

5. Procreation and Parenting in Marriage

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Date: 04 March 2007

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[0 : 00] Well, our series has been on right relationships, and our subject this evening is on procreation and parenting in marriage.

Next time I think we'll look again at this subject, maybe perhaps more at the duties of parenting, but also the denial of parenting, the disappointment when those who want to be parents can't be parents.

But tonight we're thinking about parenting. And let me first say this. Tainos duas filia, xelam xamame Joana e Juliet, tainai oitjano xisetanox.

Don't worry, I'm not speaking in tongues. That's one of the first things I learned to say at my Portuguese class. It says, I have two daughters named Joana and Juliet, and they're aged eight and seven.

I hope you're impressed. It's actually about the only thing I can say in Portuguese, so I haven't been making all that much progress. But it just demonstrates that it's one of the first things, isn't it, that we often talk about, our family.

[1 : 08] I suppose there's still the underlying assumption for most people that if they ask you if you're married, they assume that you'll have children, or at least that you'll want children.

We'll be having children. Although today I think it has to be said, doesn't it, that our whole attitude to procreation and to parenting has changed greatly. Often now we do hear people saying things quite differently, don't they?

Are you planning to have children? Or, well, I'm not sure that we will have children. Or even, well, why would you want to have children at all? And sometimes parents do think that once it's too late, don't they?

When the sleepless nights begin, when you've got babies. Although as your children seem to get older, there seem to be just more sleepless nights, don't they? Just caused by different things than crying in the night. We had a birthday party on Saturday, and I have to say in the midst of all of that, I really did begin to wonder why we were having children at all.

The house was absolute chaos. But anyway, we survived. But in our society now, the reasons for having children are much, much more diverse than the assumption that simply used to be that parenting was just part and parcel of marriage.

[2 : 18] That was that. And it's not just personal factors either. I'm sure you read in the newspapers around Christmas that there were all these German women who were hanging on desperately not to give birth until after the 1st of January because if they managed to wait until after the 1st of January, they stood to be 25,000 euros better off because the state in Germany is trying to encourage people to have more children because of the dropping birth rate.

And that's the same in many Western countries. Philip Jensen said to me that in Australia, the motto is this, have one for dad, one for mum, and one for the government. That's the way they do it. But generally speaking, today, it's becoming the case that having children or not having children is much more down to personal choice. It's much more of a lifestyle choice.

And so the Christian church really finds itself across really quite a big gulf from the rest of society in all of this. Now, of course, there are differences of views on issues such as family planning, even within the broad spectrum of the Christian church.

Of course, the most obvious would be the difference between the Roman Catholic position, which opposes all forms of artificial contraception. And I suppose the vast majority of Protestants who don't.

[3 : 38] The Roman Catholic church does allow certain, what they call, natural methods, but it's pretty dubious, really, if you can make a distinction like that between a natural and an artificial

matter.

But we can't go into details about that sort of thing tonight, but what is more important is that we do understand the broader issues and learn to think through these things biblically.

The Roman Catholic view really stems, at least in part, perhaps primarily, from the fact that in Roman Catholic thinking, the primary purpose of marriage and sexual intercourse really is procreation.

And therefore, the relational aspect is certainly secondary to that. Now, I've no doubt it's more nuanced than that, but let me quote to you a classic statement from Pope Pius XII back in 1952. He said this, Marriage, as a natural institution, does not have, as its first and foremost purpose, the personal perfection of the spouses, as is the will of the Creator, but rather, the awakening and rearing of new life.

[4 : 45] Other purposes of sex are essentially subordinate. Now, even if that is your position, it doesn't necessarily follow that all contraception is wrong, but certainly you can see how such a view of marriage sits very well with the particular view of birth control.

But on the other hand, for many Protestants, probably most, especially since the influential thinking of the theologian Karl Barth in the 20th century, the primary focus of marriage has been very much more on the relationship itself.

And therefore, you can see how that fits very easily with a much more ready acceptance of contraception. If procreation isn't primary in marriage, then sex needn't be just for procreation, obviously.

