The Language of Rights and the Challenge to the Domestic Ideal

If I were permitted to express a bold suggestion, I would say that psychotherapy and the experiences of pastoral counseling have helped to reintroduce the female element, so conspicuously lacking in most Protestantism, into the idea of God.

—Paul Tillich, “The Impact of Pastoral Psychology on Theological Thought,” 1960

It was a curious turn to the story of pastoral counseling and the liberal moral sensibility. After working very hard to articulate an ethic of responsibility that would be responsive to the interests and desires of their female parishioners, pastoral counselors failed to see the implications of that ethic for their politics. Very early in the 1950s they took up the banner of women’s causes—much earlier than one might expect given the common historical narrative of women’s experience in the 1950s. But when they took up that banner and made their case for women’s equality, they did so almost exclusively in the language of autonomy and freedom, which was, of course, the masculine language of rights. How did it happen that pastoral counselors ended up making their argument in classical liberal terms rather than by taking ideas about an ethic of relationships into the political arena? Once again pastoral counselors’ discussion of love, marriage, sex, and divorce provides a fruitful beginning point for examining their views. The discussion in pastoral counseling literature suggests that certain familiar presuppositions underlay the rejection of the domestic ideal and the negative assumptions about women that typically accompanied it. Specifically, an examination of the postwar discussions in pastoral counseling suggests that ideas about autonomy and self-realization, about the significance of the female perspective, and about
the part of culture and society in shaping human personality worked together to broaden pastoral counselors’ understanding of women’s role and their nature and to lay the groundwork for an argument for women’s rights.

**Rethinking Gender**

Pastoral counselors’ views on Rogerian therapy and on autonomy and self-realization seemed to correlate with the way they viewed gender roles. Apparently, ministers who could entertain the possibility that authority vested in the individual rather than in themselves as clergy or in the church as institution could also accept with greater equanimity their parishioners’ choice to live outside the parameters of socially prescribed roles. For instance, Seward Hiltner, who by the early 1950s was on the faculty at Princeton’s Presbyterian seminary and serving as editorial consultant for *Pastoral Psychology*, was one of the most outspoken advocates of both Rogers’s non-directive therapy and women’s equality. Hiltner opened the May 1953 issue of the journal, which happened to be devoted entirely to the “women’s role,” with a scathing editorial in which he complained bitterly about the circumstances that prevented women from making a “contribution” to the field of pastoral psychology. Hiltner condemned the “club” or fraternity mentality among ministers that made them reluctant to welcome female clergy; he criticized denominations that refused to place women in the parish as ministers; he objected to the assumption that a woman who married would voluntarily end her professional career; and he urged women to take matters into their own hands by pursuing advanced degrees.1

The work of Ralph Eckert, a marriage counselor from Riverside, California, and an occasional contributor to *Pastoral Psychology*, illustrates the connection between counselors’ methods and their views on gender roles, but from the other end of the spectrum. Eckert claimed he had tried non-directive marriage counseling but found it did not work, by which he meant that sometimes his counselees chose to divorce. Eckert assumed that divorce was always wrong and that the counselor knew what was best for the counselee. As a result, he had turned to something he called “action-oriented counseling.” His example of one case where he succeeded in preserving a marriage by this method reinforces the
impression that ministers who were most rigid about their own authority were most rigid in their understanding of gender roles. In a June 1961 article, Eckert reported with satisfaction the case of a “brilliant professional woman” who, given a “clue” from Eckert that it was her own “dominating” nature that was destroying her marriage, decided to give up her job, become pregnant, and take on the duties of a minister’s wife in order to bolster her husband’s sagging ego and thereby save her marriage. Not only did Eckert intervene, but he did so in a way intended to make certain that the woman accepted her wifely duties.

