

The Purpose of Parenthood

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Turn now to our Bible reading, which you'll find in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy at chapter 6. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, that I think is page 151, page 151.

And we're coming back to a couple more studies in our series Aspects of Love, and focusing particularly on the whole area of parenting, procreation and parenting.

Next week I'm going to look particular at some of the very difficult issues concerning our pursuit of parenthood, perhaps especially when that is a difficulty and a source of grief and sorrow.

But this week we're going to look a little more at what the Bible's purpose is for parenthood, for believing people, and then what the implications that must have for us as we think about planning parenthood.

I'm going to read here in Deuteronomy chapter 6, the first nine verses, and then picking up at verse 20 to the end of the chapter, where much is said about the whole way that we are to teach and train our young ones in the faith of the Scriptures.

[1 : 15] So Deuteronomy chapter 6 and verse 1. Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules, that the Lord your God commanded me, that is Moses, to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over to possess it, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I have commanded you all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.

Hear, therefore, Israel, and be careful to do them, that it might go well with you, and that you might multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and there shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house, and on your gates. And verse 20, when your son asks you in time to come, what is the meaning of the testimonies, and the statutes, and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?

[2 : 51] Then you shall say to your son, we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and the Lord showed signs and wonders great and grievous against the Egyptians and against Pharaoh and all his household before our eyes.

And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God for our good always, that he might preserve us alive as we are this day.

And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. Well, do be seated. You might like to turn to Deuteronomy chapter 6.

A little later we'll look at some of these verses and read them again. But our subject this morning is the purpose of parenthood. It doesn't take long, does it?

[4 : 06] When you're chatting with somebody for the first time, the question often comes up, do you have family? And it's just one of the first things that we talk about, because I suppose it's still a natural assumption, isn't it, that most married people will have children, or at least that they'll want children.

But at the same time, these days, attitudes have changed, and it's also much more common today to hear people say things like, well, are you planning to have children?

Or, I'm not sure we will have children. Or even, why would you ever want to have children? I know some parents of young children do sometimes think that, after it's a bit too late, when the sleepless nights are happening at the baby stage.

Well, that does pass. Well, not the sleepless nights, actually. They just have different reasons for the sleepless nights as they get older. I'm not sure they're ever going to quite disappear. But, in our society today, the thinking about having children is much more diverse than the simple assumption, as it used to be, that parenting was just part and parcel of marriage.

And the advent of contraception, of course, is what has changed all of that. So much so, that in most Western countries today, the birth rate has dropped so greatly that many governments offer cash incentives to have babies.

[5 : 38] Maternity leave, pay, child benefit, and so on, has all increased in our own country. But, actually, that pales into insignificance when you look at other countries. A number of years ago, Russia introduced a bonus of \$9,000 if you had a child.

In January 2007, Germany introduced incentives of €25,000 for having a baby. Until last year, in Australia, you got \$5,000.

But, Singapore, by far, tops the list because there's a total package of up to \$166,000 if you haven't raised two children.

Maybe thinking you're living in the wrong country, some of you parents. But, all of this reflects, doesn't it, the fact that nowadays, whether you have children or not, is much more of a personal choice, much more of a lifestyle choice, even, than ever before.

And that means that the Christian church has to think very seriously about what our thinking should be about all of these things. Now, there are, of course, different views in the church about family planning.

[6 : 44] The most obvious divide is between the Roman Catholic position, which opposes all so-called artificial contraception, and the vast majority of Protestant churches who don't.

Roman Catholics, of course, will allow so-called natural methods, but in reality, it's very dubious whether you can make distinctions like that because, in that sense, they're all artificial. Now, we can't, of course, this morning go into details about these things, but what is very important is that as Christians, we do think about and understand the broader issues involved.

We need to start to think through these things biblically. The Roman Catholic view stems from the fact that in Roman thinking, the primary purpose of marriage is procreation, that the relational aspect of sex is quite secondary to that.