Now, the danger of that emphasis, which of course is not wholly wrong, is that it can lead easily, and indeed it has led, through liberal Protestantism and into secular views of sexual intercourse, it leads into a very privatized, self-focused view of sexual relationships, as we've already seen in some of our earlier studies.

But also, it leads very easily into a very privatized and self-focused and even utilitarian view of procreation and parenting. You choose, simply, whether you will or you won't have children at all.

[6 : 16] If you want to, well then you do. And it may just be due to sentimental reasons. If you don't want to because it's inconvenient, because of your lifestyle or your job or your career prospects or your personality or whatever it is, well then you don't.

And it's just up to you. And if you do, it's when you want to have children and it's if you want to. And generally speaking, God has no place in it.

God is not in your thinking. Having children is all about a choice that you make for yourself and for your partner if you have one, because of course that's not necessary anymore.

It's nothing to do with your responsibility to God. And that is a very, very big sea change in our thinking in society. Now that's stating it pretty boldly, but essentially that is the view of the person in the street.

If you have kids, have them. If you don't want to have them, don't have them. It's up to you. And the problem is that we as Christians live in the same world as the man in the street and the woman in the street and we breathe the same air as them.

[7 : 24] And it's rather like passive smoking. You're always inhaling a lot more than you actually think you are. And so we need to take some big hefty breaths of good biblical clean air and think about this whole issue in the light of God's revelation to us because God has some very clear things to say to us.

Here's the question. What is God's plan for our involvement in procreation and parenting? And that's the question we need to be asking ourselves at the very beginning.

And we need to go right back to first principles as we do with so many things. Marriage itself, we've already seen, is for the purpose of serving God and serving his kingdom.

That is, serving his sovereign purposes in creation and redemption through which he is bringing the whole world to its ultimate purpose. and we've seen that that's true of both the personal aspect of marriage, the partnership of marriage, and also of the procreational aspect of marriage, childbearing and childrearing.

Both of these things are to serve that one purpose of God and his kingdom. And it's also true for the third P of marriage, the public order function of marriage, the fact that marriage is a public institution protects the privacy, the intimacy of the exclusive marriage relationship and it also prevents sexual chaos in society.

[8 : 56] That was a thing that became very necessary, obviously, after the fall and the rebellion of man. But those first two Ps, the issue of partnership and procreation in marriage, they're there right at the very beginning in the very order of creation.

Partnership in the kingdom, the woman was a suitable helper for Adam in serving in God's kingdom purpose to rule over the earth. And procreation, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the earth for God.

That's part of the very order of the creation of humanity. And neither of these things takes precedence over one another and neither of them takes precedence over the primary goal which is to serve the goal of serving God's kingdom.

But neither of them can either be separated. And I think that's a much more healthy and fulsome way of us thinking about this whole issue, especially when it comes to, for example, questions about family planning and so on.

It lifts us onto a higher plane altogether than that of just biology. If we think on that lower level we can so easily get into casuistry. That's the danger of the Roman Catholic position.

[10 : 11] That you have a principle but you can find all sorts of ways around it so that you can fulfill the letter of the law but actually you can do what you like. Or on the Protestant side, well, it can lead so easily to a very carefree attitude, can't it?

Where we don't think seriously about our responsibilities to God. So we must begin our thinking getting back to the clear purpose for procreation and for parenthood. And when we see this clearly in the context of being first and foremost about serving God and his kingdom and creation and redemption, then that helps us to get much, much clearer in our minds about the very practical issues such as planning parenthood and also the practice of parenthood and the many responsibilities that that brings to us.

So tonight, I want to get us clear on this purpose of parenthood as taught in the Bible and the Old Testament and the New Testament and then just to think through briefly some of the implications for that on the issue of planning parenthood.

So here's first then the purpose of parenthood. It is to bring to birth and to faith and to fruitful service the next generation of believers who will continue serving God's kingdom purpose of creation through redemption until Christ comes to consummate his kingdom of glory forever.