The pastoral counselors who were most ambivalent about their own authority and about parishioner autonomy tended to be the most ambivalent about gender roles. Roy Burkhart, pastor of the First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, whose comprehensive counseling and premarital education program illustrated so well the doubts some pastoral counselors had regarding non-directive counseling, showed evidence of similar ambivalence about gender roles. A first reading of Burkhart’s interpretation of the Bernreuter Personality Inventory, which he recommended as a tool for marriage counseling, suggests that he had very clear ideas about what constituted acceptable behavior for men and women. For instance, he argued that if the “boy” were self-sufficient, dominant, and extroverted, problems in the marriage would be minimal. Conversely, he suggested that if the “girl” were dominant and self-sufficient, she would have to change if she wished to help her husband fulfill his role in the marriage. Burkhart argued that the minister should assist the girl “to adapt herself creatively to the boy’s recessive nature.” He apparently assumed a world in which the man played the role of breadwinner and leader and the woman the role of homemaker and follower. He even remarked at one point, “When a girl marries a boy, she marries his life work and all that goes with it,” implying, of course, that she had no life work of her own.

The evidence seems to suggest that Burkhart promoted a particular domestic ideal that subordinated women’s needs to men’s, but a second interpretation is possible. He seemed to be very clear about his beliefs: “If either one is dependent it is better that it be the wife.” The wording of this sentence is crucial, however. It implies the possibility of a marriage in which neither party is dependent. Later in the same article, Burkhart indicated that it was not only possible, but preferable. He observed,
“Some men like a dependent wife, a ‘clinging vine,’ but the man who is most secure prefers a woman who is an individual in her own right, who can stand on her own two feet and take her place by his side.” Burkhart’s disdain for any man who preferred a dependent wife is evident. He implied that a mature man would choose a wife he could treat as an equal. Of course, he failed to explore what it would mean for church and society if women truly were treated as equals. His ideas are significant because they are representative of much of the literature of the late 1940s and very early 1950s. On the one hand, Burkhart clearly spoke in stereotypical terms about men’s and women’s roles. On the other hand, he harbored suspicions that those stereotypes were inadequate, damaging, and at odds with what he believed about the importance of self-realization and personal autonomy.

Some evidence, then, suggests that ministers who thought individual autonomy was important were less given to gender stereotyping. It was not true of all; believing in freedom and autonomy did not have to yield a change in attitudes toward women. After all, two centuries earlier, Enlightenment thinkers had, for the most part, excluded women from their vision of political and economic freedom (as had the founders of the United States) by arguing that women were different from men and hence not entitled to the same rights. Two other ingredients were necessary before general talk about autonomy by pastoral counselors could be transformed into specific talk about autonomy for women. First, these counselors had to be convinced that women’s opinions and perspective deserved respect and attention. Second, they had to believe that women had a right to autonomy in the same way that men did. And, indeed, both of these phenomena did occur.

As noted earlier, most pastoral counselors did take the concerns of their female parishioners seriously and moved those concerns to the center of pastoral counseling theory and practice. It took the addition of the third and final element, however, to transform the narrative and change the way some pastoral counselors thought and talked about women. Postwar pastoral counselors became convinced that social, cultural, and environmental factors shaped human personality more than biology did. This view was consistent with much that they encountered in the work of the neo-Freudians like Horney and Fromm who challenged the biological determinism of Freud. Having first rejected the assumption that
biology was destiny, pastoral counselors were more willing to accept as a corollary that gender roles were culturally rather than biologically derived. When pastoral counselors accepted the idea that women’s nature was shaped by more than their ability to bear children, they found themselves less able to justify the practice of gender stereotyping.

These three factors—an ongoing commitment to individual autonomy, a respect for the power of their female constituency, and a growing conviction that culture rather than biology determined human personality—provided the ground for some pastoral counselors to dismantle their narrow understanding of women. As a result, early in the 1950s, a subtext started to appear in pastoral counseling literature, in which some pastoral counselors and their secular colleagues began to reject the practice of limiting women to a domestic life, to view their female parishioners in broader and more positive terms—so much so that women became heroines of the counseling narrative—and, eventually, to make explicit arguments for women’s social, political, and economic equality. Throughout the 1950s, those pastoral counselors who supported a broader understanding of women’s role and nature did so almost always by voicing some combination of the three elements—the right to autonomy, the importance of the female perspective, and the influence of cultural forces on human personality—in defense of their position. To the extent that they stressed these concepts, they subverted the older domestic ideal and moved beyond negative and rigid depictions of women.

