Awesome Families

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Chapter 4

In with the Old and the New

The fictional account of family healing and reconciliation in KNN’s *Prodigal Daughter* was representative of a very real dream. ICOC folklore was full of sons baptizing fathers, daughters baptizing mothers, family of origin sisters and brothers baptizing one another. Late one night, as I sat on the basement floor of a leadership couple’s home for an “all night women’s Bible study” that began at 7:00 P.M. and lasted till only 10:30 (Pat said they used to go late into the evening until most of them starting having children), Ann asked that the twelve women present join hands to connect our circle. I clasped one hand around Pat’s hand and the other around Jill’s. Ann began with the following prayer: “I’m so thankful for my mom, God. For my mom who, I can’t even believe it when I say it. It’s a miracle. My mom is a disciple now. She has been a disciple for a year. I can’t believe it. It is so miraculous, thank you, God. She is coming to see me next week. I ask you to help me, God. Father, help me to love the rest of my biological family. God, help me not to close the door. With my sister especially, God. Even though it is so hard.” She paused, fought back tears, and took a deep breath to continue: “When I see her she slams the door in my face. Help me, God, not to give up, to love her.” She continued her prayer through gentle crying: “Thank you, God, for bringing my father back into my life. I have some kind of a relationship with him now and I’m thankful for that. When I want to keep far away from them, to hide from my biological family, please help me to love them, Father. I thank you, Father, for my brothers and sisters in the Kingdom who teach me what love is, who help me learn to love.”

When I first entered the basement that evening, I found it stuffy and wondered if (three months pregnant, tired, and nauseous) I would make it through the evening. By the end of the night, the basement was no
longer a stifling room, but a sacred and active space transformed by sto-
ries of healing and reconciliation with kin: a room charged by tears,
physical comforting, prayer, confession, and testimony of how church
membership had enabled members to become close and loving with fa-
thers who had abused them, mothers who were neglectful, and siblings
with whom they had fought. There was a palpable collective spirit of
community in prayer, an energy named by believers of many faiths as the
“obvious presence of the Holy Spirit” (Searl 1997, 99). Members spoke
of God as there with us, in the basement space, as active in their mar-
rriages, and as radically present on their journeys to heal relationships
with families of origin.

The women took turns expressing how disciples had helped heal
their marriages, relationships with biological/families of origin, their
own children, preteens and teenagers. I was invited to speak, but quietly
deprecated. Pat placed a psalm in front of me to read instead. I thought of
speaking; after three years of fieldwork, I wanted to be a part of the phys-
ical circle, to talk of my own family and how I had learned to forgive.
Even though I could have framed my prayer as thanking a disciple, Pat,
for our conversations about forgiveness, I could not speak of her as my
“sister,” nor talk of a “miraculous” discipling relationship, nor credit her
with my ability to make peace with family wounds. My reticence is im-
portant because it speaks to the social pressure of telling a particular ver-
sion of successful family healing in the ICOC. I knew that my words
would have seemed out of place; I knew that I would have weakened the
sacred energy that made its way through the bodies around me and dis-
turbed the master narrative of miraculous family healing and conversion.

**Narratives of Domino Healing**

Telling stories about how the discipling community was able to
bring about multiple family of origin conversion was a common group
narrative theme. Such stories of converting kin were full of contradic-
tion: they promoted ultimate loyalty to both church family and family
of origin; they promoted forgiveness of past familial abuses alongside in-
dividualism and the ultimate importance of the self; and they cast bio-
logical mothers and fathers as sisters and brothers. At the same time,
these narratives described a discipling approach and practice that ap-
peared to resolve numerous ideals and expectations of family. Members
prayed that they too would one day be able to stand at the lectern in front of their church family and proclaim, as Judy did during one women’s gospel night, “God has worked miracles in our family’s [biological] life!” Stories of extended biological families joining en masse, learning to respect one another, and protected from “evil” divisive outside influences were prominent during formal services and special events, in DPI literature, and in KNN video/film productions.

**Testimonies**

Fighting back tears, Jan Dealy looked out among the four hundred women on Women’s Day finishing coffee and cheesecake, having just been entertained by a sketch featuring “Judge Judy” as host of the game show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. A local member had dressed as Judge Judy and quizzed contestants about their commitment to God. Jan motioned to her twenty-five-year-old daughter sitting nearby. She proudly announced that her daughter had led her to God, and that now, both her son and daughter were disciples. Jan told a story of her daughter calling home from college one day extremely excited, informing her she had met “really great friends and was going to church and studying the Bible and finally, that she was to be baptized.” Jan said that she remembered feeling proud of her daughter, yet disheartened by her own life circumstances. She had been married thirty years to an abusive man who drank too much. One day she and her daughter were shopping in New York City when a man handed them a pamphlet that read: “The end of the world is coming.” She said she looked at her daughter and vocalized how frightened she was about her present life situation. Her daughter said to her, “Mom, you should be sure where you stand before God.” Jan was shocked by her daughter’s suggestion: “What is this girl saying to me? I’m her mom!” The congregation laughed at this reversal of parental role. Jan then explained that it was through her daughter’s bold efforts that she began to attend ICOC services. Her daughter was also presented as instrumental in leading Jan to attend a Marriage Enrichment Day with her husband. Jan completed the First Principles study and was baptized and became a disciple. She ended her testimony praising the bold and heroic efforts of her daughter: “I stand before you today with confidence, that same confidence my daughter confronted me with years ago.”

During another local City COC Women’s Day event in 1997, three
women—a mother, daughter, and stepdaughter—narrated a kin conversion chain reaction, a story of family of origin made awesome through disciplers’ efforts. The mother, Bobbie Kemp, testified first. She described being so impressed by the people in the congregation that she asked her daughter to come back with her: “I shared the Bible with my daughter [older teen at the time]. . . . When I was baptized, she was baptized along with me, and it was such an exciting time because God gave me my daughter. My stepdaughter was baptized too.” Bobbie’s daughter, Erin, testified after her mom. Erin told of attending an ICOC service and learning “more in that one service than I had ever learned in my life!” She converted soon after. Bobbie’s stepdaughter, Tracy, was the third to testify. Tracy offered an image of God’s power working through her biological father’s family: “Using Bobbie, Erin, and Mark, God worked it out so that I could have a second chance, I could have an opportunity for Hope, Love, and Salvation. On May 16, 1994, my dad baptized me.”

Such narratives of domino healing gave collective assurance that family of origin conversion was sacred work, in God’s hands, unexplainable coincidences leading to kin conversions filled formal discourse. For example, during Wednesday night services, members would sometimes stand up and offer brief descriptions of recent healing and conversion successes. During one such service, members gasped out loud as a female member explained that her biological mother, with whom she had been studying the Bible over the phone, was “out of the blue” offered a job and an apartment nearby the City COC congregation. During another service, members gasped and praised God out loud and in unison as one woman told of going to an ICOC congregation in Florida while on a business trip and discovering that her cousin had been invited to the same service by a Florida disciple. “Awesome,” “unbelievable,” and “what are the odds?” were some of the comments whispered among congregants. Divine intervention was the implicit message behind these brief, yet powerfully legitimating stories.

Kingdom News Network

KNN produced films that enhanced a portrait of domino family healing and family of origin conversion. During one special Wednesday evening service in a hotel conference room, Dana, the women’s
ministry leader, told us that we were going to have a special “treat,” a movie that the church had just released called *Secrets of the Heart*. She told us she would follow the film with a lesson on forgiveness. The lights dimmed as we anticipated our “treat,” but the video was not working properly. Dana’s husband, Ron, the congregation’s lead evangelist, rushed to the video equipment to determine what was wrong. Working with audio and video equipment was gendered in group as in outside society, men were often talked about as naturally better with electronics and were almost always assigned these tasks at mixed gender and segregated events to help with such backstage responsibilities. Dana quickly reversed the evening’s plan and said she would begin with her lesson on forgiveness. The women around me cheered her on, “Go, Dana! Come on, Dana!” Dana held up her hands in a forceful display of biblical feminism and exclaimed, “Women power!” The women applauded and I noted, for a brief moment, that it might have appeared to a passerby in the halls of the hotel that we were a group of radical feminists.