That's the purpose of Christian parenting. In short, we procreate, we parent for the task of mission.

[11 : 55] And that's the Bible's view of our responsibility in having children. And I want to spend a little bit of time just backing up that statement tonight. And by the way, I'm deliberately talking about parenting and speaking of parenting rather than just procreation because the latter in the Bible implies the former.

It's not just conception and birth that's in view, it's the nurture in believing faith that is absolutely integral to the whole task of biblical procreation, parenting.

parenting. Well, let's begin right at the very beginning, back in Genesis 1 verse 28, that verse that we've been to several times already. Parenthood is intrinsically bound up with the whole purpose of human sexuality, just as partnership is in the whole purpose of marriage.

God says, be fruitful and multiply. That's the very first command in the whole Bible. Fill the earth, he says. But for what purpose?

Well, to subdue it, to have dominion over every living thing. In other words, to rule the world as God's vice gerents, so that the world may glorify God and so that we might be fruitful in our desire to bring God's kingdom to full fruition, to consummation.

[13 : 16] That was before the fall of man, of course, but the striking thing is that immediately after the fall, as pictured in Genesis 3, after the curse of God on every aspect of our humanity, including child bearing, remember, in pain you shall bring forth children, even after the disaster of the fall, procreation is still very, very much to the fore.

So, if you turn over the page of Genesis chapter 4, you'll see that it begins with conception and birth, Cain and Abel. And it ends exactly the same way, after Abel's murder.

Eve brings forth another son, Seth, and Seth too has a son, Enosh. And chapter 5 of Genesis begins another book of generations.

These are the generations of Adam. Genesis is made up of ten books of generations, genealogies, procreation. God's purpose hasn't stopped just because of the fall.

all. And yet, you see, if we read through Genesis 5, we don't have to read very far to discover that all is not right. You see that great list of people?

[14:28] You see how every single one of their stories ends? And he died. And he died. And he died. And he died. And that just reminds us, doesn't it, of the huge problem of death, because of the huge problem of sin in the world, the problem of rebellion.

And so, after the fall of man, procreation alone is not enough. It's not enough any longer, is it, to fulfill man's destiny, to have dominion over the whole creation?

No, it's not, because now there are two seeds, two family lines. Yes, there is the seed of the woman, the promised line of faith through whom ultimately the source of God's salvation would come.

That's the promise of Genesis 3, but also, there's a rival seed, isn't there? There's the seed of the serpent, those who are opposed to God and his kingdom.

And that too is all too evident, just as reading through Genesis will tell you. Just read a few more chapters on, chapters 6 to 9, tell of the avalanche of sin and rebellion, of the opponents of God and his kingdom, such that God ultimately has to judge the whole world, saving only Noah and his family.

[15:44] And then again, after the flood, when Noah too is given the command to go and multiply and fill the earth, yet again, we don't get very far before we reach chapter 10 and 11 and the Tower of Babel and man's great rebellion again and again, God has to judge.

And you see, the message is very clear. Just multiplying the number of human beings on the earth now, no longer, is going to save the world, of course not, because it just multiplies sin.

Well, we know that. Six and a half billion people plus in the world now, but we're no closer to saving the world, are we? We seem to be getting a lot closer to destroying it.

And that's why, of course, the story of the Bible quickly focuses down in Genesis chapter 12 to the line of promise to God's people of faith, to his Israel in the making, to the family of Abraham.

You see, after the fall, natural reproduction for human beings is not enough to build God's kingdom. No, it needs to be supernatural reproduction.

[16:54] It's procreation, not of natural man that's going to bring about the fruition of God's kingdom. It's going to be the procreation of the family of faith. It's the bringing to birth and to faith of God.

of believing seed, of the heirs of God's covenant promise. That's what's needed. Missionary procreation in obedience to God. And that is and has been the calling of the people of God ever since the fall of man.