**A Critique of the Domestic Ideal**

Plenty of evidence suggests that the domestic ideal of male breadwinner and stay-at-home wife and mother persisted in pastoral counseling literature. Of course, pastoral counselors did not use the term “domestic ideal,” but, in the early days of both *Pastoral Psychology* and the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, more than one contributor stressed a woman’s accepting her wifely role as crucial to marital success. For instance, in 1950 the editor of *Pastoral Psychology* published a fictional account in which the female characters represented all of men’s worst nightmares. In this scenario, lovable Jim was seduced by working woman Patsy. The story implied that Jim never would have succumbed to temptation if his wife, Mimi, had not been so caught up in her “club work” or, for that
matter, if Patsy had not been there in the workplace to tempt him. The subtext suggested that when women accepted and performed their domestic role they saved themselves and their husbands from the scourge of adultery. Around the same time, psychiatrist Erich Lindemann published his analysis of marital discord in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*. Lindemann assumed that a successful marriage required that the wife give up career and education to follow her husband wherever he went. Lindemann confessed sympathy for the plight of the married woman. Although he acknowledged that sex roles were culturally rather than biologically derived, he accepted those roles and reinforced them, even going so far as to suggest that children were essential to any “real” marriage.7

Among pastoral counselors, however, the sort of one-dimensional understanding of women’s nature that we see in the story of Jim and Patsy and in Lindemann’s understanding of marriage roles was actually relatively rare. The counternarrative, with its challenge to domesticity, emerged early in the decade and gained strength as it progressed. In its inaugural year, 1950, *Pastoral Psychology* raised the issue of women’s domestic duties by publishing a reprint of Margaret Mead’s article “What Is Happening to the American Family?” Not surprisingly, Mead’s work did not challenge explicitly the division of labor into spheres in which women were homemakers and men were breadwinners. She did, however, suggest that conditions of modern life made homemaking less rewarding than it had ever been before and that it was unfair to expect women to take on that role without asking them whether they wanted to. Mead appealed to her reader’s sense of justice by pointing out that the United States was a country that prided itself on freedom of choice in matters of vocation. To underline her point, she asked the reader to imagine a man answering the question, “What are you going to do?” by saying he wanted to be a lawyer unless he got married, in which case he would have to live on a farm for the good of the children. Mead argued that most married women would choose to stay home if they had a choice, but that they did not want society to take their choice for granted. She suggested a two-fold solution. First, married women should not be expected to devote themselves wholly to homemaking, nor should they be stigmatized for choosing to work outside the home. Second, fathers should be more involved in parenting. In one sense, neither suggestion
appears especially radical, but both challenged the very heart of capital-
ist culture—the father as breadwinner. The vision of mother as wage earner, with her own money, her own interests, and her own life, and father willingly active in the domestic sphere countered the dominant paradigm.8

Three years later, in the same 1953 issue in which Seward Hiltner condemned attempts to prevent women’s entry into the professions, psychoanalyst Clara Thompson challenged the domestic ideal in much more systematic and explicit terms. She understood, as would Betty Friedan a decade later, that Freud’s biological determinism provided the essential framework for the domestic ideal.9 Thompson challenged Freud’s idea that “a woman is a castrated man, and [that] most of her troubles arise from resentment of this,” arguing that the theory of penis envy left the therapist with nothing to do but “to make the woman reconciled to her fate and to make her willing to accept certain compensations for her lack of manly assets,” eventually accepting “a child as a compensation for the lack of a penis.”10 In reality, Thompson argued, women’s sense of inferiority resulted not from their lack of penises (i.e., from their biological make-up) but from living in a society that denied them equality of opportunity socially, politically, and economically while simultaneously devaluing the only work open to them—that of mother and homemaker. Thompson suggested that “a feeling of futility,” common among middle-class and formerly professional women who were confined exclusively to the home, resulted from limitation of their choices, and she insisted that assumptions about women’s biological nature drove them to assume a role that society valued little. The solution, in Thompson’s view, was to reject the idea that biology was destiny and offer women real choices with regard to family and career. She posited that American women should not have to sacrifice either one.

