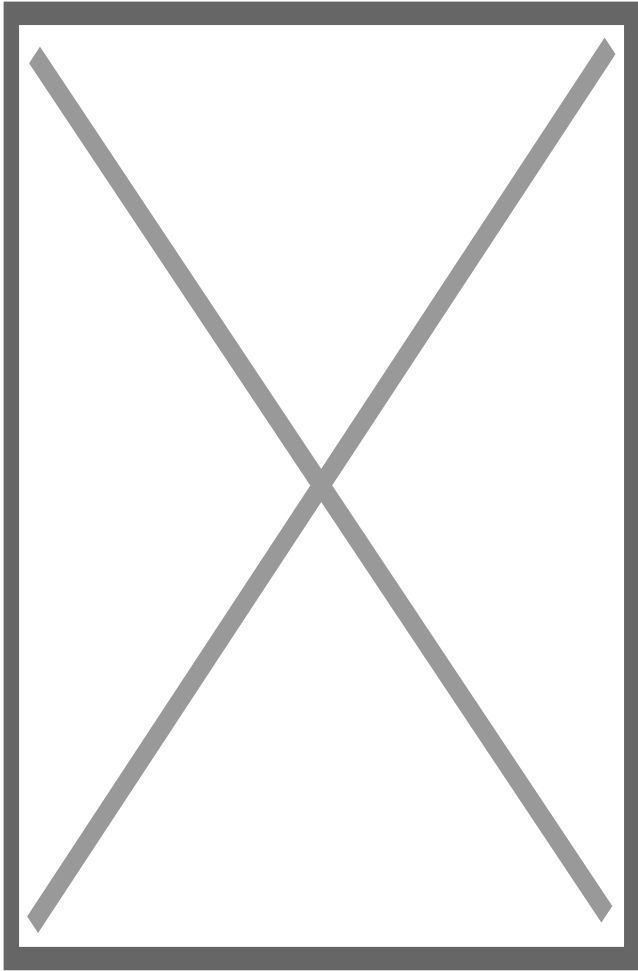


A review of The Children of Divorce

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue

In Review



The Children of Divorce

By Andrew Root
Baker

On the way to meet a friend whose marriage, I'd heard, was on the rocks, I sifted through the clichés one can offer someone on the verge of divorce. But when I arrived, her husband was with her to welcome me. As we traveled around her campus together I noticed them holding hands (so rare on U.S. college campuses that you wonder if it violates some regulation). And during my lecture the nonacademic husband attended—and even (gasp!) asked a question. Somehow being with them amidst a marriage being patched back together, a love being renewed, made me a bit more human than I was when I arrived. I hugged my wife tightly when I returned home.

Andrew Root is one of those writers who produces so much you wonder how he also maintains a bustling young family and teaches full-time (at Luther Seminary). This is, by my and Amazon's count, his third book in two years. Most of his recent work is in his academic field of youth ministry, which he entered when studying with Kenda Creasy Dean at Princeton Seminary. The book is filled with piss and vinegar; Root doesn't assume the detached posture of many academic writers.

Trying to make theological sense of divorce, Root boldly argues that the severance of a marriage presents an ontological challenge to children—it threatens them at the level of their very being. I think this argument incorrect, confused and confusing, but I am thankful that Root has taken on the topic. His and my generation is the first in which we can assume that our peers' parents are split rather than together. That must mean something. I'm not sure what it means but I'm grateful for his effort to tackle it.

Root's primary mode of argumentation is based on an anecdote about a child of divorce who feels her very existence is called into question. The relationship between her parents, which once was the very source of her being, is now severed. As Root sees it, this is far worse than the end of a marriage by death, for divorce calls the child's existence into question retroactively. Root alludes to a Gen X touchstone, the film *Back to the Future*, in which the lead character goes back in time and sees that his parents' meeting almost didn't take place, and he begins to dematerialize. This is how Root says he felt when his own parents' marriage ended: "It seemed as if I were fading into nothingness."

In arguing that our being comes from community, the severance of which threatens us at no less a level than that of being, Root spends most of his time with Martin Heidegger, the social theorist Anthony Giddens and Karl Barth, whom he badly misreads as a full-blown social trinitarian.

The strength of this book is Root's observation that modernity's culture of freedom is inherently contradictory. Parents seeking to be free of their marriage place a burden, and therefore unfreedom, on their children. Root offers wise observations about how a church can attend to the aches of children of divorce: it can be brave enough to see their pain and to call them to serve others as a way of healing. And Root is right to have no patience with the breezy, selfish culture of divorce.

But his argument feels forced to me, in some places whiny and in others dangerous. In real life, unlike in the movies, people don't dematerialize when their parents divorce. They may struggle with pain at a profound level that can feel like or even lead to death, but this pain is more properly called existential or psychological than ontological. It may have seemed to Root that he was "fading into nothingness," but of course he wasn't.

Root points to his wife's anguish at her parents' divorce. She had been raised with the insistence that family comes first. When family crumbled, "There were no guarantees in the world, death could take anyone, accidents could and would happen." The mistake here was the original insistence on "family first." Any Christian, even the sort who celebrates the nuclear family, should know that God comes first. And any adult should know that accidents can and do happen. One could argue that the shaking of security that Root is so exercised about is just a realization of the fragility of human existence that is always there.

Children of Divorce is offered as theology, but it is not nearly theological enough. Root regularly speaks of the biological nuclear family as the "unavoidable foundation" that "gives us being." But our foundation is actually God. Any adoptee should be able to tell you that there is more than one way to be family. And any church member should be able to tell you that the community that grants us security (such as there is) and even being is the church, linked to Jesus as vine to branches, body to head. At times these glaring theological oversights can run to the comic. For example, Root says that humanity's "most historically dynamic act" is the union of husband and wife that creates a child. But for Christians it's baptism. My deepest concern is about Root's insistence that only blood relationship gives us being and makes for family. Fascists would quickly agree. Christians never

should. For us, water is thicker than blood.

Root's argument would be more successful if he offered it on theological grounds. Oddly, the only scripture he uses is Genesis. (Jesus has a few things to say about nuclear families, but "unless you hate father and mother" would not much help Root.) Marriage in a doctrinal key does create "one flesh," celebrated extravagantly in Solomon's Song and praised as the mirror of Christ's union with the church in Ephesians. A christological vision of marriage would show that divorce indeed strikes at an ontological level. And when that happens, when we humans commit our worst sin—that's when theology really gets interesting. For precisely there Jesus plunges into the flesh of our humanity to save us at our worst.

For Root, theology is a way to say that divorce is really really really bad (ontology seems to function for him more as a rhetorical trope than as a category in metaphysics). His suggestions about how the church can respond are tentative at best, offered in the form of bullet-pointed helpful hints.

Theologically, the church must stitch humanity back together slowly, organically, physically, *ontologically*. And the church offers us the wonder of friendships, where we can see God's Spirit do things like patch a friend's marriage back together when we thought it was over and thus radiating hope far beyond the nuclear family, but including the nuclear family too.

Root's logic seems to be this: the Trinity proves we are social creatures, divorce violates that sociality, therefore . . . (what should follow is not clear). As I read the gospel, the story runs quite differently. We all violate one another's sociality, and then God in Christ breaks in to do what we could not: bring reconciliation and redemption. The latter story is the one that offers hope to those who suffer from whatever it is that divorce is.