That's the purpose of the calling of Christian marriage today, just the same. Because our calling is to serve the kingdom by continuing the family of faith.

faith. And the purpose of the family of faith is mission. So when you get to Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 to 3 and you read the great promise of God, the covenant to Abraham, it's in exactly those terms, isn't it?

I will make of you, says God, a great nation, so that you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Missionary procreation, right from the very beginning.

[18:08] Now that's what explains the great emphasis all the way through the Bible, the Old Testament, especially on fertility and fecundity as a great blessing. Because it has a missionary purpose.

God is a God of mission. So just one example, Isaiah 27 verse 6, in days to come, says the Lord, Jacob will take root, Israel will blossom and bring forth fruit, shoots, reproduction, and fill the whole earth with fruit.

You see, Israel's fecundity is missionary for the world. That's why when you read all parts of the Bible, you see this great emphasis. Read the first couple of chapters of Exodus and you read how God's people were being fruitful and multiplying and being strong and the land was full of them.

Well, it's speaking of God at work through his people for the great purpose of his plan of redemption. By contrast, you find all the way through the Old Testament that sterility and barrenness is a mark of God's curse and his punishment on his people because they're not fulfilling their missionary calling.

Deuteronomy chapter 28, one of those awful chapters of curse, reminds Israel that if she abandons her calling as God's people, cursed will be the fruit of your womb.

[19 : 31] procreation. And that's not just arbitrary. It's because it's all bound up with the very purpose of procreation for God's people. It's for God's kingdom purpose.

It's for his mission. And that overarching purpose is why the Bible is so taken up not just with procreation, of course, but with parenting.

Not just a matter of bringing children to birth. They're to be nurtured in faith. They're to be nurtured for service. And the Bible is quite clear about that. Never, ever, does it separate the natural side of procreation from the spiritual side.

The two belong together. Reproduction isn't just a matter of biology. It's not just a natural thing. It's a supernatural thing for God's people. It's a matter of faith because it's a response of obedient faith to God's command and his purpose to be missionary people.

Now, we need to come back to this and we will do more next week, but it's a monumentally important thing for us to understand in our thinking about childbearing and childrearing.

[20 : 40] Just for now, think about it, mull it over, that having and rearing children for God's people is a supernatural process.

It's not just a natural thing. It's an act of faith. It's a response of faith and faithfulness to God to seek to parent. God never asks us just to have children.

He commands us to bring forth believing children, to bring forth missionary children. Yes, he is a sovereign God, but that is his sovereign command to his people and we can either respond to that command with faith or with unbelief.

And that explains, you see, through the scriptures, this huge emphasis on the nurture in the faith. God's promise to Abraham to bless the world through his offspring was a sovereign promise.

Yes, of course it was. And yet, at the same time, God made Abraham responsible to him for the stewardship of that. It was a matter of obedient faithfulness for Abraham.

[21 : 46] Look at Genesis chapter 18, verse 19. Very, very important verse. Genesis 18, 19. God is speaking about Abraham. I have chosen him, Abraham, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

Now, do you see that? God's promise, yes, you will have a missionary family, Abraham. But alongside God's promise, God's command, Abraham, nurture a missionary family.

And you see, as it is for Abraham, so it is for all the family of faith, all who are the seed of Abraham. Turn to Deuteronomy chapter 6, the chapter that we read together, because it's just one of the clearest examples of this in the Old Testament.

Moses begins to explain what it means to be the people of God, to live as God's missionary people, Israel. Look at verses 1 to 3 again. Now, this is the commandment, the statute, the rule that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land which you are going over to possess, that you may fear the Lord your God, that your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and commandments, which I command you all the days of your life, and your days may be long.

Hear, Israel, be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and, there's our word, that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you.

[23 : 33] You see? Passing on the blessing, the promise of God to the next generations. How is it to be done? Well, we read verses 4 to 7, didn't we? Teaching them diligently to your children, talking of them when you sit in the house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

That's the nurture and admonition of faith, as our old service book used to call it. Not ever in Scripture do you ever have the idea, well, we must let our children go their own way, and decide for themselves if they're going to follow God, we mustn't put pressure on them.