Like most messages delivered by ICOC leaders, Dana divided her sermon into sections, numbered them, and gave each a catchy title: “I am going to lay out three simple points: one, acknowledge the problem; two, accept his plan; three, activate the power of forgiveness.” She bemoaned a “growing awareness of blame and not forgiveness” in our society. We must “accept his [God’s] plan of forgiveness.” She recited a list she had composed earlier in the week entitled “Things That Come from an Unforgiving Heart.” Included in her long list were “hurtfulness, anger, vengeance, hatred, hardness, scornfulness, rage, violence, ugliness, meanness, bitterness, murder, and divorce.” Dana, the woman who had just declared “women power,” then told us that her parents’ divorce had caused her to be raised by a single mother in a “feminist household” where she grew up developing a “man-hating” attitude. Her denouncement of feminism alongside a celebration of women power offers a strong example of what Judith Stacey (1991) names postfeminist rhetoric: an explicit disdain for the label feminist yet a rhetorical and practical application of core feminist principles—here namely the assertion of female power. Before she could fully review her three points, Ron signaled that he had mastered the video’s audio problem (we had been listening to a local radio station instead of the film’s audio track). Improvising, Dana quickly wrapped up her talk and let *Secrets of the Heart*
demonstrate discipling’s power to activate family of origin conversion and healing.

secrets of the heart. The film began with a white woman (in her thirties) standing in a line of bridesmaids with a big smile on her face. Music played as we watched this woman miss catching a bridal bouquet. We saw a repeat of the same woman at several different weddings, missing various bridal bouquets. Her attempts grew more comedic as she began diving and falling to the ground in pursuit of bouquets through slow motion clips.

Film cut to this same woman sitting with her boyfriend at an upscale restaurant. Her boyfriend repeatedly tried to ask her a question but kept stumbling, “Will you mmm . . . will you mmm . . . will you mmm.” The woman daydreamed as he struggled and we briefly saw an image of her in a wedding dress. Boyfriend finally got the words out, “Will you move in with me?”

Film cut to the woman sitting on her couch eating ice cream. Her roommate came in and gave her a hard time about agreeing to move in with the boyfriend rather than insisting on marriage. The roommate argued, “Two and half years of dating isn’t enough to know!” As she nervously ate the ice cream the phone rang. It was her younger sister calling from a pay phone. The younger sister announced that she was getting married and that she wanted her older sister to come to the wedding and be a bridesmaid. The older sister had a pained expression on her face at the prospect of wearing yet another bridesmaid dress and missing yet another flower bouquet.

The older sister and her boyfriend arrived in Los Angeles the night before the wedding. She found her younger sister surrounded by her Christian friends (ICOC disciples). Her sister was trying on her wedding veil. We learned that the bride was blind and that her blindness was caused years ago in an automobile accident when their father, an alcoholic, was driving while intoxicated. We also learned that the groom, who arrived at the church with his family, is black. I heard women around me in the conference room whispering, “Ahh, he’s black,” seeming to anticipate that the parents might have an issue with interracial marriage. The family conflict that ensued, however, had nothing to do with the racial makeup of the couple.
That evening at the rehearsal dinner, disciples toasted the couple and talked about how much the future bride and groom loved each other. During the rehearsal dinner, the older sister began talking to the bride about how terrible their father was. A disciple intervened and asked her to stop. The disciple told her that it was a bad time to bring up the father because the father had called the younger sister that day and asked if he could attend the wedding. We saw the father appear in the hallway. The biological mother asked the father to leave as tomorrow was a big day for their daughter and she did not want him to ruin it. The father stated that he was there to “make amends.”

The song “What the World Needs Now Is Love” played softly. The older sister became very upset about the alcoholic father’s presence and ended up on the chapel floor late on the evening of the rehearsal dinner, sobbing about how much she hated her father. The younger sister followed her into the chapel and knelt beside her. In the balcony above, the groom and the bride’s discipler were listening. The younger sister admitted that she too felt anger and resentment toward their father, but that God was leading her to do the right thing—she wanted to forgive her father for causing her blindness and let him participate in the wedding ceremony and celebration. The older sister was taken by her younger sister’s efforts to forgive their father; she told her that if she was able to forgive him for his alcoholism and taking away her sight, she would listen to what her little sister had to tell her about a relationship with God. Late that night, the bride sat in a car with her fiancé and her discipler who both encouraged her to do the “right thing,” to lead her family into forgiveness: “You have what your family needs,” they told her.

The next day, right before the wedding ceremony, the older sister gave the younger sister a kiss and then left the bride alone with her discipler in an anteroom. The discipler looked into the bride’s eyes and told her that her eyes were “so beautiful.” The bride replied, “My dad used to say that to me.”

Film cut to the foyer of the church where the bride’s biological father was signing the guest register. The father told his blind daughter, who was to walk down the aisle momentarily, that he had stopped drinking. The daughter gave her father a flower to wear on his suit and asked him to walk her down the aisle. He told her that he was not dressed properly. She responded that he looked fine to her.
Father and daughter walked down the aisle. Biological mother appeared shocked, as did the older sister. The disciplers in the congregation were smiling and pleased at the reunion. A young man played the guitar and sang the lyrics “In your eyes I’ve found my place.”

During the wedding reception, the older sister gave the keys to the apartment back to her “live-in” boyfriend and said, “I made my little sister a promise.” The women around me in the conference room clapped. The older sister finally, having made a promise to study the Bible if her sister forgave their father, caught the bridal bouquet. The song “What the World Needs Now Is Love” played throughout the credits. A clip at the end of the film read, from book of John: “Perfect love casts out fear.”

Like other KNN video events, when the lights came up, I noticed many women in the congregation were crying. I looked to my left and Pat had tears in her eyes. I looked to my right and noticed another woman crying. I thought of the stories that these three women had told me during formal interviews over the past few years; each had fathers they were estranged from, none had been able to grow close to their fathers or make them into Kingdom brothers. One of these women had a father who was sexually abusive, another had a father who had abandoned her as a child; both women struggled to “forgive.” The KNN film caused me, as I tried to sit back and observe, to work to push back emotions regarding my own family relationships.

Ann stood and spoke to us from the lectern in the front of the room as they wiped their tears. She gave us a context for individual interpretation of Secrets of the Heart. “The woman in the film was me,” she said. She told us of her stressful relationship with her father, and how a disciple had persuaded her to call him. During the first call her father had asked curtly, “What do you want?” “That hurt,” she said, but tried a second time, to which her father responded that he “couldn’t take the time” to come and see her and his grandchildren. How does she get through the pain, she asked. It is only through the help of church members who have taught her how to “continually forgive” that she is able to love her father despite his resistance and cold responses. Recall that Ann had affirmed her commitment to mending fences with her father during the “all night” basement Bible study, thanking God for bringing her father back
into her life and for her brothers and sisters in the Kingdom who had taught “what love is.”

Pat gave me a ride home that night and told me more about how her time in the church had helped her come to terms with her own father’s distance and inability to express love. Earlier that evening, feeling the fatigue that often comes with the first months of pregnancy, she had struggled with not wanting to come to church on a Wednesday night. “What would be new [about the service] after fifteen years?” she had asked herself. “Just that day,” she told me, she and her husband, Tom, had struggled with the task of how she could go on forgiving and loving a father who had so little involvement in his child’s and grandchildren’s lives. She had been “amazed” by the ability of the church to provide a new tool (the KNN film) to help her face again the old, yet open, wounds caused by her father’s harsh emotional distance. Watching the estranged and wounded family in the film come together gave her hope and patience to keep loving and trying to communicate with her father, and to pursue these efforts through a community of caring church disciples.

ICOC production efforts like *Secrets of the Heart* gave Pat and others renewed hope that their church family was the very best community to help them heal relationships with parents and siblings. KNN also fortified group boundaries: vividly reminding members of a conflicted and helpless picture of family relationships outside the church and of the strong potential for healing within.