Now, I doubt it is a little bit more nuanced than that, but here is the classic statement from Pope Pius VI in 1952. He says, marriage as a natural institution does not have, as its first and innermost purpose, the personal perfection of the spouses, as in the will of Creator, but rather the awakening and rearing of new life.

So other purposes of sex, he says, are essentially subordinate. Now, even if that were so, I don't think it necessarily follows that contraception is wrong, but you can see how the Roman Catholic position on contraception fits very comfortably with that view of the primary, the sole purpose of sex.

[8 : 25] On the other hand, in the Protestant church, more recently, and especially since the very influential thinking of the theologian Karl Barth some 50 years ago, the Protestant church has focused much more exclusively on the relationship of marriage itself as the purpose of sex, not procreation.

And obviously, that view sits much more easily with acceptance of contraception. If procreation isn't primary, then of course, sex needn't always be for procreation.

But the danger of this emphasis is that it can lead, can't it, to a very privatized, a very self-focused view of sexual relationships, and also to a very self-focused and even utilitarian view of procreation and parenting.

And that is, I think, the way our society tends to think today. It's your choice, whether you will or won't have children. If you want to, you do. And if not, because it's inconvenient to you, to your lifestyle, to your career, to your personality, whatever it is, well, you just don't, and you don't have to.

And if you do want to have children, then it's when you want to, and it's how you want to, and generally speaking, God really has nothing to do with your thinking. Having children is all about your choice.

[9 : 44] It's all about yourself, perhaps also your partner, if you have a partner, but of course, nowadays, it's no longer necessary, is it, to have a partner, to have a child? And in most people's thinking, at least, it's absolutely nothing to do with God.

Now, that's stating it pretty boldly, but that is essentially, I think, how our society thinks. And the problem is, for us as Christians, is that we live in our society, and we breathe the air of our society.

And like passive smoking, we inhale much, much more than we ever realize. So we need to take some big, deep breaths of good, clean, biblical air as we think through all of these things in the light of God's revealed will and purpose for our lives.

What is God's plan for our involvement in procreation and parenting? That's the question we need to ask, isn't it, first of all? And in asking it, we need to go right back to first principles in the Bible.

Marriage itself, as we've already said in these studies, is for the purpose of glorifying God and of serving God's kingdom purpose in this world.

[10 : 57] That is, his sovereign purpose in creation and redemption through which he is bringing his creation purpose to fulfillment through recreation. That's what God's doing.

And the Bible shows us that both the personal aspect of marriage, its partnership in life, and also the procreative aspect of marriage, that is, childbearing, both of these serve that one overarching purpose of God.

And so, in fact, does the third P of marriage, the public order aspect of marriage, marriage as an institution. That is what protects the private intimacy of marriage, and that's what prevents sexual chaos in society.

That third P is a necessity, isn't it, in a fallen world. But the first two of those, the partnership and the procreation in serving God's kingdom, are of the order of God's creation.

Partnership in the kingdom, man and woman, as complementary helpers. and procreation, to fill the earth and have dominion over it for God. Neither one of these tasks is the primary task and goal of marriage, but both of them serve the primary goal, which is that man serves the glory of God's kingdom on earth.

- [12 : 13] But neither of these tasks can be separated either. And that, I think, helps our thinking in this whole area, especially when we come to think of things like contraception because it lifts it onto a higher plane than just matters of biology.

That's all we think about, just the biological aspects. Very easily, you get led into the casuistry of the Roman Catholic position or, alternatively, a very carefree attitude that has arisen out of liberal Protestantism.

Now, we begin our thinking by getting clear on the purpose of procreation and parenthood in serving the kingdom of Christ. That's how, then, we will understand practical issues like planning parenthood and, indeed, practicing parenthood and all the responsibilities that are involved in that.

So I want to focus today on the purpose of parenthood as the Bible teaches us and then just deal with a few of the implications for planning parenthood that will necessarily flow from that. So first of all, then, here it is.

The purpose of parenthood, according to the Bible, is to bring to birth and to obedient faith and to fruitful service.