Mead, Hiltner, and Thompson all drew upon the same pool of assumptions when they argued that women should not be limited to a domestic life. For one thing, all three assumed that women should have autonomy, especially with regard to their choice of career. Hiltner, more than Mead or Thompson, advanced the idea that women had a special contribution to make and that society was diminished when it limited women’s contribution to the domestic sphere. Thompson, to a greater extent than Hiltner or Mead, assumed that gender roles were shaped by
culture and openly challenged the assumption that a woman’s ability to bear children destined her for life at home.

Obviously, none of these authors offered a clear, coherent, and systematic challenge to the domestic ideal. All saw the home as uniquely feminine and assumed that women did not want to lose their right to stay home if they so chose. And yet their work did have a subversive effect on that ideal. The subversive nature of the counternarrative can only be understood if the work of individuals is located in the context of the larger conversation about human personality that was going on at the time. Margaret Mead’s work is a good example of this. Mead has never been the darling of American feminism, in part because of the thorough drubbing she took at the hands of Betty Friedan in a chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* entitled “The Functional Freeze and Margaret Mead.” Friedan argued convincingly that Mead’s work, specifically her book *Male and Female*, served to reinforce the part of the feminine mystique that assumed that biology was destiny. But Friedan also conceded that Mead’s work could be read with quite a different interpretation: “She might have passed on to the popular culture a truly revolutionary vision of women finally free to realize their full capabilities. . . . She had such a vision more than once.” Friedan concluded that Mead’s challenge to the domestic ideal was less important than her contribution to the feminine mystique. Friedan was right on one level: every time Mead slipped toward biological determinism, she encouraged a very narrow understanding of women’s nature. But Mead’s work and life, taken as a whole and located within the context of a larger discussion with other social scientists about personal autonomy, come to mean something else. This was true, too, of pastoral counselors and their colleagues in sociology, psychology, and anthropology. No matter what their intention or the detours they might have taken, wherever they maintained a commitment to personal autonomy, a respect for individual women, and an allegiance to the idea that human personality was culturally derived, they moved—albeit erratically, tortuously, and frequently oblivious of the destination—toward a vision of women’s equality and away from a vision of female domestic bliss.
Heroin of the Narrative

The middle of the decade saw not only a challenge to the domestic ideal but an increasing reluctance to portray women in negative or stereotypical terms. The earliest contributors to pastoral counseling journals tended to describe women in terms of pathology or weakness. In one 1950 fictional drama (similar to the story of Jim and Patsy), husband Allan accused wife Ginny of being “neurotic,” “childlike,” and “illogical.” The play was printed with commentary by two well-known pastoral counselors and a psychiatrist, none of whom came to Ginny’s defense, of course. In fact, the tone of some of the literature in those early years bordered occasionally on hostility toward women. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this can be found in the work of Russell Dicks, who in 1936 had coauthored The Art of Ministering to the Sick with Richard Cabot. Dicks also wrote a book about pastoral care and counseling in 1944 that remained popular in clinical pastoral education programs throughout the 1940s. The latter book went through several editions, but the earliest gives a good indication of Dicks’s mind-set. At one point or another, Dicks trotted out almost every stereotype associated with women at the time. He peopled his works with clinging, neurotic, obsessive women who manipulated their environment through their physical appearance and unplanned pregnancies. Dicks even attributed the “thousands” of problems experienced by “psychoneurotics” discharged from military service to emotionally immature mothers, an attitude consistent, by the way, with much of the popular secular literature.

Dicks’s work also provides one of the best examples of the way in which images of women were eventually transformed. Because Pastoral Work and Personal Counseling went through several revisions, we can see very clearly the change in Dicks’s language and in his attitudes toward women. For instance, in the first edition of his book, Dicks described his encounter with a young woman who had decided to divorce her husband in order to pursue a career as a writer. Exploring the nature of the woman’s relationship to her husband, Dicks asked her about the couple’s sexual relations. He came close to accusing her of being sexually manipulative. When she indicated that the sexual relationship in her marriage had never been satisfactory, Dicks charged her with being frigid intentionally in an attempt to force her husband to divorce her. In the
1949 revised edition, Dicks modified his analysis and admitted that he had been “too judgmental.” This assessment of his own behavior implies that he was beginning to question his authority to judge the woman. His analysis of her decision to leave her husband shows the same significant shift. In the first edition, Dicks declared that the young woman had made a mistake in leaving her husband before her children were grown, implying that her obligations as a mother should have taken precedence over her desire for a career. In the 1949 version, he repeated his opinion but added the comment “or maybe it wasn’t a mistake. Who can say!” So, as early as 1949, some pastoral counselors were challenging the assumption that a woman’s responsibilities as a mother should determine all her choices.\textsuperscript{14} By the 1963 revised edition, Dicks had removed the example from the book and, in addition, had edited from his book almost all of the language that described women in terms of pathology.\textsuperscript{15}

