on Family Ministry_ is an argument for each model, followed by two responses against then a final response in favor of the model.

Paul Renfro, pastor of discipleship at Grace Family Baptist Church in Spring, Texas, defends the family-integrated model. Brandon Shields, teaching pastor at First Baptist Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, writes on family-based ministry. Jay Strother, Campus and Teaching Pastor of The Church at Station Hill, writes in favor of the family-equipping ministry model.

The family-integrated model abandons all age-graded ministries. Those who adhere to this model view family units—single or married, with or without children—as component that together comprise the local church. The delivery method for discipleship is primarily through families, which is the intent of the phrase “family of families.” Proponents of family-integrated view the purpose of the church as equipping the parents, primarily the fathers, to evangelize and to disciple their children and for these families to become units for evangelizing and discipling others. Some difficulties raised regarding this model are that a “family of families” cannot define the church since the church is defined as the “body of Christ” in Ephesians 4. Renfro points out that what is intended by “family of families” is not a redefinition of the nature of the church but a description of how discipleship processes are undertaken. According to some, there also seems to be an inability to reach public school families as well as the non-traditional families that are prevalent in our society today.

Two values are foundational to the family-based philosophy. (Brandon Shields seems careful to use the term “philosophy” rather than “model.”) These values are flexibility and balance. Flexibility is essential because every church context is different and, thus, every church will, in some sense, make concessions within its particular culture. Balance is also necessary because not every family in the local church is a “traditional” family. There are many challenges with blended families, single families, and other situations that must be handled with care when discipling families. Those adhering to a family-based philosophy see no need for radically reorganizing or restructuring present ministry models. The key is a philosophical shift wherein the activities and programs are added or “exfamized” (expanded to include family members and others from multiple generations) to draw the families closer together. Some problems with this particular model include the appearance that there is a greater concern for being culturally relevant rather than being biblically faithful. Some believe this model does not go far enough in addressing the disconnection between the church and the home. Lastly, it is still too programmatic and does not offer sufficient training to the parents to disciple their children.

Jay Strother explains family-equipping ministry as a three-pronged approach. First, there are catalysts; the catalysts are (1) parents, who are primarily responsible to disciple their children, and (2) small group leaders in the church, who lead Bible studies that reinforce the spiritual truths that are being taught at home. Second, there is the content; what is being taught is intentional and coordinated between church and home. Finally, there is the context, which includes service and celebration in the church as well as missional living in
Objections to the model include the charge that parents may not have the time to disciple their children and that parents may not be sufficiently confronted with their responsibility to disciple their children. Additionally, Brandon Shields contends that the existing models are not so badly broken that such wholesale change is warranted.

This volume offers much to think about in the way of how the church should minister to the family. All three models attempt to root their approaches in Scripture, and all three models are driven by a love for the church and for the family. Each pastor writes and ministers with urgency, deeply desiring to connect church and home through their respective views of family ministry. The formatting of this book—with the point, counterpoint, and response method—offers the reader a balanced perspective. This book provides a tool for church leaders who want to address more adequately the family units in their ministries. Many evangelical churches are shifting ministry paradigms; this book will help you to make sense of the differing approaches.

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Over the past five years, the first edition God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation has served the church well. The text presented a clear and unapologetically biblical theology of marriage and family; meticulously researched, God, Marriage, and Family quickly and rightly became the standard work in this field for conservative evangelical Christians.

Much has improved in this second edition: Sections on corporal punishment, singleness, and homosexuality have been expanded. The chapter on divorce and remarriage has been reworked completely and presents its case more clearly than before. The format and overall design are easier to follow.

This new edition is not without its problems, however—particularly in relation to the field of family ministry. In what appears to be a well-intended attempt to consider theologically some current trends in family ministry, a new chapter has been added to this edition: “God, Marriage, Family, and the Church: Learning to Be the Family of God.” While remaining appreciative of the balance of the book, I wish to raise some concerns related to this new chapter.

One primary point of concern in this new chapter is in an apparent assumption that family-based, family-equipping, and family-integrated models of ministry are three variations of family integration rather than three distinct approaches to family ministry. Admittedly, some elements of each one do overlap at times with others—but each model remains quite distinct and particular.