- [13 : 26] The next generation who will continue serving God's kingdom purpose of creation through redemption until Christ comes to consummate his kingdom in glory forever.

To put it in short, we procreate and parent for the task of mission. That's the Bible's view of our responsibility in having children.

I want to spend a little bit of time just fleshing out what I've said there. By the way, I'm deliberately speaking about parenting rather than just procreation because for the Bible, the latter entails the former.

It's not just ever conception and birth that's in view. It is nurture in the faith of the one true God that is integral to the true task of parenting for the Bible.

So let's start right at the beginning. The very first command to humanity is this, be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it.

- [14 : 27] Have dominion over every living thing. In other words, rule the world as God's representative so that it may glorify God and that the whole world might fulfill God's purpose in his wonderful kingdom that he has created.

That's the first command. But what's very striking is that even after the fall and after God curses every aspect of human life, including childbearing, remember, in pain, you shall bring forth children.

Even after this disaster, procreation is still very much to the fore in the Bible's account. So Genesis 4 begins, doesn't it, with conception and birth, Cain and Abel, and it ends, after Abel's terrible murder, with conception and birth again.

Adam begets Seth, and Seth begets Enosh, and so on. Genesis chapter 5 is a whole book of generations, of genealogies. It's all very concerned with procreation because God's purpose hasn't stopped.

And of course, it's very clear when you read Genesis chapter 5 that it's far from right. Do you remember the refrain, the end of everyone, and he died, and he died, and he died. And that reminds us of the huge problem of death because of the huge problem of sin, because of man's rebellion against his destiny.

- [15 : 47] And what that means is that procreation is not enough any longer to fulfill man's destiny to rule the world perfectly for God.

It's not enough because there are two seeds now, aren't there? There are two families, there are two lines. Yes, there is the seed of the woman, the promised line of faith, through whom ultimately God's source of salvation would indeed come.

But there's also another seed, another line, the seed of the serpent who are opposed to God and to his kingdom and to his people. And that's just too evident, of course, as you read on in Genesis.

Genesis 6 to 9 speak about the avalanche of sin that as man multiplies, so sin multiplies in the world. And so far is humankind from God's ordained purpose for them that God has to judge the whole world again in the flood.

And then again, even after the flood, when man's multiplication happens again, what happens? Evil multiplies and once again, God has to judge in the Tower of Babel and scatter people over the earth.

[16 : 51] And so the message is very clear, isn't it? Increasing the number of humans in the world according to God's first command will not any longer save the world. More than six billion people in the world today, isn't there?

And we're no closer to saving the planet. In fact, we're a lot closer perhaps to destroying the planet. And that's why, of course, from Genesis 12 and following, the Bible focuses down to just one line, to just one family, the line of Abraham, the line of promise, the people of faith who will be the answer to the world's problems.

Because, you see, after the fall, natural reproduction is not enough to build God's kingdom on earth. No, it must be supernatural reproduction.

It's procreation by faith, of the family of faith. That alone is what can bring God's kingdom purposes to fulfillment. The bringing to birth and to faith, of believing seed, heirs of God's covenant promise.

In other words, missionary procreation in obedience to God's command. That is the calling of God's people ever since the fall. And that is still the calling and purpose of Christian marriage today.

[18 : 12] We mate for mission. Nothing's changed. See, from the beginning, the promise to Abraham was framed in exactly these terms in Genesis chapter 12.

I will make of you, said God, a great nation, so that you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. That's missionary procreation right from the start. That's what explains the great emphasis all through the Bible on fertility and on fecundity, giving birth, as a blessing from God because it had a missionary purpose because God is a God of mission.

So Isaiah 27, verse 6 says, In days to come, Jacob shall take root. Israel shall bloom and put forth shoots, that's reproduction, which will fill the whole earth with fruit.

Israel's fecundity is missionary for the world. So, for example, when you read at the beginning of the book of Exodus, chapters 1 and 2, how the Israelites were multiplying and filling the land of Goshen, that is telling us that God is at work blessing his people for the sake of blessing the whole world.