KNN features like *The Prodigal Daughter* and *Secrets of the Heart* speak to the power of film as a mechanism of group commitment and conversion. *Secrets of the Heart* emphasized, through a familiar and effective medium, that the ICOC community had the power to heal the worst of family history tragedy. The film’s production values were good: the sound design (rich with classic tunes) had dramatic effect and the acting was convincing. It is no wonder that members described KNN’s video and film products as seeming “so real”: they passed as professional films for many members.

The plots also magnified the dangers threatening contemporary families and intimate relationships. In *The Prodigal Daughter*, abortion and drugs threatened young daughters; in *Secrets of the Heart*, alcoholism destroys children and tears a family apart. As in narratives of heroic ICOC marriage saves, families then experience healing, transformation, and
reconciliation through the interventions of disciplers: this radically de-
viant father transforms into a symbol of the good father, the protective
father who walks his daughter down the aisle of the church at her wed-
ding. The sister, swimming in disappointment in a dating culture that of-
fered little security, is now living among a community where she is likely
to find a willing and caring church brother to marry. The title of the film,
Secrets of the Heart, calls to mind ICOC rhetorical images of open, sub-
missive, and “teachable” hearts. Hearts that hold nasty biological family
secrets and destructive relational habits, but through disciplers’ interven-
tions become catalysts for the opening of successive biological family
members’ hearts.

Notable was that throughout the entire film, the bride was sur-
rounded by her own discipler and other disciples in the church. When
she and her sister were in the chapel, disciples were listening to their in-
timate conversation on the balcony above. When she was in the car late
at night trying to decide whether or not to forgive her father and let him
participate in the wedding celebration, the discipler was there. When she
was in the chapel before the wedding ceremony, it was her discipler who
helped her see that she had the power to forgive. Not only did her con-
viction as a church member allow her to forgive her father and lead to
her father walking her down the aisle, it was the impetus for her biolog-
ical sister’s conversion to the ICOC, the action that led her sister to leave
a sinful relationship with her boyfriend.

This young bride became the biological family heroine, the daugh-
ter who, through membership in the ICOC, was able to heal and recon-
cile her family. Her sister was now a “real sister,” a sister for eternity, sure
to develop a loving marriage with a dedicated ICOC brother. We were
given no solid clues of the father’s motivation—left to wonder that, per-
haps, as in other narrative instances, his willingness to make amends was
divine intervention. Given the scenario that unfolded in front of the
mom and dad, we were left with the impression that the parents may be
well on the way to becoming brothers and sisters in the Kingdom and
perhaps even remarried.

The potential for the discipling community to bring about family of
origin change was performed in the ritual participants viewing of the film:
we sat in a room surrounded by City COC disciplers. Immediately after
the film, Ann, a discipling group and family group leader, demonstrated
application of the film to life experience by beginning, “The woman in
the film was me,” and then applying the message to her own situation.
Immediately after viewing The Prodigal Daughter we had a share time, a
break in the service where members and potential converts and disciples
and disciplers began talking together spontaneously in small groups
about how the film had touched them and how they had similar family
troubles. The social environment where media messages are received is
essential to audience impact. The showing of KNN films and video
newsreels, in my observations, were primarily viewed during services or
in homes where disciples gathered; they were not routinely given to po-
tential converts for home viewing. Viewed alone, Secrets of the Heart
would no doubt lack the collective energy that sitting among disciples
brought; viewed alone, members and potential converts would be left on
their own to interpret and apply to their own life circumstances.

Discipleship Publications International

One of the special treasures that God gives to people on this earth is
the family. . . . [O]f course, many families experience divorce, adul-
tery, lack of forgiveness and other painful scars. . . . [T]he true disci-
ple sees these needs as an opportunity to introduce his or her family
to the healing power of Christ. . . . As Christians, we are com-
manded to love and care for our families. (Kim 1998, 56)

The previous excerpt from Frank and Erica Kim’s DPI text, How to
Share Your Faith, stresses the dangers social disease poses to biological/
families of origin. This text is replete with success stories that named and
illustrated the domino effect: “Let us not hold back one day longer with
the people we should love the most on this earth—our families! . . .
[W]e baptized nine mother and fathers of disciples in six months! . . .
The domino effect of parents being baptized also allowed many siblings,
children and even grandparents to be baptized into Christ! Families in
Tokyo were reunited and also united in Christ like never before” (Kim

In fact, an entire chapter, “Love Your Family,” is devoted to domino
conversion stories. The following narrative is indicative of the organiza-
tion’s domino effect script, successful conversion through bold disciple
efforts producing a conversion chain reaction:
About five summers ago, my nephew, Jeremy, came from Colorado to stay with my family and me for six weeks. At fifteen years old he had begun to drift away from his mother, from a good conscience and into sin and rebelliousness. . . . As he lived with us and participated in the church activities, he changed immediately.

Then we went to our summer Christian youth camp. While there, Jeremy decided to become a disciple of Jesus. He started studying the Bible that week while at camp. We continued studying, and ten days after camp I baptized my nephew into Christ!

The change in his life was so radical that my sister and my mother (his mother and grandmother), though three states away, perceived his transformation merely in their phone conversations. They were so impressed that they decided to attend the church in Denver and began studying the Bible with the women’s ministry leader there and with my wife, Debbie, over the phone. . . . Five days later I drove Jeremy, along with our two children, John and Amy, to Colorado and baptized my mother and sister into Christ as disciples. It was a glorious time for our family!

A few months later they all moved to Dallas to be near us and to be a part of the Dallas church. Jeremy now is in the third year of a football scholarship at the University of Central Oklahoma. My sister lives across the street from us and leads a group of disciples. My mom, a Bible discussion group leader, works for me as my personal executive assistant. All three are very fruitful in their ministry for the Lord. Because of Jesus and the church, our family has been redeemed, and our relationships are better than ever before. Praise God for these blessings! (Kim 1998; 62)

This text, as with other DPI publications, were read alone, discussed in Bible study groups, featured during larger services and events, and carried with members as constant reminders of the potential for domino conversion.

*Ex-Member Narratives of Bio Conversion*

The extreme movement focus on converting family of origin that I documented in group was also a subject of ex-member and media attention.
For example, the ABC News program 20/20 did a spot on the ICOC on October 15, 1993, entitled “Believe It or Else.” This exchange is typical of media cult accounts that stress ex-member horror stories—this one, in particular, depicting a child, a girl of fourteen at the mercy of relentless “cult” leaders.

John Stossel [20/20 journalist][voice-over]: When Nancy could not persuade other children to come to her church, leaders told her—
Ms. Cone [former church member]: “You have something wrong with you. You’re not close to God.” And they said, “You need to beg them. Tell them this is a life-and-death matter. Even if they say no, beg them until they say yes.”

Stossel [voice-over]: She tried, but when she couldn’t recruit anyone else, church leaders told her that she and her family would burn in hell.
Ms. Cone: I couldn’t go to sleep at night, wondering if I woke up the next morning if my mother would be dead or my father would be dead and they’d be in hell. You know, that’s what they told me. “Your parents are going to hell and you’re responsible for their souls.” And that was a real big responsibility for someone who was only 14 years old, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I felt like I was going to crack.

(ABC News 20/20 transcript #1344, October 15, 1993, pp. 2–3)

Nancy said she told the church she was leaving and that they warned her not to go. Ms. Cone details more of leaders’ threats and how she thought of suicide and scratched her wrists till they bled. Stossel tells us that Ms. Cone “was hospitalized for a month. She says being in the hospital and not being allowed to take church leaders’ phone calls is the only thing that allowed her to escape the church.”

Ms. Cone’s story may have been dramatized; however, her media account taken together with my ex-member interviews, and my member interviews and field observations, suggest that members did feel great pressure in group to convert family—not just for bringing them together as brothers and sisters in their new church family, but to save them from eternal hell and damnation.

