

The state of the family: Don Browning replies

by [Don Browning](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

Small differences in analysis and in the use of theological sources can make for big differences in conclusions, even among friends like Homer Ashby and me, who share many of the same commitments. My criticism of “Living Faithfully” and of Ashby’s defense of it is that each falls short on social analysis and on the development of relevant Christian themes.

I have a great deal of sympathy for the economic analysis in the report. I agree that the strains of modern capitalism are the main reasons for family change and disruption. The market has pulled married couples away from the supports of extended family, drawn both men and women into its competitive atmosphere, reduced the time working parents have for their children and each other, and forced many workers into lower salaries in the name of efficiency and global competition. And yes, there are growing economic differences in our society between rich and poor that hurt families. Furthermore, we all agree that the cultural values of materialism and individualism compound the negative effects of the market.

My complaint is that Ashby and “Living Faithfully” minimize the effects of these disruptions on families and children and that they are weak on specifying what churches and government can do in response. They mainly pass the buck to the government, leaving a diffuse acceptance of all families as the church’s only response.

Though Ashby says the primary purpose of “Living Faithfully” was not to make recommendations but to analyze the reasons families are changing, it does make some proposals, including the general proposal that churches should value “many forms of the family” (“many” suggests that some would not be valued; which ones it doesn’t say). It also issues these proposals: society should increase time for families; provide family-sustaining wages; reduce economic and consumer pressures; reduce materialism and individualism; reduce economic forces absorbing family time and pressuring families financially; and not discriminate on the basis of race, gender,

class, age, disability or sexual orientation. Nothing is wrong with that series of proposals, but it is certainly not specific.

My colleagues and I at the Religion, Culture and Family Project have specifically addressed several issues. Take taxes (a subject never mentioned in “Living Faithfully”). If the child exemption on income taxes had the same value today that it had when first enacted in 1948, it would be worth \$9,000. Shouldn’t it be raised? The child credit was recently increased from \$600 to \$1,000, but it might be raised even higher and given to all families. Some experts want to raise it to \$1,500. If “Living Faithfully” wants to help all children in all families, why omit discussing this issue?

What about health insurance for all families? I have proposed a move toward some form of universal health plan as the only way to cover all families. Presbyterians may have supported this move in the past, but why not explicitly argue for it anew within the context of this family-policy document?

What about the marriage-tax penalty that many in Congress think penalizes marriage? Should dual-income married couples pay higher taxes just because their union bounces them into a higher tax bracket? We get no guidance on this issue from “Living Faithfully.”

“Living Faithfully” is interested in creating more time for families and wants government and businesses to help. I could not agree more. But the report offers no concrete proposals. I have proposed that government and market move toward a combined 60-hour workweek option for couples with children. This would require many more 20- and 30-hour-a-week jobs with benefits, which married couples could organize into 60 hours of work between them. More well-paying 30-hour workweeks for single parents also are required. Harvard sociologist Judith Schor argues that this strategy will reduce unemployment: when more people work fewer hours, more jobs will be created to fill the gap. The capitalist wage economy puts pressures on families, but why shouldn’t the churches discuss proposals that might constrain it—proposals that have some actual bite?

I argued that churches should do a better job of marriage education, and of helping teens avoid pregnancy. Both the report and Ashby ignore marriage education completely. The new marriage education movement does not force people to marry. It helps people who want marriage make better choices and better marriages.

I recently attended a service at an inner-city church which attempted, via a drama, to teach girls how to resist sexual advances, thereby avoiding pregnancy and single parenthood. Did that church unjustly privilege one form of family over another? The mothers of these young women didn't think so, some of whom were never-married mothers themselves.

I know a Catholic church that each year offers a group wedding celebration, with a reception, for financially strapped, cohabiting couples. Is that church inadvertently propping up patriarchy and encouraging male violence against women? Maybe, but not in comparison to the documented patriarchy and domestic violence that occurs in dating and cohabiting relationships. But if all family forms are absolutely equal, who would care?

The Christian faith can hold up ideals and not be stigmatizing because it acknowledges that we all fall short and we all make mistakes. There is an ironic relation in the Christian faith between ideals and the fact of human weakness and contingency. That gets to the heart of its genius. This tension and irony should not be blunted. It is a tension and irony that demands responsible action from all of us; it acknowledges pressures and sin but also offers grace, forgiveness and the love of God.

To mention the reconstruction and retrieval of marriage as an antidote to market pressures on families is not to make marriage the only answer, as Ashby suspects. My remarks above should make that clear. But the slow and gradual cultural work of creating a new equal-regard marriage of the kind never fully seen in history is, I submit, one part of the response to the contemporary family crisis.

By the way, the Religion, Culture, and Family Project involved more than 100 authors and was the most diverse research project of its kind. And it was not afraid of the work of evangelicals.

Churches should simultaneously help create a more family-supportive society and reform marriage. Both tasks are required by the gospel and the demands of social justice. The Presbyterian report is inadequate on the first issue and totally ignores the second.

Don Browning's [Empty inclusivism](#)

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