His plan and purpose of redemption is being carried out. By contrast, all through the Old Testament, barrenness and sterility was a mark of God's curse.

[19 : 35] And it came upon them if his people were not fulfilling their calling and purpose as a missionary people. So in Deuteronomy 28, that great chapter of curse is, cursed be the fruit of your womb if you depart from the Lord.

He says, that's just not arbitrary. It's because Israel's whole purpose was bound up with procreation and with mission in serving God's kingdom in the world.

And that missionary purpose explains why the Bible is taken up also not just with procreation but with parenting. not just a matter ever of bringing children to birth but they're to be nurtured in the faith and nurtured for kingdom service.

The Bible's quite clear about that. Never, ever, ever in the Bible does it separate that natural side of procreation from the spiritual side. The two belong together.

Reproduction is never for the scriptures just a matter of biology. It's never just natural. It is supernatural for God's people because it's a response of obedient faith to God's command and to God's purpose for his missionary people.

[20 : 48] I rather suspect that we never think about that in any way near as big a way as we ought to but we need to because it's monumentally important for all I'm thinking about childbearing and childrearing.

Having and rearing children for believing people is never just a natural thing for the Bible. It's a supernatural thing. It's an act of faith.

It's a response of faith to seek to be godly and missionary parents. God never asks us just to have children. He commands us to nurture believing children, indeed missionary children.

Of course God is a sovereign God and ultimately God alone calls to himself eternally those upon whom he has mercy. Yes, he is sovereign. But at the same time his sovereign command is that believing parents nurture their children in the way of believing faith.

Those of us who are parents must respond to that command and we can either respond with faith or with unbelief, with obedience or with disobedience to God's command. That's why the Bible has such a huge emphasis on nurturing in the faith, in believing homes, within God's household of faith.

[22 : 08] God's promise to Abraham to bless his offspring and to bless the world through his offering was a sovereign promise. And yet at the same time God made Abraham personally responsible to him for its stewardship.

It was a matter of obedient faithfulness to Abraham. Genesis 18 verse 19, I have chosen him, Abraham, that he might 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.

And you see, God's promise, yes indeed, a missionary family. By God's command to Abraham, you must nurture a missionary family. And as for Abraham, so for all God's people of faith.

Now Deuteronomy chapter 6 that we read earlier is one of the very important examples of this, very, very clear. It would be helpful if you would look at it just now. After the Decalogue, after the giving of the law in Sinai, Moses begins to expound the life of believing holiness for God's people to live as his missionary nation, Israel, in the land that he has given them.

Look at verses 1 to 3 again. This is the command, the statutes and the rules that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you that you may do them in the land which you're going over to possess, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son.

[23 : 39] You see, nurture and admonition in faith. Never ever do you find in Scripture the idea that we just leave our children to go their own way, that we leave our children to decide for themselves if they're going to follow the Lord's way.

Far less do you ever find in the Bible any idea that parents should allow children to dictate and decide what a family's priorities are going to be and what they do.

Quite the reverse. Nor, for that matter, do we ever find in Scripture the idea, well, God is sovereign so we can't do anything to lead our children to faith. No. God is sovereign and so bringing children into the world at all is a response of faith and trust in Him as the sovereign Lord and a Lord that we know is good and just and merciful and right.

How else could we ever otherwise think about bringing children into this world with all its sin, with all its curse, unless we trusted it to God? And we must go on in faith and trust, obediently committing our children to God, teaching them to be sharers in all God's marvelous promises and His grace.

Look down to verse 20 to see what this instruction embodies. When your son asked you in time to come, what's the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes and the rules that the Lord has commanded you?

[25 : 05] Then you will say to your son, we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord showed signs and wonders great and grievous against Egypt and Pharaoh and all his house sold before our eyes and he brought us up from here that we might be in the land that God swore to give to our fathers and the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes to fear the Lord our God for our good always and that he might preserve us alive as we are today and this will be righteousness for us.