Family of Origin Dilemma
As members formed intimate new relationships within church boundaries that demanded extensive loyalty, emotional attachment, intimacy, and
frequent association, the time they spent with their family of origin naturally diminished (unless those members had converted as well). New religious movements that have demanded strong in-group bonds, consistent and/or constant physical association, and submission to group norms of behavior have historically carried a mark or stigma of biological/family of origin destruction (e.g., Children of God or “The Family,” and the Unification Church, labeled the “Moonies”). Members of such groups naturally experience role conflict as normative family responsibilities and expected ideals of caring and concern clash with their current position as sister, brother, mother, or father in the new group. The anticult movement that arose in the 1960s and 1970s was sustained by parents convinced that their young adult children were being “brainwashed” and taken away from their families in “cults.” After the mass suicide of nine hundred people in the 1970s in Jim Jones’s movement, the People’s Temple, family panic grew over youth membership in “cults.” The social impact of this historical anti-cult moral panic left many ICOC members’ biological families nervous and in serious fear of being abandoned.

Like many parents of young adults who joined new religious movements in the sixties and seventies, contemporary parents of young adults in the ICOC nationwide have voiced serious opposition to the movement. Media coverage and anti-cult literature are replete with heightened rhetoric fueling cult accusations. ICOC campus activities were in fact banned from several college campuses (Paulson 2001; Rodgers-Melnick 1996). Criticisms echo the concerns of original anti-cult, biological family instigated organizations that responded to new religious movements of the 1960s. For example, the AFF (American Family Foundation) published a book in 1996 entitled The Boston Movement: Critical Perspectives on the International Churches of Christ, edited by Carol Giambalvo and Herbert Rosedale. The editors state as their mission: “to study manipulation and cultic groups, to educate the public and professionals, and to assist those who have been adversely affected by a cult experience.” The majority of contributors to this volume view the ICOC as a destructive group, and as especially detrimental to family. Speaking from a place of medical therapeutic authority, Lorna Goldberg and William Goldberg’s piece (in Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996, 47), “A Mental Health Approach,” begins, “We are clinical social workers who
have been working with families of current and former members of cults and destructive groups since the 1970s. Typically, membership in these groups has hurt both the member and his or her family.” Another contributor, long outspoken critic of the movement, Robert Watts Thornburg at Boston University, writes, “The Boston Church of Christ discourages new prospects from associating with nonmembers, systematically cutting out any contact with family, friends, or outside sources of reality checks” (Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996, 21).

Such anti-cult literature, often authored by former members and members’ family of origin, posed a serious threat to the ICOC organizational performance. Stories of losing young family members to the ICOC are grave images. In these narratives, members are not heroines or heroes, but victims, and their disciplers evil representatives of an organized effort to “steal” children. Imagine how the following narrative, written by the parents of an ex-member, might drain symbolic renditions of the discipling community as exceptionally able to heal biological families through the teaching of forgiveness and relationality.

The Stranger in My House: A Parent’s Story

Karen [daughter] was outraged when I said her new friends reminded me of Moonies and it seemed like the church was a cult. . . . Karen said that there was “spiritual warfare” going on in our household and that Satan was using her parents to try to keep her out of the church. . . . I still remember the words of a pastor from a mainline Church of Christ. . . . “I’m sorry I have to tell you this, but your daughter is in a religious cult.” . . . The harmful effect is that the person becomes totally dependent on his or her discipler for all decisions . . . the church member must imitate his or her discipler in every way. This causes complete loss of identity and autonomy. . . . With Karen’s recruitment came “the invasion of the body snatchers,” or, more accurately, the invasion of the mind snatchers! . . . For five months, from March until August, we didn’t see Karen. She lived with a family who had been asked to help out in the San Francisco Church of Christ. . . . Karen slept on the sofa in the living room of the couple’s rented home. . . . It has been almost four years since Karen was recruited into the International Churches of Christ, and I have found ways to cope. . . . It is puzzling to me that my daughter
no longer shows any signs of emotion. She has no laughter, no tears, and no anger. Her temperament remains the same, except during those rare times when the old Karen slips out. It is a great loss to me that the two of us can no longer be close. Before her recruitment Karen was very open and honest, but now she seems to have many secrets and hidden thoughts. (Giambalvo and Rosedale, 172–180)

What we don’t hear in these cult war stories (ABC News and Karen’s mom, above) is the emphasis that the group also put on, as I witnessed, forgiveness and interaction with kin. On the other hand, what we don’t hear in the ICOC discourse is recognition that church family commitment to organizational therapeutic and evangelical goals necessarily meant less time and commitment to family of origin members. I did find that if a family was engaged in trying to “deprogram,” or get their family member out of the group by offering them “spiritual pornography” at every turn, leaders and disciplers suggested that members spend limited time with these parents and kin. ICOC leader and author Sam Laing offered biblical justification for keeping distance from biological family during one large regional event: “Abraham did not do all that he should have done. . . . God called him to leave his father and move. . . . I remember another famous guy in the Bible who wanted to have his relative along with him and it messed him up. I’m not saying your relatives can’t be beside you in the Lord or in the Kingdom, but there are times when we are compromising to do that.” If parents and kin did not pressure members to leave the church, it seemed that disciplers were encouraged, in their limited “free time,” to be with families of origin.

What is most interesting in narratives of ICOC critics, especially regarding our understanding of the cultural implications of this group and other religio-therapeutic organizations, is how anti-group discourse drew from the very same well of cultural beliefs and practices that the ICOC organization did. As sociologists studying deviance and the framing of social problems have noted, labeling an act, group, or organization as deviant takes place through moral battles where organizational actors draw from deeply resonating symbols and stories as they frame their arguments (Becker 1963; Snow and Benford 1992; Loseke 2003). Children, for example, are a particularly powerful and much used symbol
in social problems’ battles: a child as the ultimate helpless/innocent victim. The ABC transcript, Karen’s mother, and other family of origin ICOC relatives present their children as victimized, losing individuality, becoming like robots, lacking emotion and expressive feeling. Karen’s mom ends with the statement: “I plan to do my part to make people aware of this evil plot to snag our bright young people and take away years of their productive lives.”

Group and anti-group discursive repertoires were similar, based on normative therapeutic and family values: biological family as normative, families as providing unconditional caring, and families as teaching appropriate gendered roles and behavior. Karen’s mother ends her narrative by noting she reminds her daughter that “our love is unconditional—that we love her no matter what” and that “the group members’ love is conditional” (Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996, 172–182). ICOC and anti-group spokespersons as “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker 1963) drew heavily from therapeutic cultural discourse, assembling those cultural beliefs, strategies, and practices that they knew would best resonate with individuals socialized to respect therapeutic values and practice. As we have seen thus far, formal group discourse stressed relationality and expressivity as core practices of the discipling church family. Critics claimed the opposite, that the group took away true emotions and “snatched” minds away. Critics also cast discipling as a manifestation of major “diseases” in therapeutic culture: for example, discipling as “codependency,” a contemporary relational “dysfunction” defined by some therapeutic “experts” as individuals who become too wrapped up and dependent on one another. Given the extreme accountability and dependence on disciplers for day-to-day negotiation of self and sifting through cultural expectations, it is not surprising that critics and ex-members leveled this therapeutic indictment. A former member posted on the Delphi Forum chat room in early April of 2004: “The ICOC is extremely codependent. . . . It’s prevented a lot of people from growing. . . . The church will not get healthy by remaining inclusive, looking inside of itself for answers. . . . The only way to get healthy is to separate one self from sick people and look for a healthy environment.” The debate that ensued between ICOC members, families of origin, and critics of the movement operated through ideals like expressivity, emotionality, and concepts like dysfunctional family and
co-dependency. This emphasis speaks to the cultural weight afforded therapeutic ethos in contemporary U.S. society.

**Cultural Tools: Therapeutic Stance and Strategy**

It is possible that the heavy emphasis I documented in ICOC family productions on converting, forgiving, and reconciling with biological kin in the late 1990s was partly a response to over a decade of harsh “cult” accusations and former members’ labeling of church family “dys-function.” The Kims’ book was published in 1998 and KNN films *The Prodigal Daughter* and *Secrets of the Heart* were produced in the mid- to late 1990s, both well after the flood of harsh criticisms in the early 1990s that made much of how the ICOC took members away from biological family/family of origin. Without question, these narratives were performances meant to cast the movement as healing and bringing together biological/families of origin.