You never find that in the Bible. It's quite the reverse. Neither do you ever find in the Bible, oh, God is sovereign, so there's nothing that we can do about our children.

Never do you find that in the Bible. Now, what you find in the Bible is absolute affirmation that God is sovereign, and that bringing children into the world is a response of faith and trust in Him, and that you are to go on in faith and trust, obediently teaching them to be sharers in the faith of God's promises.

That's what you find in the Bible. Look over at chapter 6, verses 20 to 25, those last verses that we read. See what that instruction embodies, you see?

[25 : 03] It's not legalistic strictures, is it? It's not unforgiving moralism. That is a dreadful parody. That is what can be so damaging to children, so disastrous.

That is what will send our children AWOL, provoking them against the gospel, against God, against Christ. No, it's not that at all.

That's what we're commanded deliberately not to do. Paul says, don't provoke your children to wrath. What are we to teach them? Well, we are to teach them God's testimonies and statutes and rules, but when they ask what it all means, we're to tell them that it's all a response to the wonderful, abundant grace of God who's redeemed us, who's made us His people, who's called us to be His forever and ever, who's laid out before us a wonderful and a glorious future, who's called us into that future with Him and called us to be a people who witness to Him and call others into that glorious future.

We are to bring up missionary children steeped in the glories of God's redemption, steeped in the glories of the gospel and therefore understanding why we live the way we do and rejoicing in the God of redemption and rejoicing in living as the people of the God of the gospel of redemption. We're to bring up children for God and for God's mission in the world. And that's what believing parenting is all about in the Bible. And notice it's fathers in this chapter and all the way through the Bible who bear the particular responsibility.

[26 : 49] Fathers are to be leaders, yes, in marriage, but also in the home. And what being a leader in the home means is being a leader in missionary preparation of your children. That, of course, is why it's doubly tragic if there isn't a father.

Not just for all the natural reasons that our politicians are talking about at the moment, but because of this added biblical dimension of leadership in nurture, leadership in preparation for serving the kingdom of God.

And that's why the Bible so often tells us so particularly about God's special care for the widow and for the fatherless, for whatever the reason is. That's something that we in the Christian church must take very clearly as a real responsibility, isn't it?

To be fathers to the fatherless. God does set the lonely in families. God does provide fathers to the fatherless, but he does it here on planet Earth using real people.

He does it through his people. It's a responsibility that the people of God bear, the community of faith. Because fathers must lead the way in missionary preparation.

[28 : 03] But not only fathers, of course, mothers also are very, very important. And motherhood itself is dignified so very highly in the Bible.

One of the loveliest examples is in the New Testament, in the person of Timothy. Timothy, that great missionary who co-labored with Paul. He was nurtured, it seems, not by his father, who perhaps wasn't a believer.

But we're told by his mother and his grandmother, who certainly were. And you remember Paul writes, doesn't he, in 1 Timothy chapter 2, that women will be saved through childbearing.

He's not saying, of course, that women will be saved and find their salvation just because they have children. Of course not. What he's saying is that child-rearing, parenting, is in itself a wonderfully dignified and glorious thing for a woman and part of her calling by God.

And part of bearing fruit. For the gospel of the kingdom. Because parenting is a response of faith. It's a missionary task. And we must assert that very, very strongly today, mustn't we?

[29 : 13] In the face of all of those who say, and it seems that they were saying the same thing in Timothy's day. That motherhood in itself somehow isn't enough. It's a demeaning thing for women.

And that women must find their real fulfillment elsewhere. Elsewhere. Well, no. No. Not if it's a supernatural task.

Not if it's an exercise of faith for Christ and his kingdom. You can never say that. It's a glorious calling in itself. You see, it's that vital importance of parenting that explains why in the Bible there's such an insistence that marriage should take place within the family of faith.