You see what this instruction in the faith is not? It is not, is it, legalistic strictures. It is not harsh, unforgiving moralism.

It's the very opposite. That is a dreadful parody that is so damaging, that is often so disastrous. That is what will lead children in Christian households to go AWOL, to kick against the traces, to rebel against the gospel and the Lord.

But that is not what this is here. We're explicitly commanded not to do that, aren't we? Paul says to the Ephesians, don't provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and the instruction of the Lord.

And that's what Deuteronomy 6 is all about. We're to teach God's commands, yes, his ways, his statutes, his rules, of course we are. But see how clear Moses is here. We're to do it within the context of his wonderful grace, his wonderful mercy that has redeemed us, not just from Egypt, but from the bondage of sin and death and hell and has promised us righteousness and promised us a glory of life with him that is everlasting.

[26 : 58] We're to bring up missionary children steeped in the glories of gospel redemption and rejoicing in the goal of redemption, which is to live as God's own people for his glory and for his kingdom mission in this world.

That's what believing parenting looks like in the Bible. And of course, we're told in many places, aren't we, that fathers are to lead in this responsibility as leaders both in marriage and in the home, leaders in the missionary preparation of their children.

home. That's why it's doubly tragic when there's no father in the home, not just for all the natural reasons that everybody recognizes today, but for all these biblical reasons, the leadership and mission and godliness in the home.

That's why the Bible has such a special care and concern, doesn't it, for the fatherless and for the widow, for whatever reason that might be. And that's why the church today ought to also likewise echo that same care and concern, that special help, very especially when there's no father in the home.

It's a responsibility that we in the church owe to one another as brothers and sisters and owe to God himself. It's a command. But where fathers are physically present, men, are you listening?

[28 : 21] We must be spiritually present in our homes as well. Fathers, bring up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

That's a command from Christ's apostle. We need to listen to that, fathers, don't we? And by prayer and precept and example, we need to step up and bear our responsibilities.

It's very easy, isn't it, just to leave that to our wives. We're very lazy by nature as men. I know I am one. So we need to be challenging one another.

We need to be challenging and asking each other as men, as fathers, how is it going with your Christian leadership in the home? I need you to ask that to me, you need me to ask it to you. We can filter out a wife's nagging on these things.

Wives, don't bother, it doesn't get through. But we need men to be encouraging one another. Of course, don't think that I'm downplaying mothers, absolutely not, not at all.

[29 : 27] The role of motherhood is very highly dignified all through the Bible. One lovely example is that of Timothy, that great missionary leader who was nurtured, it seems, not by a Christian father, but we're told in 1 Timothy by his mother and his grandmother.

We're also told by Paul in 1 Timothy 2 that women will be saved through childbearing. He's not saying that women will gain salvation just because they have children, of course not, but what he is saying is that child rearing, and the word means parenting, not just having a child, that child rearing is itself a wonderfully dignified and glorious calling for a woman, that that in itself bears great fruit for the kingdom of God, because parenting is a response of faith, it's a missionary task.

And we must assert that, I think, very strongly today, mustn't we, because there are women and many others who seem to be saying what they were saying in Timothy's situation, that motherhood on its own and of itself somehow was rather a demeaning thing, and that if women really wanted to find fulfillment, well, it had to be found elsewhere in something more than just that.

But God's word says to us, no, that is not so. The supernatural kingdom task of parenting as a mother to your children is your road to salvation.

That's what Paul's saying. Don't let anybody ever demean that. Don't let anything usurp it either. Nothing else is more important to God.

[31 : 05] It's this vital task of parenting that also explains why the Bible is so insistent that marriage must take place within the family of faith, that we're not to be unequally with unbelievers because, of course, if missionary parenting is so important, well, that can't be shared, can it, with a spouse who has no conception of what that's all about.

That's why Abraham insisted that Isaac's wife would not be found from among the pagans, and Isaac likewise insisted that for Jacob. That's why when you read through the book of Kings, it always tells you of any particular king, whether his mother was an Israelite or a pagan.

