

The state of the family: A response to Don Browning

by [Homer U. Ashby Jr.](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

In his [critique](#) of “Living Faithfully with Families in Transition” (June 28), a report submitted to the recent assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—and sent back to committee for revision—Don Browning argues that the report fails to give practical guidance. He also charges that the report reflects an elitist denial of the negative social impact that uncommitted marriages and nonintact families have on children.

Unfortunately, he misses the main point of the report, and he unwittingly champions a vision of family and ministry that supports patriarchy, family abuse and society’s abdication of support for those families that do not conform to a certain model.

Browning complains that the report’s policy recommendations are limited in number and disappointing in content. The report’s intent, however, was to be descriptive, not prescriptive. It examines how American families have changed over the past 50 years and the ways in which social structures have responded to those changes.

Moreover, the report points out the ways in which American social structures—including governmental and nongovernmental institutions—and values support families in the midst of these changes. Rather than displaying elitism, the report reflects a deep concern for the factionalism that has arisen around the topic of family. Browning’s critique serves only to deepen the factionalism.

Some of the social changes noted in the report include these:

In 1999, approximately 50 percent of the after-federal-tax income of U.S. families went to the bottom 80 percent of families while the other 50 percent went to the top 20 percent of families. In 1998, the wealthiest 1 percent of households controlled 38 percent of the nation’s wealth while the bottom 90 percent of households owned 29 percent of the nation’s wealth. In essence, since the 1950s there has been a shift in the distribution of productivity gains away from most workers and toward the wealthiest 20 percent of U.S. families. At the same time, there has been a significant

retreat in governmental policies that once promoted education, family-formation, and home ownership for young adults.

These figures become increasingly important in light of Browning's arguments about the importance of committed marriages and the data indicating that children in intact families fare better on a number of socioeconomic indices. As the report shows, the single most important factor accounting for the well-being of some children in single-parent homes is income level.

If there is a preoccupation with the question of family form in the family report, it is precisely because the report is concerned with equal treatment of families. This stance is especially important when nontraditional families are being criticized for outcomes that are determined less by family form and more by societal structures and values. A culture of materialism, consumerism and individualism is more of a threat to the well-being of families than are changes in family form. As the report says, "Materialism shapes what people think is important, how we spend our time as well as our money, how we frame the goals of our lives, and how we judge the value of other persons."

Browning makes the bold statement that children do better when raised by "intact married couples" because "they are on average *more invested* in both their children and each other" (my italics). On what basis is Browning making this assertion? A search of the literature does not indicate that children from disrupted families do worse because the parents are less invested in the children. It certainly is the case that parents in such cases have decided to deinvest from one another as a married couple. But it's irresponsible to assume that they have less investment in their children than intact married couples do.

Browning suggests that mainline churches talk about diversity but do not actually practice it, and he also suggests that other kinds of churches may actually end up having more to offer families struggling with family issues. He does not identify these churches, but one might suspect that they are the more evangelical churches.

But evangelical churches are not free of family discord and disruption. And the work of Lori G. Beaman and Nancy Nason-Clark gives evidence of the experience evangelical women have with domestic abuse. (See Beaman's *Shared Beliefs, Different Lives: Women's Identities in Evangelical Context* and Nason-Clark's article "The Evangelical Family Is Sacred . . . but Is It Safe?" in *Healing the Hurting*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck.) Soft patriarchy, linked with wifely

submission and coupled with an underlying message of “Just get or stay married,” has the potential to contribute to a forceful imposition that at times can take on physically violent dimensions.

Like many who dislike the message, Browning attacks the messenger, calling the report on families elitist, the product of a church that is mostly white, relatively rich and well educated, three-fourths of whose members are married and only 19 percent of whom have experienced divorce. Browning conjectures that these facts may explain why the report takes a sanguine view of the effects of family disruption.

The authors of the report do express concern about the effects of family disruption. The report refers to research that shows that “divorce is typically the result of a painful disintegration of a shared vision of marriage and family that occurs over a long period of time,” and it notes that “contemporary social science research presents convincing evidence that, on average, children do better in healthy, intact two-parent families than they do in step-families, adopted families, or single-parent families (even when taking into account a variety of factors).”

But the report also indicates that a good deal of research substantiates the claim that economic deprivation increases marital conflict and the likelihood of divorce. It points out that the impact of divorce on children is a complicated matter, and rather than suggest only one solution—“Get or stay married”—it suggests that we need to identify the many variables that lead to the poor performance of children in single-parent, step-parent or adoptive families.

And what of the elitism of the Religion, Culture and Family Project that Browning directs? A review of the contributors to that project reveals that they are overwhelming white, middle-class and highly educated. Does this profile compromise the research and negate the value of their contributions? I will not presume to say so. However, I would challenge the project, as Browning has challenged the authors of “Living Faithfully,” to identify the less than idealistic motives that drive their work.

Finally, Browning is mistaken in saying that the report makes a limited number of practical policy recommendations. In fact, the section on Policy Principles and Recommendations lists a number of practical recommendations which thoroughly challenge the social policies and structures of the government, social agencies and the church.

Don Browning's [reply](#)