Dicks’s transformation was the most thoroughgoing among leaders in the movement, but others underwent similar changes. Even Seward Hiltner began to revise his views. For example, in his 1950 book \textit{The Counselor in Counseling}, Hiltner tended to see domineering, controlling mothers as the culprit in a remarkable number of the case studies he described. By the 1959 publication of his book \textit{The Christian Shepherd}, however, Hiltner was celebrating women’s special talents for psychology and urging ministers to tap the hidden resources of the “wise,” middle-aged women of their congregations.\textsuperscript{16}

While no one called explicitly for an end to gender stereotyping, evidence suggests that there was at least a growing awareness that women were being portrayed in narrow and unfair terms. \textit{Journal of Pastoral Care} editor Rollin Fairbanks wrote most of the book reviews for the journal in the 1950s, and his concerns emerge clearly in his reviews. In a 1956 review of Kinsey’s report on female sexuality, Fairbanks lamented the fact that Kinsey’s report on male sexuality had been given so much more attention and publicity than the report on female sexuality. Even though he wished that most Americans had paid more attention to Kinsey’s findings about women, he believed that the report would have been even more valuable if women themselves had done the research and writing. In a departure from much of the literature, Fairbanks recognized the urgent need for women to have the right to speak for themselves: “Only when more women speak and write for their own sex will we have...
a balanced and accurate body of knowledge about one of the most im-
portant of human relationships.” In a 1958 review of Frank Caprio’s
*The Sexually Adequate Female*, Fairbanks was sharply critical of the
book because of its “regrettable masculine bias which infers that wom-
an’s primary raison d’etre is to gratify the sexual needs of her man.”
Fairbanks’s reviews suggested not only that he respected women and
their point of view but that he believed they had a right to an autono-

mous existence. Once again, familiar themes repeated themselves: the
importance of personal autonomy, the value of women’s perspective, and
the conviction that a woman’s biology should not control her destiny.

Simultaneously, two remarkable changes occurred that probably were
linked to pastoral counselors’ willingness to see women in a more posi-
tive and less narrowly defined role. Most obviously, women began to
appear as heroines in counseling narratives rather than as villains. Most
surprisingly, male pastoral counselors began to talk about embracing for
themselves characteristics they defined as “feminine.” At the very least,
pastoral counseling literature evidenced, by the late 1950s and early
1960s, considerably more sympathy for women’s concerns than it had
immediately after World War II.

In the 1930s and 1940s, narratives of counseling encounters portrayed
women as the source of family, marital, and social troubles and sug-
gested that in order for those troubles to be resolved, the woman would
have to change. In the early 1940s, in his book *Getting Down to Cases*,
Charles Holman described intervening on behalf of his male counselee
“John,” who was willing to do anything to save his marriage except cook
and clean. Holman saw this as a reasonable position and encouraged
“Maybelle,” a woman with a master of fine arts degree, to rescue the
marriage by accepting the domestic responsibilities of cooking and
housekeeping. In his book *Religion and Health* around the same time,
Seward Hiltner attributed the problems of his client “Mary” to a domi-
neering and overprotective mother and discounted the effect that a fre-
quently absent and emotionally distant father might have had on her
emotional development. In general, not only did men fare better in
prewar counseling narratives than did women, they also, apparently,
fared better in the counseling session. Initially, pastoral counselors
seemed to approach their male parishioners with greater deference and a
greater desire to avoid offending them. For instance, both Seward Hilt-
ner and Wayne Oates included in their early works about counseling accounts of philandering husbands and accompanied those accounts with guidance for approaching these men in a way that would not intimidate them or scare them away.21