Some researchers warn that staged events inhibit understanding what is really going on in controversial new religious movements. They are “tricks” of cults eager to fool and craft researcher presentations of group to the outside world. The benefit of listening carefully to former members and movement critics as you conduct intensive fieldwork over time in the community is that you come to understand the function of formal performances and individual presentations in both individual group experience and movement construction. Even if the stories I heard from individuals and in formal group performances were staged and selected events meant to shape my interpretations and counter negative “cult” accusations, there is still much to be learned. These intentional performances were meant to shape not only my opinion but also potential convert and member conceptions of the group as therapeutically sound. The disciples that joined hands in the basement prayer circle I describe at the beginning of this chapter were bolstered by a promise: a new family who would help you care for the old; a new family that would teach familiar therapeutic and religious healing strategies; and a new family that would help you resolve contradictory familial expectations. These performances suggest that religious communities today understand the power and appeal of offering new and familiar cultural skills and approaches to helping people mend fences with biological/families of origin,
and that a religious promise of such healing ends must incorporate core therapeutic values, skills, and approach.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness as a strategy for improving self and relationship is culturally ubiquitous. As Swidler (2001) stresses of such beliefs, practices, and models of making sense of social experiences, they are deeply embedded—they are familiar and seem right, and this is why they make sense to us. Forgiveness is one such cultural habit: a rhetorical interaction of weighted ambiguity. We are taught through major social institutions (e.g., family, religion, medical therapeutic) to say, “I forgive you,” to accept apology, but what does that mean—how does it manifest as a practical strategy for improving self and relationships? Members were told that discipling would clarify forgiveness.

For those who converted to the ICOC from other religious groups, forgiveness was already a familiar aspect of their faith. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and many other faiths stress a need to make amends with those who have hurt us or those we may have wronged. In fact, the teaching and enabling of forgiveness is a driving commodity in today’s religious marketplace. For members who converted to the ICOC from other Christian faiths, they recognized forgiveness as a key aspect of Christology: Jesus died on the cross to forgive the sins of humankind. Jesus taught in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6: 9–13) forgiveness as key to individual salvation: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (verse 14, NRSV). A large part of the Christian “tool kit” for mending relationships with others and God is the ability to enact forgiveness. Griffith (1997, 189) found, for example, a “vast energy” among the women in Aglow (an international, interdenominational evangelical women’s group) “given to teaching each other to pray for and forgive parents for their shortcomings and to work through the anger caused by their mistakes.” That ICOC disciplers would teach forgiveness one-on-one, take you by the hand day or night and help you figure out when to forgive, when to name sin, that they were supposedly offering you a new, effective, and seemingly coherent approach to practicing forgiveness, was no doubt extremely appealing.
ICOC author and lead evangelist Sam Laing told a group of men at a regional event: “A lot of us, it’s the old sin of bitterness that’s wrecking up our heart right now. . . . It may be toward your dad. It may be toward the person who sexually abused you, it may be toward the wife who’s committed adultery.” He continued, stressing that forgiveness took away the pain of estrangement from biological family: “It is the most liberating thing you will ever do in your life when you finally stamp that bill of sale you’ve been holding over their head—paid in full. I forgive you. . . . You must forgive or your life will be a living hell.” The best way to walk in the path of forgiveness was with ICOC disciples who could teach you how to forgive, who could “activate the power of forgiveness.” Clearly, a strong message of *Secrets of the Heart* was that disciplers could help a member sift through the pain and questions surrounding when and how to forgive: disciplers would be there to help you approach and overcome physical and mental scars.

An expectation of forgiveness is pervasive; it extends beyond explicitly therapeutic and religious endeavors, yet its meaning is so often vague. Forgiveness is grounded in therapeutic culture and core U.S. values: individualism, humanitarianism, and unconditional familial love. Forgiveness, like apology, is expected: when Richard Clark, a top former counterterrorism advisor to the Clinton and Bush administrations, stood in front of the September 11th commission in 2004 and apologized for failing the people, there was some expectation on the part of the public that families of those killed in the terrorist attacks should accept the apology and “forgive.” Despite our national tendency to see forgiveness as a therapeutic and social good, practical implications and actions of forgiveness remain vague and are often primarily rhetorical.

Contemporary theologians have wrestled with the meaning and practice of forgiveness in our therapeutic culture. To forgive is to let go of past abuses, to love those who have hurt you. Yet in contemporary culture, we are also encouraged to embrace and understand these abuses and express our own pain and desires. Forgiveness exists alongside therapeutic ideals that demand individuals to not be “taken advantage of,” “enable,” promote “codependence,” or inhibit growth of the “self.” Demands of therapeutic culture then render the process of forgiveness, and “letting go” of past abuses ambiguous. Forgiveness in ICOC discourse still embraced these contradictory elements, but claimed a
new approach in overcoming the confusion. Disciplers would teach you when and where to embrace a particular therapeutic or Christian ideal or practice, just as disciplers would help you figure out, as a disciple, when to submit to church leaders/disciplers and when to speak your mind. As the KNN film *Secrets of the Heart* and the one-on-one discipling efforts that took place directly after its viewing indicate, discipling was promised as practical assistance for enacting the indefinite cultural expectation of forgiveness.

**Biological and Family of Origin Bonds and Responsibilities**

I love this church, it’s a family. We don’t give up on each other.

—Alicia

The popular phrase “You can’t divorce your family” reflects a profound sense of the permanency and high expectations of kin care and interaction in our society. Even though many people are estranged from family of origin, and you can, in effect, sever ties with parents and children through various legal and informal means, such actions are perceived as deviant, as departures from how people should be doing family and kin. Normative family ideals call us to love and care for our families through “thick and thin,” and, in contemporary culture, we have an added responsibility to appeal to therapeutic experts when serious problems arise that threaten family health.

Biological family is the normative family construction: for the most part, we think of “real” family as those connected by blood. Our legal and medical institutions legitimate this model: for example, biological family members often have rights to visit and make decisions in medical emergencies (if spouses as next of kin are no longer available), and family courts persist in primarily viewing biological family as true family. Despite the rising acceptance of a number of alternative family structures of “choice” such as adoption, gay/lesbian marriages and civil unions, and stepfamilies, the “molecular connection still implies a sense of belonging, continuity, and care that makes families—and society—possible” (Wegar 1998, 41). Our new popular genetics discourse makes this connection seem even stronger; a discourse of genetic essentialism in media presentations warning us of inherited genes responsible for a wide range of disease and illness. Genetic essentialism and legal, religious, and medical institutions continue to legitimate biological family as normative. If we
undergo a serious socialization process that involves naming new kin, we become beholden to that old set of expectations demanding care, love, and unconditional support for family members—they are transferred to our newly constructed kin ties.

Family is for life. We don’t give up on families. Families are there for each other, forgiving, caring, taking care of each other, sacrificing for each other. This is not unique to U.S. society, or a new social expectation. Other cultures may have different ideals and practices of family/kin care-taking, but core expectations are often similar: you don’t abandon family, especially biological family. In the Christian and Jewish traditions family responsibilities are front and center. ICOC members who saw, like other evangelical Christians, the Bible as a guidebook for life, found scriptural affirmation for high kin care expectations. In the Hebrew Bible God speaks to Moses the now familiar commandment, “You shall each revere your mother and father,” and later, “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin.” Leviticus 21:1–3 notes that only for “his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother [nearest kin]” was a man expected to perform mourning rituals like shaving the head and mutilating the body (Leviticus 19: 3, 17, NRSV). Caring, revering, and sacrificing for family is a cross-cultural, long expected social action, legitimated by religious texts and reinforced by various social structures.

We have high expectations for family and kin care, yet family has always been the site of massive contradiction: namely, domestic violence and physical and emotional abuse. While the local news would have us believe that our cities and neighborhoods are dangerous streets to walk today, we are more likely to be hurt by our families than a stranger. Our biological/families of origin are the people in whom we place our faith, who are supposed to always be there with gentle and loving hands and “heart,” yet they are the very people who deal the deepest blows. This social contradiction is painful and difficult to resolve on individual and structural levels. In contemporary U.S. society, we are often expected to turn to therapeutic professionals for assistance in making some sense of this disturbing contradiction.