The new chapter in God, Marriage, and Family states, for example, that “some churches are more purist in their convictions and application of family integration, while others are amenable to combine this approach with other approaches” (259), with text and footnote alike suggesting that the three models of family ministry are three forms or degrees of family integration. Family-based and family-equipping are apparently less “purist” forms of a single phenomenon of family integration.

Verifying that this is indeed how these three models are being presented, the term “family-based youth ministry” is used to describe a youth ministry led by parents instead of a youth pastor, which is in turn presented as an example of family integration (259). This confuses what is implied by the phrase “family integration” (which would entail the elimination of all age-segmented ministries in the church and thus not have separate youth activities at all) as well as “family-based youth ministry” (which would be led by a professional youth minister who would plan some intergenerational events in addition to age-segmented events). The presentation in this chapter, however, conflates two very different approaches to family ministry.

This leads to a second concern with the new chapter: One foundation of this misconstrual of models appears to be the assumption that these models have emerged only recently (258) and that there is insufficient data from which to assess them fully; at one point, it is even stated that “family-integrated” is the only term that was “widely used” when this new chapter was being written (372).
In fact, family-based ministry has been discussed at both academic and practical levels for decades. In the late 1970s, Harry Parkin from Nommesen University was speaking in favor of recovering “family-based faith” at Lutheran conferences. Charles Sell’s 1981 and 1995 textbook on family ministry described “family-based Christian education.” In 1994, the first edition of Mark DeVries’ Family-Based Youth Ministry brought this discussion to a practical level and helped to coalesce family-based ideas into an identifiable model for youth ministry. Since that time, a host of books and articles—including doctoral projects and dissertations—have explored family-based ministry at a variety of levels. All of these discussions of family-based ministry emerged separate from any discussion of family integration.

Additionally, there is academic and professional literature related to family-integrated ministry that precedes the discussion into which this new chapter wades. In the mid-1980s, Malan Nel of the University of Pretoria was pressing for “inclusive congregational” ministry. In Nel’s vision, children and youth would be “an integral part of the congregational whole” and “youths [would] not become a separate group.” His book Jeugbediening: ‘n Inklusiewe Gemeentelike Benaderin clearly articulated the implications of the inclusive congregational approach for church-based youth ministries in South Africa. Nel’s chapter in Mark Senter’s 2001 book Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church summarized his inclusive congregational approach for English-speaking audiences.

The suggestion in God, Marriage, and Family that the three primary family ministry models are forms of family integration—as well as the claims that the models have emerged only in “recent years” and that the terms (with the exception of family-integrated) are not “widely used”—overlooks a broad range of scholarly and popular writings. Family-based ministry in particular is not new at all, either as a term or as a concept. Writings related to these models span more than three decades.

Two problematic subtexts in the chapter relate primarily to family-integrated churches (FICs): (1) At times, it seems that the author may assume family-integrated churches do not practice regenerate membership and Communion—though this is not clearly stated (263, as well as footnote 29 on page 373). In fact, credo-baptist and some paedobaptist FICs do practice regenerate membership and Communion. In the paedobaptist FICs that do not practice regenerate membership and Communion, the foundation for these practices is not their view of family integration but their view of the covenants, coupled in some cases with their understanding of the Federal Vision. (2) The chapter takes the phrase “family of families”—a term used by some proponents of FIC—to imply an ecclesiological revision in which the nuclear family becomes the primary redemptive unit rather than the church. Proponents of family integration have, however, repeatedly clarified what they intend by this phrase—most notably in the book Perspectives on Family Ministry. Their intent is not any ecclesiological revision but simply a functional description of the way in which they seek to disciple one another and to witness to the world, by mobilizing families.

These errors do not negate the many strengths of the remainder of this text. At the same time, it is hoped that it will not take five years for a third edition of God, Marriage, and Family—with a corrected chapter on family ministry—to be released.

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ENDNOTES

5 Malan Nel, Jeugbediening: ‘n Inklusiewe Gemeentelike