Not being unequally yoked to unbelievers. Because the missionary task is so important. And how can that task be shared with a spouse who, well, has no conception about it, no interest in it?

So Abraham, you remember, insisted that a wife be found for his son Isaac, not from the Canaanite pagans, but from his own people. Same for Isaac, when in Genesis chapter 28, he's commanding Jacob.

[30 : 27] He explicitly tells him to find a wife from his own people so that, quote, God may give the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring. In other words, so that you and your offspring will share in the missionary task of God's kingdom.

And that's in striking contrast to Esau, of course, who married Canaanite women and then an Ishmaelite. If you read the book of Kings, you find that again and again we're always told of a king whose mother was.

And that would be the thing that told you if he was going to be faithful or evil. If his mother was one of God's people, he would be a faithful king. But if she wasn't, well, it would be disaster.

That's why in the book of Proverbs, there's so much that's held up about the worthiness of a woman's character, far, far more than her beauty. Beauty without true character, says the Proverbs writer, is like a gold ring in a pig's snout.

But a woman who fears the Lord, she is to be praised. Why? Because parenting is for mission. It's for God's kingdom.

[31 : 36] It has been ever since the fall. It's part of God's calling for his people of faith. And it will be until Jesus comes. Sometimes people say, well, that's different now since Jesus came.

Now it's all about evangelism. That's how God's family grows. Well, of course, that is one of the glorious ways that God's family grows. But God's creation purpose doesn't stop just because Jesus has come.

In fact, it gathers pace, doesn't it? For one thing, people have to be born before they can be one for Christ. You have to be born first before you can be reborn. It's pretty obvious.

But also, just because in the same way the gospel is for the Jew first and then for the Gentile world, also with the family of faith under the new covenant.

It's the privilege and the joy of believers to share the blessings of the family of faith. And all the more compared to the Old Testament. God is still very, very interested in the blessing of his calling cascading down the generations.

[32 : 41] Acts chapter 2, the promise is to you and to your children and to all those who are far off. You see, childbearing and childrearing is supremely missionary.

It's kingdom work. And just like Timothy, it's so often true in our own experience that the leaders of the future come from those who have been nurtured on the milk of the gospel just as they've been nurtured on their mother's milk.

Well, of course, it's what you'd expect. They start off at a huge advantage in the world because they've grown up and been nurtured with the nurture and admonition of gospel faith.

Parenting is of the very essence of the kingdom calling of marriage for God's people. And so having said that about the purpose of parenting, there will obviously be implications, won't there, for planning parenthood.

I've got no time to say more than just one or two things here, but I do want to give some pointers to the practical implications of this theology of parenting that I've been talking about. Because you see, today, when we use the word family planning, it's almost completely a misnomer, isn't it?

[34 : 02] Family planning clinics, by and large, are not helping people to plan their family within a stable relationship. Well, they're doing that a bit, but by and large, they're helping people to make sure that the one thing that won't happen is that a family arises.

In other words, it's not planning for children, it's planning against children, isn't it? And if a child results from the sexual liaison, well, that's a disaster, it's a curse.

Because most such sexual relationships are never intending children at all. And that's the assumption of our culture, isn't it? Sex is for sex. It's not for marriage and a long-term relationship only.

It's certainly not only at all bound up with procreation and with parenting. Well, that's the ethic that underlies the whole disastrous sex education policy that we are forcing through in our schools and our society by doctrinaire politicians, even in the face of all the evidence.

And there was lots of evidence in the papers this week about the disastrous failure of our sex education policies. That's what stands behind it. From the vulgarity of the always use a condom, to the sheer brutality of abortion and the sanitized version of abortion, the morning after pill.

[35 : 24] And all of that is light years away, isn't it, from the wonderful pattern that we've been unfolding from Scripture, that marriage and parenting is a wonderful calling, serving the kingdom of God. Procreation and parenting, integral to that calling.

