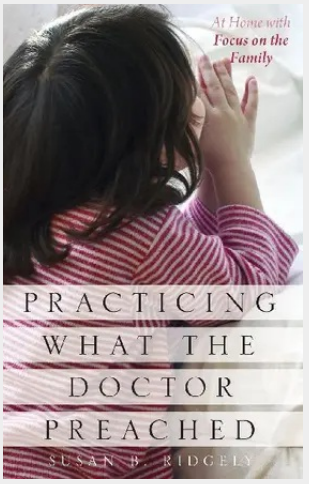
Ridgely

Practicing What the Doctor Preached

At Home with Focus on the Family

James Dobson, founder of the conservative Christian foundation Focus on the Family, is well-known to the secular world as a crusader for the Christian right. But within Christian circles he is known primarily as a childrearing expert. Millions of American children have been raised on his message, disseminated through books, videos, radio programs, magazines, and other media. While evangelical Christians have always placed great importance on familial responsibilities, Dobson placed the family at the center of Christian life. Only by sticking to proper family roles can we achieve salvation. Women, for instance, only come to know God fully by submitting to their husbands and nurturing their children. Such uniting of family life and religion has drawn people to the organization, just as it has forced them to wrestle with what it meant to be a Christian wife, husband, mother, father, son, or daughter. Adapting theories from developmental psychology that melded parental modeling with a conservative Christian theology of sinfulness, salvation, and a living relationship with Jesus, Dobson created a new model for the Christian family. But what does that model look like in real life? Drawing on interviews with mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, Practicing What the Doctor Preached explores how actual families put Dobson's principles into practice. To what extent does Focus shape the practices of its audience to its own ends, and to what extent does Focus' understanding of its members' practices and needs shape the organization? Susan B. Ridgely shows that, while Dobson is known for being rigid and dogmatic, his followers show surprising flexibility in the way they actually use his materials. She examines Focus's listeners and their changing needs over the organization's first thirty years, a span that saw the organization expand from centering itself on childrearing to entrenching itself in public debates over sexuality, education, and national politics.

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