

Empty inclusivism: A report on church and family

by [Don Browning](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

Last month the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wisely voted to send a five-year study of the family back to the committee that drafted it for revision. “Living Faithfully with Families in Transition” was weak precisely where it hoped to be strong—as a social-justice statement about families.

The report preached about being inclusive of all people and all family forms. What really counts, it contended, is how the various forms function and the quality of their communicative process. This, it argued, is what both the social sciences and the Bible say.

The report was mainly wrong about both the social sciences and the Bible. Good family process is important, but on the whole intact married couples do a better job of it. Why? They are on average more invested in both their children and each other. And the Bible’s long march toward endorsing monogamy and its caution about divorce leads to much the same position.

The report more or less defined away evidence of the serious consequences of family disruption. It did a relatively good job of conveying statistical subtleties about rates of divorce, nonmarital births, single parenthood and cohabitation (some trends are moderating while others are intensifying), but it suggested that things are not so bad. It ended by repeatedly saying that the “majority” of children—whether in two-parent, single-parent, blended or adoptive families—“are doing just fine.” The conclusion: “Church and social policies should not discriminate among these families, but support all such families equally.”

It’s true: all families should be accepted and treated with equal dignity. But shouldn’t church and society go beyond acceptance? Isn’t there anything that churches should do to help these families? Are “acceptance,” “support,” “solidarity,” “presence” and “right relationships”—the favorite words of the report—really enough? When the report says the “majority” of children are fine, does this not

trivialize the suffering of those who are not in the majority? Church and society do not take this attitude toward other social problems. Take cigarette smoking: Would the authors of the report say there is little to be done about smoking since only one in three smokers dies as a consequence?

Such a sanguine view of the family is actually elitist, for reasons the report itself unwittingly suggested. It admitted that Presbyterians are a very privileged part of society. For the most part, Presbyterians do not experience family disruption to the same degree as the national averages. According to the report, persons from racial or ethnic minorities make up 20 percent of the U.S. population but only 4 percent of Presbyterians; 96 percent of Presbyterians are white. Presbyterians are better educated and richer than most Americans. Three-fourths of Presbyterians “are currently married; only 19 percent . . . have experienced divorce.” These are far higher marriage rates and lower divorce rates than such rates in the nation as a whole. Then the report noted something quite revealing: “Most Presbyterians . . . were once children in the white, middle-and upper-income families of the 1950s and have been able to repeat that family form for ourselves.”

As University of Virginia sociologist Brad Wilcox has pointed out, mainline leaders talk about ethnic and family inclusiveness and diversity, but their denominations, for the most part, do not actually practice much diversity or inclusiveness. Mainline Protestant churches, including Presbyterians, pretty much do what they did 40 or 50 years ago; they practice a conventional familism, get educated, get married and have children. And, to a higher degree than the rest of the population, their mothers stay home with the children—partially because they can afford to. Mainliners experience divorce, and some of their children have babies out-of-wedlock, but at a rate below the national average. Their traditions, their education and their income give them more social and cultural capital to lessen the rate and negative consequences of these family trends.

Minimizing the consequences of family disruption does not help Presbyterians handle these trends within their own ranks, and it does not equip them to reach out to the working classes, the poor and various minorities who do indeed experience family disruption more profoundly, partially due to their less favorable social, economic and educational conditions. These groups want more than superficial acceptance and the vague language of inclusiveness; they want concrete help and a theological framework that acknowledges, rather than minimizes, the challenges they face.

The report did call for living wages, welfare for poor families, and more time for parents with children. But it neglected to discuss a wide range of government programs, tax proposals, market initiatives and proposed legal reforms that are being hotly debated in public-policy circles. And it advanced no concrete programs for churches to pursue beyond vague appeals for them to be accepting and supportive.

The report was strangely silent on several issues contested in other sectors of society. Take marriage; the word was hardly mentioned. It acknowledged that intimacy is better if expressed in “committed relations.” It also stated that children do better in “committed relations.” But theologically, the church should be willing to say that sexual intimacy is better and that children do better in committed marriages—marriages that are witnessed before extended family, community, churches and the state. Increasingly, the social sciences have been willing to say as much. Why not the Presbyterians?

The report was right on some things: that Christians are not saved by their families, that they should not pursue the welfare of their own families at the expense of others, that early Christianity had impulses toward gender equality in families, and that the claims of the Reign (Kingdom) of God have priority over the private good of families.

The report’s conviction, however, that acceptance and inclusiveness will cure all the ills of families left it with very few concrete proposals to offer. Should Presbyterians be part of the emerging marriage movement? Should they provide widespread marriage education in their churches? Should they participate in the marriage education programs being promoted in states such as Oklahoma and Florida and communities such as Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Chattanooga, Tennessee? Should they support the covenant marriage movement in Louisiana and Arkansas, the Bush marriage initiative, the removal of the marriage penalty, the increase of the child tax exemptions, or new proposals from legal scholars to make long-term cohabitation equal to marriage before the state without the consent of the cohabiting couple? Where are the Presbyterians on these vigorously debated issues?

The report mostly devoted itself to arguing that there really isn’t much of a problem with families that warm acceptance by churches won’t cure. It imagined that if this acceptance is forthcoming, poor people, blacks, Asians, Hispanics and all kinds of diverse families will flock to mainly white, middle- and upper-class churches. I doubt it, for the simple reason that the entire report functions to explain away the family

problems of these groups. This report is a marvelous example of how elitism can march under the banner of inclusiveness.

Homer U. Ashby Jr.'s [response](#)

Don Browning's [reply](#)