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the counseling narratives that pastoral counselors constructed more often depicted men either as problems or as peripheral figures, while women were portrayed as central characters, more highly skilled at solving emotional problems than were their male counterparts. For instance, Seward Hiltner characterized “Mr. Coe” as a drug-addicted, mother-dependent, unreliable person who had so little insight into himself and his behavior “as to be frightening.”22 “Mrs. Coe,” on the other hand, who had faced her inner demons and taken control of her life by leaving her abusive husband, appeared as the heroine. Elsewhere, Hiltner stated explicitly that women were just better at understanding themselves psychologically than were men.23 Knox Kreutzer’s 1959 account of “Marion Farad’s” psychological and spiritual transformation treated Farad’s husband as a peripheral figure—weak, ineffectual, and almost irrelevant.24 And in 1961 when Lowell Colston and Seward Hiltner published the results of their research comparing counseling in a religious setting with that in a secular venue, they drew a group portrait of strong women taking steps to change their own lives by ending abusive relationships, confronting philandering husbands, and acknowledging their own autonomy.25

Much of the work that saw women as heroines and men as problems did not necessarily challenge the domestic ideal, but it did avoid the pitfall of portraying women as pathological and as a problem to be solved. Instead, men became the problem. Irving Sands, a medical doctor and occasional contributor to the Journal of Pastoral Care, illustrated this point in his discussion of men’s and women’s roles. Sands deplored the male practice of escaping to the golf course on Saturday mornings while the female was forced to stay home and care for the children. He objected, likewise, to the “weekend automobile culture” and encouraged, instead, family activities centered in the home. Sands saw the home as symbolically female and the car as symbolically male, and he wanted the feminine to triumph.26 Similarly, when the editors of Pastoral Psychology in 1955 published the account of a man who had committed adultery and suggested that the minister should not be too judgmental of
this man, a general howl arose from rank-and-file pastoral counselors, who believed that the adulterous man needed to be held accountable for behavior that had probably damaged his wife and family emotionally. None of the objectors suggested that he needed to be handled gingerly or with undue respect in order to retain him as a member of the church. The claim of wife and family to justice seemed to be a higher priority.²⁷

More telling than pastoral counselors’ willingness to portray women sympathetically was their interest in embracing the feminine for themselves. Some went so far as to acknowledge that the new model of ministry that pastoral counselors had promoted was based on a feminine model of being. In one of his books on pastoral care, The Christian Shepherd (1959), Seward Hiltner pointed out the importance of feminine characteristics for ministers, especially pastoral counselors. He began by explaining that masculinity and femininity were culturally constructed. The feminine, according to Hiltner, was linked in American culture to introspection, tenderness, humility, and “subjective knowledge.”²⁸ He defined subjective knowledge as the “process by which we attempt to [enter] understandingly [into] the frame of reference of another person.” The masculine, on the other hand, was linked in American culture to a life of action rather than introspection and to objective or scientific knowledge rather than intuitive knowledge. In Hiltner’s judgment, feminine subjectivity was essential as a counterbalance to masculine objectivity, especially for the Christian minister engaged in pastoral counseling. Objective knowledge alone was inadequate, because it could not provide the “tender and solicitous concern that is always the essence of Christian shepherding.”²⁹ Possessing objective or masculine knowledge only constituted a real danger for counselors. According to Hiltner, ministers who concentrated only on the objective circumstances of their parishioners’ lives and not on how people felt about their own lives risked misusing the knowledge they had gained. The result, Hiltner believed, would be an attempt by the minister at social control—an effort to remake the counselee in the image of the counselor. Essentially, Hiltner was arguing that the so-called feminine characteristics were necessary to a noncoercive ministry that would respect the inner resources of the counselee. James Ashbrook, a Baptist minister and seminary professor, in a 1963 Pastoral Psychology article, went even further. Drawing on the work of Margaret Mead and Carl Jung, he argued that people could not be fully human
unless they recognized and accepted both the masculine and the feminine within themselves. The implications were clear: the man who was afraid to face and cultivate the “feminine” qualities within himself risked failing to live up to his full potential.30