But I don't want to go into details about this area, but I do want to say something about family planning because some Christians do get concerned about it. And it's right that we should be concerned about it if we're taking parenting seriously as a response, as a calling from God. So first, a word about what I'm going to call deliberately planned non-parenthood. It's quite common today for couples to just choose not to have children.

And we live in a perverse world where children are often viewed as a curse and not a blessing, as an intrusion in life, as an expense, as a burden.

And we live in a self-centered world where relationships and sex are primarily there to serve me, or at the very least to serve us, to serve our relationship, which so often becomes our God.

[36 : 31] So why not? Why should we bother? Why should it be wrong to say, well, we're just not going to have children? You see, Christians who take the Bible seriously just can't ever say that.

Children in Scripture always, without exception, are seen as a blessing, never as a curse, always as a gift from God. It's always childlessness that's seen as a grief and as a deprivation.

And if parenting is a missionary calling for believers, it would be anti-mission and anti-kingdom to be against parenting. So when we understand the purpose of marriage in this way, we must conclude that a marriage that is closed in principle to having children is a rebellion against God's purposes. Let me quote to you from Helmut Tillich's book, *The Ethics of Sex*. There can be no doubt that a willful and permanent refusal to have children, on principle, constitutes a reduction of the purpose of marriage in the order of creation, a sundering of what God has joined together, and therefore something that is not the proper will of God.

And I think that can be the only conclusion, can't it, if we take Scripture seriously? Now let me say immediately that there can be exceptions to that, where in principle, a couple are open to such a hope of children, but there are certain circumstances that mean that in their particular case, godly wisdom may well be in accord with refraining from having children.

[38 : 15] There may be, for example, some kind of awful genetic disease in the family. There may be some illness that would just make it foolish to have a child, against medical advice and so on.

But that's very different because in principle, that couple agrees that the hope of children is something that under every normal circumstance they would have longed for. But it's just that in this particular case, reluctantly, that can't be for them.

So that's very different. That's not planned non-parenthood. Planned non-parenthood must ordinarily surely be against the purpose of our Creator.

Secondly, let me say something about planned parenthood, which is a very, very different matter. The question is, can faithful Christians take into their own control the management of their fertility? Well, the Roman Catholic Church says essentially no. We must leave it all to nature. What can we say to that? Well, there are lots of things we could say, but let me just say two.

[39 : 23] The Roman Catholic view is essentially bound up with a conception of natural law that arises more from medieval philosophy than from the Bible. So it says that every act of sexual union must be open to procreation because you can't separate the aim of personal union from the aim of procreation.

You can't separate that ever in the sexual act. You see, that is fraught with problems. You just need to ask the question to see whether it's realistic that the aim of procreation is ever uppermost in the mind of the individuals in the midst of sexual intercourse to see how ridiculous that is.

But more importantly, perhaps, it does reduce the whole relational and unifying personal aspect of sex down to just biology. But that's just not so.

To do that makes the sex act itself the only thing that matters, not the whole context of a chaste relationship, an exclusive relationship. Now, we must say it is perfectly possible to honour and to value and to hope for the blessing of children within a marriage and yet not necessarily to see it necessarily that every single sexual act is open to procreation in itself.

The second thing is this, and Helmut Thieliker again makes a very helpful and very necessary distinction between what we might call the order of nature and the order of creation.

[40 : 57] Some Christians might say, you see, well, are we interfering with nature by using contraception? Shouldn't we just trust God? Thieliker points out that God created man as distinct from all other creatures in nature, not to be under nature, not to be controlled by nature, but to have dominion over nature.

And since the fall, that also includes working against the curse that has this world in bondage to decay. Now, you don't get up in the morning, do you, and say, well, shall I put clothes on today or shall I just leave it to nature?

Well, I don't advise going out. If that's what you have done, you'll probably get arrested. You don't do that if you cut your leg and say, well, will I just leave it to trust in God? You put a bandage on your leg.

And the same goes with so many things in our lives. Isn't that true? And the same is true for planning and managing fertility. Listen to Helmut Thieliker. Letting things go as they come would not be the responding and the responsible attitude appropriate to the claim of the order of creation, but only a bondage to nature camouflaged by religion.