There has been a significant rise in family therapy options and investment in the last half of the twentieth century (Herman 1995; Irvine 1999, 37). Despite our notion that families are autonomous and parents should decide what is best for their own children, we harbor a great
moral responsibility to turn to these “experts” (Lasch 1977). This responsibility to seek secular therapeutic expertise is sometimes formally enforced, as in family court when a judge may order parents in high-conflict divorce to seek family therapy, or in educational institutions, where educators and courts may work together to encourage parents and children to receive counseling. It is also informally enforced: for example, when religious leaders refer families to outside counselors, or family members themselves put pressure on children, siblings, or parents to enter into family counseling. In the ICOC, and other religious movements, a search for outside therapeutic help is replaced (or enhanced) by in-group religio-therapeutic efforts. Christian marriage and family counselors provide options to secular psychologists and counselors. The ICOC discipling system was presented by members and leaders as the ultimate family therapy choice. Given our high cultural expectations for seeking family counseling and “expert” assistance, ICOC’s performance of disciplers as exceptional family counselors made an impact.

Expectations of family care and engagement in therapeutic guidance naturally presented ICOC members and potential converts with a deeply felt contradiction: they maintained a responsibility to both their family of origin and their new church “real” family to engage in a therapeutic family process. Resolving this contradiction, for members whose families engaged in anti-cult therapeutic efforts like “deprogramming” (using former members and other religious or therapeutic experts to counsel members out), was extremely difficult as they were encouraged by the group to keep a distance from these kin members. However, for those whose parents/family of origin were not actively engaged in an effort to get them out of the church, the discipling system was presented as a therapeutic community that would help them not give up on their family of origin. In fact, in the evangelical mission of the church, the pledge to save your family of origin came to life through aggressive action. By proselytizing and converting family members you would be saving them from hell while healing old wounds. Even more, domino conversion narratives suggested that your mother, father, sister, and brother of origin could be with you as sisters and brothers in the Kingdom on Earth, and for an eternity in heaven. In these efforts, ICOC discipling was presented as truly “awesome” family therapy, with exceptional power to
heal and reconcile the old family by making them new ICOC family, a Christian family driven by unconditional love and dedication.

Yet, the reality was that many members were not able to convert family of origin. How did the movement keep this common experience from debilitating the organizational performance of the group as exceptionally able to achieve these ends? One way they managed this inconsistency was by maintaining that disciplers would help members stay strong in their commitment to love resistant family of origin members; they promised that disciplers would help them to continue to forgive fathers and mothers as they closed the door again and again; and they continually reminded disciples that God may choose to open the door to family members’ hearts at any point in the future. So, even if family of origin members never converted, you were still engaged in a valuable process and therapeutic strategy. Members, even if domino healing was far from the story they were able to tell, still presented themselves as genuinely working to open lines of communication and forgive families of origin.

As members and leaders talked about negotiating, working to heal, convert, and forgive family of origin, they made clear that disciplers would be available to manage this painful and confusing process. Not surprisingly, in their narratives and descriptions, they, and their biological/family of origin members, were often cast as victims of social disease.

Victimization

ICOC’s plan for family reconciliation sustained another familiar cultural contradiction: individual as both victim and responsible agent. Victims are important characters in the social drama of therapeutic culture. We understand, through the powerful social construction and performance of institutions like the media, the judicial system, and our educational system, that people can be victims of corporations (Enron, coal miners), crime (robbery, identity theft, rape), and schools (lack of qualified teachers, curriculum, and funds). We believe too that individuals can be victims of family: for example, through “dysfunctional” families, “codependent” families, and divorced families. To self-identify or identify others as a victim of family experience is a popular and well-understood stance in therapeutic culture, a popular talk show subject (Lowney 1999), and a perfectly acceptable position that can bring much sympathy from others. ICOC’s discourse repertoire was deeply grounded
in the language and moral construction of victimization, primarily victi-
moms of family disease and dysfunction, often the damaging results of the
gender sins of parents and society.

To sympathize with victims seems “natural,” especially sympathy for
children and youth. Those who abuse children are afforded little sympa-
thy from the public, while those who abuse adult spouses may be more
easily forgiven. The social debate around victimization, from both lay
and medical therapeutic “experts,” centers around the acceptance of the
validity of victim status and individuals using the label to gain sympathy
and escape responsibility. For example, one can be perceived as a victim
of the socially constructed “disease” of alcoholism and at the same time
seen by many as responsible for his or her behavior, perhaps even as
morally bereft, or as a criminal (Ries 1977). Furthermore, we have social
methods of assessing who deserves sympathy, who does not, and how
much: “Receiving sympathy has its patterns and rules,” it is “part of our
moral code” (Clark 1997, 11, x). To self-identify then as a victim of do-
mestic dysfunction is to enter into a world of cultural confusion, an often
ambiguous position that must be defended according to “moral codes.”
Most often, this self-identification comes along with an expectation to
heal from victimization and to turn to the appropriate medical therapeu-
тик experts. Here again, disciplers would hold your hand, they would
help you figure out and navigate victimhood: when to claim victimiza-
tion, when to name parents as victimized, and how to engage in a pro-
cess of healing from abuse. Disciplers were presented as able to produce
a coherent approach to victim identification, responsibility, and action.

The ICOC was one of many contemporary religio-therapeutic spaces
committed to making sense of how to negotiate this contradictory ther-
apic stance. Griffith (1997, 190) found that “Aglow fosters a kind of
victimology that attributes women’s suffering to their family—often
construed today as ‘dysfunctional.’ . . . Aglow offers women the chance
to reinterpret family crises in ways that replace the burden of guilt and
shame with redemption and hope for healing.” Griffith’s work in Aglow
highlights the core contradiction in identifying with a Christian and
therapeutic victim stance: “Although the notion of victimization and the
conviction that one’s ‘sickness’ is one’s own burden of sin apparently con-
tradict one another, these beliefs are held together through an avowal of
the need for prayer and surrender” (1997, 190). In the ICOC, prayer and
surrender to God were important individual responsibilities, but only third-party Christian counselors, disciplers, could provide the keys to the process of balancing and negotiating the contradictions of victimhood. One must first surrender or “submit” to the wisdom of older Christians. Disciplers were there to monitor your precarious identification as victim—to tell you when to perform victim, when to stop, when to begin to enact change, and what strategies for change made sense.

What were the crimes in group discourse that justified ICOC members’ victimhood? A range of abuses and social diseases, but most prominent in the data I gathered were gender sins: not enacting and/or embracing inherent and biblically grounded gender roles and responsibilities. Gender sins were presented by members and leaders as the root of much family of origin “dysfunction.” The discipling community was presented by many members and leaders as helping you figure out what exactly Mom and Dad did wrong, how your parents may have been the victims of social and individual gender sin. Disciplers would help you sift through cultural expectations and circumstances of fatherhood and motherhood to determine how you became a victim of parental gender sin. And disciplers would, after holding your hand through the puzzling process of interpretation, tell you when you should stop “whining” about the abuse, how to come up with an approach for healing and forgiveness, and how to convince your mother and father that they too should live in righteous gender relationships within the ICOC Kingdom of God.

