In American culture, it is considered deviant to be celibate or financially unstable. Every American parent hopes that his or her children will lead successful lives, get married, and retire early. The American dream is to own a house, a cabin, a spouse, two cars, and two children. As evidenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Christmas Eve*, the German dream of the 18th century was not much different from our current American dream. The characters of Schleiermacher’s novella show a general distaste for religious zeal and enthusiasm, because these properties disrupt the domestic order. The worst possible fate for poor little Sophie would be to become a Moravian or Catholic, because these religions would cut off familial ties. Yet this fear of domestic disruption prevents the German people (and indeed, the American people) from embracing the radical call of Christ. American and German society have not only abandoned the pursuit of celibacy and voluntary poverty, but also erased their idealization.

As the evening events of Schleiermacher’s novella unfold, the adults begin to discuss Sophie’s future. Leonard is worried that Sophie’s piety will lead to extremism. Leonard relates how he envisions the future Sophie:

> Probably you cannot see her so vividly in the future as I do now, with her colours early faded, perhaps kneeling in her veil and worshipping with fruitless rosary before the image of a saint; or if not that then dressed in the back-thrown hood and unattractive dress, excluded from the free enjoyment of life, and brooding dull and inactive in one of the Moravian Sisters’ Homes. (14)

Essentially, Leonard is worried that Sophie will become a Catholic or a Moravian. Both of these potentialities is frightening to Leonard, because he believes that a conversion to enthusiasm leads to “tearing asunder [women’s] family ties” (14). Zealous women lose “the fairest form and richest happiness destined for women” (14), i.e. marriage and domestic bliss. And as far as Leonard can see, rejecting the family life is an outright perversion of female nature.

Leonard is not the only one who sees extremism as a corruption of the female nature. While Ernestine does not believe that Sophie is in danger of extremism, Ernestine agrees with Leonard’s view of female zealotry: “certainly you are quite correct in supposing that there is some inward distortion of nature involved when such a course of life is entered upon” (15). By
adding her assent to Leonard’s presumptions about non-domestic life, Ernestine reveals the prevalent German bias against enthusiasm.

A third voice enters the conversation: Caroline argues that the Moravians ought not be conjoined with the Catholics (16). Caroline brings up a personal example, her two lady friends who are Moravians. According to Caroline, these ladies are “certainly not distorted” because their “judgment and understanding are as correct as their piety is deep” (17). While Caroline’s contribution might be seen as a defense of countercultural lifestyles, it is a half-hearted defense at best. For Caroline, the assumption is that the countercultural Moravians need to be redeemed by normalcy. While Caroline is willing to accept countercultural practices, these practices must be tempered by social acceptability.

A simple analysis of Schleiermacher’s characters reveals their distaste for religious extremism. This distaste stems from a complete abandonment of the Catholic paradigm. Whereas a Catholic might revere countercultural activities, such as celibacy and voluntary poverty, Schleiermacher’s characters no longer idealize these traits. Leonard and Ernestine believe that pursuit of the evangelical counsels is actually a deviation of human nature. Caroline believes that pursuit of the evangelical counsels might be acceptable, but only when tempered by social acceptability.

The traditions of the early Christian Church show that Christ idealized the evangelical counsels and countercultural lifestyles. Thus the extreme abandonment of non-domestic lifestyles by German society is problematic because it prevents Christians from responding to Christ’s radical call to poverty and celibacy. In many ways, this protestant world view has transferred to the American culture in which we live. In many ways, the radical call of Christ has been pacified by our cultural attraction to domesticity.