



Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction

By Amy Laura Hall

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Genetic manipulation. Designer babies. Prenatal screening. The genomic revolution. Cutting-edge issues in reproductive bioethics grab our attention almost daily, prompting strong responses from various sides. As science advances and comes ever closer to “perfect” procreation and “perfectible” babies, controversy has become a constant in bioethical discussion.

Amy Laura Hall seeks out the genesis of such issues rather than trying to divine their future. Her disturbing finding is that mainline Protestantism is complicit in the history and development of reproductive biotechnology. Through analysis of nearly 150 images of the family in the mainstream media in the twentieth century, Hall argues that, by downplaying the gratuity of grace, middle-class Protestants, with American culture at large, have implicitly endorsed the idea of justification through responsibly planned procreation. A tradition that should have welcomed all persons equally has instead fostered a culture of “carefully delineated, racially encoded domesticity.”

The research in *Conceiving Parenthood* is new, the theory provocative, and the illustrations exceptional. The book is replete with photos and advertisements from popular magazines from the 1930s through the 1950s -- *Parents'*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *National Geographic*, and so on. Hall's analysis of these ads is startling. Her goal, however, is not simply to startle readers but to encourage new conversations within communities of faith -- conversations enabling individuals, couples, congregations, even entire neighborhoods to conceive of parenthood in ways that make room for families and children who are deemed to be outside the proper purview of the *right* sorts of families.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Hall, who teaches theological ethics at Duke, combines perceptive reading with stirring criticism of the corporate-inspired family ideals that have come to pervade the American Christian mainstream. Focusing on the Methodist experience, Hall's narrative potentially resonates across the theological spectrum. How did a denomination with roots in gospel activism come to be so captivated by images of material and technological progress delivered by corporate marketing? Hall mines church publications and popular media to reveal several dynamics at work. Partly because of its attempts to market itself as part of the American dream, the mid-century church became infatuated with an image of the ideal family that inevitably, if unintentionally, encouraged middle-class Protestants to insulate their families from their troubled neighbors. At the same time, corporate and scientific messages undermined the confidence of parents—and particularly mothers—in natural or traditional ways of providing for their children without commercial products and expert advice. Aspiration and anxiety combined to create families that were more focused on themselves, less secure in their Christian identity and less engaged in mission to others. Contrasting these trends with the example of Christ and the unifying message of the sacraments, Hall invites her readers to wage a resistance and reconsider the least of these. (*Feb.*)

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Review

Barbara Katz Rothman

— author of *Weaving a Family*

"This powerful, thought-provoking book places the new technologies and ideologies of parenting in historical context. There may be no answers we can all agree upon, but Hall has raised questions that all of us — parents and grandparents, medical providers, and those within and outside of religious traditions — need to think hard about."

Bernd Wannenwetsch

— Oxford University

"Reading *Conceiving Parenthood* comes at a risk, but a risk well worth taking. Written in an engaging and brilliantly entertaining style, the book confronts us with the ideology of the familiar and familial — an ideology in which we all are easily and comfortably entrapped. Who would not want to have or be part of a 'good family'? Working through a wealth of amazing — and embarrassing — material that demonstrates the self-idolizing of the better-offs in twentieth-century American society as it has stylized the image of the 'right' and 'decent' family, Amy Laura Hall's analysis is still far from cold-blooded deconstructivism. Drawing on theological voices of brave dissent from the mainstream, her call for 'reconceiving parenthood' is ultimately a call for mercy and a witness to its transforming presence in the midst of a highly ideologized society."

Christine D. Pohl

— Asbury Theological Seminary

"There is much to be learned from Amy Laura Hall's rich description and probing analysis of twentieth-century assumptions about responsible parents and children 'worthy of a place.' Her account powerfully illuminates what is theologically and humanly at stake in contemporary impulses to craft more perfect children."

John Swinton

— University of Aberdeen

"This is a truly wonderful book — incisive, thoughtful, and profoundly disturbing. In powerful and moving ways Amy Laura Hall helps us to understand and recognize some of the darker recesses of American history. . . No one can read this book and remain unmoved. . . *Conceiving Parenthood* marks Amy Laura Hall as a scholar worth listening to."

Hans G. Ulrich

— University of Erlangen-Nürnberg

"A truly enlightening book that paves the way for a much-needed ethical and theological discussion."

***Publishers Weekly* Starred Review**

"Hall's narrative potentially resonates across the theological spectrum."

Christianity Today

"Hall's research is exhaustive; her analytical acumen profound. . . [Her] style keeps the book accessible, and her personality is refreshingly present throughout. Four stars."

Modern Theology

"Hall has given a superb example of the kind of work ethicists should be cultivating. The book speaks primarily to American Protestant experience (particularly Methodism), but if readers have been attentive to the arguments presented, they should suspect that perhaps there are ways in which their own churches and denominations are complicit with the world, in ways as yet unseen and unknown, against the gospel message of Christ. If we care about naming and uncovering the sins in our midst, we will hopefully take to heart Hall's method and message."

Religious Studies Review

"In a lively, engaging style, Hall offers a book of interest to a wide audience. . . . Readers can expect to be surprised, provoked and challenged."

Church History

"A forceful critique of modern mainline Protestantism. . . . *Conceiving Parenthood* is a reminder that happiness comes from many sources, and that most of them come to us small and unexpected."

Christian Scholar's Review

"Necessary reading for anyone who thinks the Church has yet to offer its most faithful understanding of the family. Amy Laura hall does a masterful job."

American Studies

"A thoughtful and provocative study on [the] history of procreation and parenthood in twentieth-century America."

Christian Century

"Hall has written an important book, one that should take its place on any list of texts to consult on motherhood, families, religion and American culture."

American Historical Review

"A powerful work of interdisciplinary historical and cultural analysis that is informed by theological ethics. .

. . An important contribution to the ongoing study of eugenics, domesticity, and the history of the family.”

About the Author

Amy Laura Hall is associate professor of theological ethics at Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Janice Pyles:

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Gladys Dearth:

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Teresa Cook:

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Merlin Doyle:

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