**Gender Sins**

In the forefront of victim talk was a divorce culture where mothers and fathers had made grave mistakes in raising their children. As with group and individual discourse that presented marriage disciplers and individual spouses as successfully balancing varied and often contradictory gender stances (like female submission/mutual submission), presentation of disciplers’ biological/family of origin parental gender sins embraced and challenged multiple and contradictory ideas. Disciplers’ biological fathers were often described as distant and uncommunicative. Many times fathers’ characters were further diminished by stories of alcoholism and/or sexual abuse. Fathers were often depicted as too caught up in their work lives and as harsh disciplinarians; yet they were also sometimes
praised for teaching disciples the value of discipline and hard work. Some fathers were indicted for their lack of leadership in the family and for letting strong mothers walk all over them, and at the same time praised for their ability to listen and be open and communicative with family members. Biological mothers were frequently portrayed as not teaching female disciples how to be good caretakers and nurturers, and as setting bad wifely role models because of their participation in the workforce. Some mothers were depicted as weak because they allowed overbearing patriarchs to dominate. In one of the greatest gender sins named by disciples, mothers became “feminists,” who taught daughters that they should “hate men,” yet these same mothers were often praised by female disciples for teaching their daughters how to be strong. This wide range of parental gender sin was depicted as causing family disease, instigating divorce, and in some cases, producing homosexual relationships (a prominent gender sin articulated in most conservative Christian communities).

Members’ stories and formal discourse presented disciplers as helping members interpret and learn from family of origin gender sins.

Distant Patriarchs, Absent Fathers, and Feminist Moms

The dream of converting and healing biological fathers gave rise to multiple reflections on distant and unemotional fathers, images of a traditional patriarch, a father who holds ultimate economic and relational power in the home but was never in the home and emotionally bereft. Disciples’ narratives were full of childhood and adult memories depicting fathers who took breadwinning masculinity to the extreme, failing to incorporate contemporary ideals of paternal presence and emotional attachment. Casting a lack of emotionality and physical presence as the gender sins of modern fathers reflects historical constructions of what we have come to expect fathers to do for their children.

Post–World War II U.S. society brought rising cultural expectations of greater paternal involvement from men—a call to be breadwinners and establish a strong presence in the home as disciplinarians and male role models. Voices from prominent mid-twentieth-century psychologists, social researchers, and popular child rearing “experts” linked absent fathers to a number of social ills that would befall their children, from juvenile delinquency to “homosexuality” (Pleck 1981, 1983). Today fathers are held to similar incompatible ideals, the contradictions therein
magnified as therapeutic culture and gender egalitarianism rise in ideological dominance. We expect fathers to be breadwinners, to protect, provide for, and endow their children with the tools to succeed in life, while at the same time we demand that they are present in the home, involved in children’s activities, actively disciplining, and emotionally present for their kids (Townsend 2002). These contradictory ideals of fatherhood are made even more difficult to live up to in a contemporary economic climate that offers lower salaries, a substantial contingent workforce, and a workplace climate that informally demands an over-forty-hour full-time workweek (Fried 1998; Hochschild 2001; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Schor 1981). ICOC member and leader accusations of distant and absent fathers mirrored these long-standing historical tensions and gender expectations of fatherhood.

When ICOC men and women spoke of trying to forgive fathers, it was almost always in the context of fathers who were harsh disciplinarians and excessively uncommunicative. Stories of biological reconciliation for women often entailed teaching their fathers, with the help of the discipling community, how to “open their hearts” and be “real”—how to embody relationality, how to become that new father that embraced therapeutic ideals. Only some could cast these efforts as successful. Pat remembered her father as an “angry” and “distant disciplinarian.” Learning to forgive him, she told me, was the hardest thing she had ever done. Forgiving her father was “never ending”; she was “constantly having to forgive him and love him” despite the fact that he didn’t “know how to love.” Pat laid blame on her father’s resistance by describing his “heart” as “closed.” She sadly admitted, “Some people just can’t get their hearts to move and sometimes we have to accept that.” Some male members remembered distant fathers whose absence in the home, in the words of one twenty-year-old member, left them knowing “nothing about how to be a dad and good husband.”

Disciplers were presented in many members’ anecdotes as key in bringing sons and fathers out of their silent masculine worlds and facilitating a healing male expressivity. One member told me that his involvement in other religions did not help him see that he had to make an effort to become closer to his biological father; it was not until he studied the Bible with a City COC discipler that he was forced to learn to communicate with his father:
My dad, we’ve never had a great relationship... we hadn’t talked in, uh, four years. ...I didn’t want to talk to him because I was doing my own thing and it was not until I studied the Bible [with City COC discipler], . . . they would not baptize me until I made peace with my dad. . . . Finally we did talk and I shared with him how I felt and it was amazing because he had basically felt the same way and we just really didn’t know how to communicate. I kind of learned about his own past. I didn’t really know I was angry at the wrong things because he was always there, I was always fed. . . . What I was looking for was that he never told me he loved me. He did love me, but to me he wasn’t there for me when it was important. In my mind. But he was, you know.

In this member’s recounting of his relationship with his father, we can hear the confusion in the memory of his father’s presence and purpose in his life. He was “there” and made sure his son was “fed,” but it didn’t feel like he was there “when it was important.” This member’s confusion over the exact nature of his father’s gender sin is cured by disciplers’ insistence that he listen to his father, make peace, and learn to communicate with him.

Absent and distant fathers were prominent characters in stories of naming parental gender sins. These absent fathers were sometimes the result of mothers’ gender sins. ICOC discourse was full of stories of fathers who cowered in the paths of women who had picked up the “feminist sword.” Feminist moms pushed dads away, produced daughters who were too forceful, and led children into sinful “homosexual” relationships.

Members’ narratives and formal discourse of dangerous feminist moms echoed a long-standing social phenomenon of mother-blame: in the later half of the twentieth century, mothers have been blamed for raising children to be autistic, homosexual, schizophrenic, and juvenile delinquents (McDonnell 1998; Terry 1998). “Feminist” mother-blame (speaking primarily of second wave feminism) is one of our most recent chapters in this historical legacy of maternal deviance: feminist mothers work and so leave their children unsupervised or spoil them to overcompensate; feminist mothers teach their daughters to hate motherhood and men; feminist mothers, in their man-hating fervor, drive sons away.

ICOC formal discourse cast homosexuality as a result of gender sins
and bad socialization process as well. Mothers who were too strong took up space on a list in formal discourse of sins that led to a rejection of heterosexuality. Mothers were also blamed for “sissifying” sons and failing to expose them to proper masculine activities. Sam Laing told a group of men that “homosexuality is a learned behavior,” and offered examples for how they came to engage in homosexual relationships: it was usually the fault of somebody, he argued, whose father did not treat them well, or an “adult who confused them early on in development.” Casting homosexual behavior as learned behavior allowed the ICOC, as it has other conservative Christian groups and medical professionals at mid-twentieth century, the opportunity to resocialize and offer institutionalized “cures” for the affliction. In the ICOC, this was discipling; I heard several stories about disciplers who had helped members involved in homosexuality return to fulfilling heterosexual relationships. The ICOC heavily monitored sexuality through marriage discipling, premarriage discipling, and controlled dating—each of these therapeutic relationships was committed to the continual reinforcement of heterosexuality. One former member I interviewed spoke of being a “target” of female leaders who were convinced that she and her single roommate were lesbians. She was constantly lectured about the dangers of lesbian relationships, not allowed to be alone for long periods with single women (a difficult task in a group that often separated by gender!), and eventually left the group.

In naming the gender sins of parents, discourse wavered, as does our popular cultural debate, between recognition of the power of biology and genetic destiny and the power of socialization. Often the chosen emphasis is one that legitimates a particular organizational or individual goal (as was the case with stressing that homosexual behavior was a result of social, not biological, forces). Disciplers were characterized as able to help you figure out biological “tendencies,” what they were and how to overcome those that would lead to gender sins. Genetic gender flaws (i.e., in group discourse of body types that did not adhere to social ideals of masculine and feminine forms) were often credited to genetics. Men whose bodies were not “muscular” or women whose bodies were not “feminine” were talked about as inheriting these conditions from biological mothers and fathers. These genetic gender body flaws were seen as fixable through therapeutic discipling relationships, disciplers who
would encourage men and women to work out, lose weight, gain muscle, and monitor the shaping of masculine and feminine bodies. ICOC leaders recognized the power of genetics discourse to resonate with individuals’ understanding of themselves as victims of genetic destiny. The appropriation of genetic discourse was sometimes metaphorical. For example, Sam Laing stated to an all-male audience at a large regional event: “God disciplines every one of us. And he does it custom-made. . . . He knows how to get ‘cha and flush your sins right outta your genetic code and get them out of there, baby. He’ll do it!” Laing referred to God’s discipline (ICOC discipling) as capable of “flushing” out bad genes, a powerful image in today’s world where media representations of genetic essentialism often provide quick explanations for a host of undesirable conditions such as alcoholism, obesity, and bipolar disorder, to name just a few.