And so, you see, as we seek to be responsible stewards of creation, as we live for serving the kingdom of God in all things, including in our parenting, there's nothing against us planning families responsibly.

[42 : 31] In fact, in a complex world that is the world we live in after the fall, there are many factors that make these things much more complicated than we would like. And that kind of planning might need a lot of wisdom from us.

So we need to fear to plan families. Provided, this is important, that we're driven by godly attitudes and right attitudes about serving the kingdom of God.

Not driven by selfish attitudes, just about serving ourselves and our own comfort. And we may very well need to challenge ourselves about that in our society.

Is our use of contraception godly or selfish? That's a very real question. Now, I can't tell you if that's right in your relationship or not, but you can.

We're given liberty and freedom to wisely steward in the task of parenting. There's nothing wrong, I would submit, with planning the size of your family insofar as you can.

[43 : 34] Provided, of course, you're open to God giving you some surprises and God does give surprises. Some people just can cope with a lot of children and others just can't for all kinds of reasons.

And it might very well be irresponsible for those to have large numbers of children they can't cope with. Provided they're acting in faith. Because the Bible says everything that's not of faith is of sin. Providing they're acting in faith and not just in selfishness. Not just with an attitude that treats children as a curse from God, not a blessing. There's nothing wrong, as far as the Bible teaches us, with planning the time of our parenthood responsibly.

But again, as long as it's a matter of faith. As long as it's about the worship of God, not a matter of unbelief and worship of yourself, just for your own convenience.

And both of those attitudes are possible, aren't they? One couple might get married and want to have kids straight away. And they might need to ask themselves, well, is this wise?

[44 : 45] They might both be students in the midst of exams. They might be separated in different parts of the country working. They might not have an income. They might not really have anywhere suitable to live.

Well, it might be alright, but it might be that it's more sensible to wait a little. But then another couple might get married and then put off having children for years and years and years.

And, well, they need to ask, well, do we really need all of this time to get used to being married or to make ourselves financially secure or whatever it is?

Is the real answer that we're just not quite so keen on seeing parenting as a blessing from God, as God wants it to be? Maybe we are just a bit more affected by the culture around us than we think we are.

You read a lot today, don't you, about people saying, well, we want me time and we'll have babies later on. Of course, many women are finding that when they want babies later on after their me time it's not nearly so easy as it might have been earlier on.

[45 : 52] So all of these things, you see, are just practical things that we need to think through but giving serious consideration to the wise stewardship of God's gift of parenthood.

And above it all and behind it all must be a clear understanding of what it's all for. Parenting, like marriage, is for the kingdom of God.

It's a missionary task. We bring to birth in order to bring to faith, in order to bring to service and fruitfulness in the kingdom of God.

And that is the way of faith for family life. That's the way for family life in God's calling for his people. So let's praise him and let's rejoice in it and let's be encouraged in our task and encourage one another in our task of parenting for the kingdom of God, for the glory of God, for the blessing of his people in the world, for the gathering in of others to his kingdom, for the ushering in of the consummation of the very purpose that God created this world for.

That's what we're doing when we have children, when we bring them up and when we seek to send them out as missionaries into God's world. And that's a task that we need to unite in and be involved in together, whether we ourselves have children or whether we don't or whatever stage we're at.

[47 : 28] All the people of God have a purpose to play in this great and glorious task of parenting for the kingdom of God. Whether you're young or old, whether you're married or single, whether you have loads of children, or few, or none.

It's part of what it means to be the people of God. Let's rejoice in it and let's help one another in it and see above all the glory of serving the kingdom of God this way.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your manifold gifts and blessings and especially we give you thanks for the gift of children among us and we pray that you would help us to receive these gifts with blessing and with joy and to be responsible, faithful, obedient people, parents as well as others that we might together serve your kingdom and bring blessing to this cursed world until our Savior comes.

Amen.