The Argument for Women’s Equality

Ashbrook was part of a new generation of scholars who had begun to address the question of women’s equality more systematically. These young men (and they were still mostly men, despite all the talk about women), who came to study with Wayne Oates in Louisville or Seward Hiltner in Chicago or Paul Johnson in Boston, understood more completely than did their teachers the implications of the psychological, sociological, and anthropological theories they encountered in the classroom. In particular, as they confronted the assumption that gender characteristics were culturally rather than biologically derived, one question became unavoidable: if biology was not destiny, how could American society justify the limitations it placed upon women? In response, this generation of pastoral counselors argued, in classic liberal terms, for the expansion of women’s roles. That is, they argued for the right of the individual female to equality of opportunity.

In a series of Pastoral Psychology articles edited by Southern Baptist minister and pastoral counselor, Samuel Southard, pastoral counselors examined the implications for both men and women of changing sex roles. (It is important to note that all of the contributors used the term “sex roles” in a manner very much akin to current use of the term “gender roles.”) Three of the articles in that series articulated, in unequivocal terms, something that looked very much like the liberal feminist position. William Douglas, an assistant professor at Boston University School of Theology, Lester Kirkendall, a family life professor at Oregon State University, and James Ashbrook all addressed questions about women’s equality in very similar terms.31 Douglas’s article, published in June of 1961, illustrates the basic arguments very well. Douglas launched his attack against sex discrimination at the same point as Betty Friedan would when she wrote The Feminine Mystique. He attacked the domestic ideal that limited women to domestic pursuits, subordinated them to men’s authority, and left them feeling bored, frustrated, and stymied at every
Douglas recognized that the domestic ideal was grounded in assumptions about women’s biological nature. Hence, to the argument that women’s biology suited them for nothing but childbearing, Douglas responded by arguing that sex differences were “more a matter of culture than biology.” Citing the work of Margaret Mead and Carl Jung, Douglas argued that masculinity and femininity were culturally defined points on a continuum rather than rigid, biologically determined categories, observing that “even if we could [his emphasis] distinguish the ‘feminine temperament[,]’ we would find some who were biologically male with ‘more’ of it than some who were biologically female.”

Because his audience was largely Christian, Douglas offered a fascinating parallel argument about the Bible. Douglas seemed to be arguing that in the same way that sex characteristics were cultural artifacts, the apparently clear biblical mandate for silencing and subordinating women was also a cultural artifact that should be discarded. Douglas suggested that the mandate was less clear if the text were read with more careful attention paid to “the intention of Scripture as a whole,” as well as to the cultural and practical context of specific passages. For instance, he argued that the Bible, as a whole, encouraged equality of the sexes and the “mutual” (his emphasis) submission of men and women. He pointed to specific scripture that seemed to support this, such as Genesis 1:27, in which the creation story is told in a way that suggests that “God’s image” included both male and female. Douglas concluded his argument by recalling the practice of the early church, in which women exercised considerable control before the authority of men became institutionalized in the Roman Catholic Church. Douglas challenged his readers to consider this evidence and with it the possibility that the church, when it called for the subordination of women, might have misinterpreted scripture and “falsely deified the patriarchal perspective of Middle Eastern culture.”

Implicit in Douglas’s argument was the assumption that if women were not biologically different (other than the ability to bear children), then no argument could be made for their inherent inferiority. By impli-
cation, he seemed to be arguing that if women were not inherently inferior and the Bible did not specifically limit their sphere of contribution, then they ought to be offered the same opportunities as were men. Based on these assumptions, Douglas argued that the “proper goal” for women should be “equality of opportunity” (his emphasis) granted upon the basis of individual merit. Hence, the basic challenge facing the church, as he saw it, was, “Can we see women as individuals with talents and dedication, rather than as members of a class automatically assumed to be inferior and defective?”

As the capstone of his argument, Douglas offered the possibility of a sort of communal self-realization, maintaining that only if the church gave women equal standing would it realize “the potential inherent in the body of Christ.” In fact, he contended that “God’s purposes” could not be completely accomplished without granting women equal status. Douglas implied that if the church expected to succeed and to do the work of God in the twentieth century, it would have to stop limiting women to a domestic life and offer its female constituency access to power and authority. Like those who had preceded him, Douglas appealed to the importance of individual autonomy, the power of culture in shaping human personality, and value of incorporating a female perspective.