On Marriage Enrichment Day 1995, one female leader stated that “for most of us our moms were not role models for how to be a Godly woman.” During an interview in her home, Heidi, a white married woman in her early thirties, echoed the same sentiment about her biological mother: “She raised two children after divorcing my dad, which was very hard, and she didn’t give me much of a role model for being a wife and mom.” It was only after she became a member of the ICOC in a congregation “down South” that she felt she had “good role models” that taught her to be “too strong,” and had set her up for feeling that she could tackle the world on her own. Yet at the same time, Heidi praised her mother’s strength, stating that her strength and power as a “woman of God” and as a “strong wife” comes from her mother’s influence (her mother is an evangelical Christian in a conservative denomination). Like women who balance and negotiate ideals of Christian female submission and mutuality in marriage power dynamics, Heidi vacillated as she tried to come to terms with exactly what gender attitudes and behaviors her mother had instilled in her. Several City COC women expressed the same struggle in their stories of biological family and efforts to forgive parents: how to come to terms with the independence and power their mothers (many of whom were young adults during the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and had entered the
workforce) represented, and traditionalist conservative Christian doctrine and practice that rhetorically and discursively prescribes normative gender roles and behaviors. Heather, who was raised by her mom after father “deserted” the family, offers an example of how members presented the ambiguity:

She wasn’t consistent enough a lot of times because she wasn’t there [had to work], but she was always very loving when she was home and very focused on me. She couldn’t provide a lot of material things, but we never wanted for anything. She taught me to be not just independent but, well, very independent. I guess as a woman that I can do things on my own and I don’t need a man to take care of me and be successful and happy. . . . My first serious boyfriend, I was the boss you know. That’s how I’d seen my mom while she took care of the family, so that’s how I was going to be. Alan, her husband, wasn’t afraid to tell me no, and as I’ve studied the Bible and learned what I should be, her example becomes even more clear. But I’m glad that she taught me her example, because I am strong-willed.

Heather’s appreciation of her mother in the wake of divorce was one way members faithfully reconciled memories of biological family with the naming of parental gender sins. Heather fulfilled group demands by recognizing her mother’s sins, yet remained loyal to family of origin by expressing appreciation for her mother teaching her valuable life skills. In doing so she was walking that familiar evangelical discursive path: back and forth from traditionalism to biblical feminism. Another City COC member stated that even though his father was not a “good” role model because he had been “sexually impure,” he felt his father had instilled other admirable expressive qualities: “My father, in particular, was very much always kissing you. I found myself being very much that way. I love to touch. I love to hug.” We hear a loyalty and respect for this man’s biological father, alongside a condemnation of his ability to serve as a good role model. Members rarely leveled gender sin without adding a caveat of parental love and worth.

Whatever the gender sins of parents, member and formal discourse presentations of parents’ mistakes worked to affirm the power of discipling. Disciplers were there to help you forgive and overcome any inclination you may have to repeat the mistakes your parents had made, to
provide you with strong masculine and feminine role models and a seemingly coherent ideological approach for achieving various gender ideals and practices.

**The Dream Falters**

When members could not tell stories of themselves as heroes and heroines able to heal biological relationships and produce a cascade of biological kin converts, their recounting of attempts to convert still reinforced the power of discipling as an exceptional therapeutic approach. Like member and leader presentations of marriage discipling failures, failed attempts were attributed to the “closed hearts” of relatives and members who were not trying hard enough. For example, Heidi told me that her initial efforts to convert her mother “really frustrated” her. She laid blame on her own eagerness and evangelical style: “She wouldn’t go to church with me because I’d always turn it into these big three-hour discussions afterwards.” Still, she did not give up hope that her mother would eventually convert to the ICOC: “I’ve toned things down a little bit. . . . I’m not discouraged [about mom converting] because I feel like there’s hope.”

Depictions of family of origin who had come to “respect” the church over time were another way members and the organization dealt with failure. Progressive acceptance and respect promoted the idea that, given adequate time, all family of origin members with “closed hearts” would at least come to recognize the good disciples had found in the ICOC community. Many parents of origin became grandparents while sons and daughters were in the church and so came to see their children living “normal” lives, not swept away to a foreign country to drink poison with loyal McKean followers or giving away all their life possessions to the church, as they may have initially feared. Several City COC members who had joined the church during their college years, or soon after, were in their thirties during my fieldwork. These members frequently talked about parent of origin resistance and fear of the movement as a “dangerous cult” when they were first in the church and how parents had come to respect their church community. One man described a Catholic father who was extremely disturbed by his son’s initial “change” fifteen years ago when he joined the ICOC movement. His son’s membership in a group that the newspapers were calling a cult made
the father suspicious and vocal about his doubts. In time his father came around: “Over the years they [parents] have gained a great respect. I know my dad is very proud. There is a lot he still doesn’t understand. . . . Over the past fifteen years I have really won their respect.” One woman in her mid-thirties who had been in the church for twelve years told me of a brother and sister-in-law who were at first against her membership in the ICOC, but in later years came to greatly “respect” the way they raised their children. To stress her point, she told a story of this brother turning to her for help with a teenage daughter who was “out of control,” and the niece coming into her home to live with her so that she could try to help the niece with school and discipline problems.

To the many members for whom the dream of ICOC family of origin conversion never materialized, telling stories of continual efforts to communicate and enact forgiveness, coming to understand the source of parents’ mistakes, and ultimately earning the respect of their parents and other family of origin members justified their choices to commit to the demanding family therapeutic strategies of the discipling community. Their narratives were of self-actively mending family of origin wounds and effecting, however small, some positive change in core kin relationships.

As I listened to the exit narratives of former members, spoke with members, and monitored websites as the unified movement dissolved, it became clear that efforts to earn family of origin respect and open lines of communication were often in the shadow of persistent fears and disapproval of discipling’s authoritative and exclusive character. Even though disciples were aggressive in their assertions that one should reconcile, forgive, and come to understand the sins of their parents, the attention they had to give to the discipling community and its therapeutic and evangelical goals left limited time for such actions. Telling stories about learning to forgive and understand the sins of parents was a large part then of the process of understanding oneself as actively working to heal relationships and balance contradictory expectations of family life.

When the unified movement dissolved and the demands of discipling diminished, the door opened again for spending more time and effort on family of origin relationships. Those families who had converted en masse were also freed from movement goals. One former member, who converted along with her children and husband in the mid-1990s,
made a point of telling me in 2004 that when her family exited, in domino fashion, they found family occasions more relaxed; they were freed, she sighed in relief, from the pressure of talking about Kingdom successes and their heavy duties as brothers and sisters in the movement, and able to enjoy being together again as just “a family.”

Pat and I listened, during New England Women’s Day 2000, to a grandmother and longtime church member talk about the fate of her four married children and six grandchildren. She asked us all to pray that one of her daughters, who was trying to conceive that weekend, get pregnant. Another daughter, she proudly asserted, had become an ICOC leader in a nearby city, another was the talented young performer who had just finished performing a ballad on Women’s Day. She told us that years ago her son left her and the ICOC and chose to live with his father in a faraway city—but then, “five years later he came back to Mom and church.” In her “brief time on this earth,” this grandmother proclaimed as her goal: “My passion is to get my children and grandchildren to heaven.” She exclaimed in front of thousands of women present that day: “I will not go through the pearly gates without all of my children!” This woman, and thousands of other members, spoke with passion about converting and keeping their children in the Kingdom of God (ICOC). In the City COC congregation, where most members were families with young children, and for many other leaders and members across the country who were now at a stage where having children and raising children was a major focus of everyday life, narratives of “awesome” church family concentrated on how the Kingdom provided assurance that their children would be safe, disciplined, well-prepared, and ICOC Christians for life.