Not all pastoral counselors embraced the argument for women’s equality or attempted to abandon gender stereotyping. In a 1957 Pastoral Psychology article on Christian love in the home, Vere Loper articulated the middle-class, domestic ideal with a vengeance. Loper spent his entire career in the parish ministry, primarily serving as minister of the First Congregational Church in Berkeley, California. His discussion of gender roles and the wife’s obligation to her husband illustrates the potentially regressive nature of an ethic of relationships and hints at why pastoral counselors interested in women’s equality made their argument in terms of women’s rights rather than in terms of human obligation to relationships. In his article, Loper began by recommending that the wife be “careful of her appearance knowing that her husband takes joy in her attractiveness,” reminding his readers that “Bibles keep homes together, but red dresses have their importance.” He urged the wife not to save the disciplining of children for her husband in the evening but instead to
make the “homecoming a source of joy to her husband.” Loper instructed the husband, for his part, to express his love with material gifts—a new dress or a “jewel” on the occasion of the wife giving birth, for instance. Loper also reminded the husband to be aware that his wife sometimes needed relief from home and children. He did not, of course, propose that the husband should dry dishes, run the vacuum, or bathe the children. Instead, he encouraged the husband to be “sensitive and responsive” to his wife’s “social needs, [and] her desire for friends,” by which he apparently meant that husbands should take their wives out to dinner occasionally. In Loper’s understanding of the relationship between the sexes, women were primarily wives, mothers, and ornaments to their husbands. Men were breadwinners and providers. More important, Loper explicitly rejected the primacy of individual rights. He argued that Christian partners should not think about their relationship in terms of “rights and privileges” but in terms of making their “loved one happy.”

In this we see the problems with an ethic of relationships illustrated. If a woman’s moral decisions were to be made with regard to the needs of her husband, and he expected the house to be vacuumed, the children well disciplined, dinner ready, and his wife attractively dressed each day when he arrived home from work, maintaining autonomy and pursuing self-realization became difficult for women.

It is important not to overstate the feminist quality of pastoral counseling literature. Clara Thompson, William Douglas, and James Ashbrook, who led the way among pastoral counselors in thinking about women’s equality, all felt they had to make excuses for early feminists, whom they portrayed as strident, hostile, and too eager to be like men. Psychologist Ruth Hartley, in her 1961 contribution to the series on masculinity and femininity, went even further, devoting most of her article to reassuring men that women did not really want equality or power. Presumably because she believed that many men felt threatened by the impending changes, Hartley concluded by suggesting that changes in sex roles could best be facilitated by strengthening the egos of male children. Another contributor to the series, psychologist Aaron Rutledge, insisted that the fewer the distinctions between male and female, the greater the possibility of healthy relationships. At the same time, however, he peopled his discussion of sex roles with references to nagging, possessive, overbearing women. It must also be noted that pastoral
counselors did little in the real world to advance the cause of women’s equality. It is one thing to articulate an argument for women’s equality on paper and another to take up political action or even to welcome women as equals into professional ranks. Women did enter seminaries and theology and divinity schools in ever increasing numbers beginning in the mid-1960s. In disproportionate numbers, women who entered seminary chose to study pastoral care and counseling, but they continued to find themselves blocked from the pulpit and from professional advancement.

Despite their best intentions to envision equality for women, pastoral counselors found themselves falling prey to many of the stereotypes of the day. And while they flirted with a truly original theory of women’s equality, they were never able to fully articulate that theory. As with liberal thinkers before them, pastoral counselors clung to a highly individualistic understanding of freedom and equality, one that celebrated feminine characteristics but took shape around the notion that those characteristics were culturally constructed and that the best argument for women’s equality had to be based on an argument for women’s right to that equality, as well as on the fundamental sameness of women and men. In a liberal political framework, that was the only argument that made sense. Arguing for difference repeatedly opened the door to treating women differently and as less than men. And yet, the expanded notion of what it meant to be human that came from pastoral counselors’ discussion of gender roles continued to percolate through the literature as they began to rethink their own role in the parish in the early to middle 1960s.