If she was an Israelite, it boded well. if he was a pagan, almost certainly the king would be a disaster and ungodly. It's why Proverbs tells the young man in question to seek a woman of character because beauty without godliness is like a gold ring in the snout of a pig.

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

It has been ever since the fall, and it will be until Jesus comes again. Be very clear about that. Sometimes people are confused, and they think because we're New Testament Christians, they say things like, well, surely now it's just about evangelism.

[32 : 30] Surely that's how God's family grows through the proclamation of the gospel. Well, of course it does. Of course, that's always been so right back from the very beginning. There were many who joined Abraham's family, were circumcised, and became Israelites along with him.

They weren't by birth. But God's creation purpose hasn't stopped just because Christ the Redeemer has come. In fact, the very opposite, it has gained pace.

I mean, for one obvious thing, people can't be spiritually born again unless they're also born physically in the first place. That's obvious. But also, just as the gospel came to the Jew first and then to the whole Gentile world, so also, it's the privileged joy of believers to share the blessings of the faith in the new covenant with their families, with our young ones.

All the more so that Christ has come in the new covenant than in the old. The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are afar off, says Peter.

And the promises that we have in Christ are not lesser promises, but greater promises, better promises, in these latter days of God's fullness. And so childbearing and childrearing is still supernatural, supremely kingdom work.

[33 : 49] Parenting is of the very essence of the kingdom calling of marriage for God's people, bringing to birth and bringing to faith and bringing to faithful service the next generation of missionary servants of Christ until he comes.

And it's just an obvious fact of history, isn't it? We know that just like Timothy, so often the Christian leaders of the future are those who have been nurtured in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ from their earliest age.

They've had the privilege of taking in the milk of the gospel almost with their mother's milk. Well, having said that about the purpose of parenthood, let me mention briefly some implications for our thinking about planning parenthood.

The first thing to recognize, I think, is that so-called family planning clinics today are almost a total misnomer, aren't they? Overwhelmingly, their work is not at all in helping people to plan their family, but they're usually in helping people, almost always unmarried people, to ensure that the one thing that will not happen is that a family will happen.

It's not planning for children in these clinics, it's planning against children. And if a pregnancy results from a sexual liaison, then it's seen not as a blessing, but a curse, it's seen as a disaster and a failure.

[35 : 11] That's because most sexual relationships today are never intending children at all. Sex is for sex, sex is not for a long-term relationship, certainly not just for marriage, and certainly not just bind up with procreation.

And that's our society's view today. We've got to recognize that. That's the view that lies behind all the sex education policies that our secularist governments and authorities insist on promoting so vigorously in our schools, which have been such a total and utter failure and disaster, but is an ideology that lies behind it.

But that is light years away, isn't it, from the wonderful purpose and pattern of marriage and parenting that the Bible presents for us. So we need to say something about how we are to think rightly, about these practical issues because they are areas that many Christians are concerned with and rightly concerned with.

So first of all, I worry about what I will call deliberately planned non-parenthood. As I said, it's quite common for people today to make a lifestyle choice not to want to have children at all.

And our world is so perverse that children are seen by some people as a curse and not as a blessing. As an expensive burden, as an intrusion into your life.

[36 : 36] And in a self-centered world where relationships and sex are just there to serve me or to serve us in our relationship when we've elevated our relationship to the level of our God, then in a sense, why not if that is our thinking?

But you see, as Christians who take the Bible seriously, we could never, ever think like that. Because children, according to the Bible, are always, always a blessing. They're always a gift from God, never a curse from God.

It's childlessness, it's barrenness that is a great grief and a great deprivation. And if parenting is a missionary calling from believers, then it is surely to be anti-mission and anti-kingdom, to be anti-parenting.

So I think we have to conclude that a marriage that is closed in principle to all hope of children is rebellion against God's stated purpose for us, that it is sin.

The German theologian Helmut Tillichke says this, there can be no doubt that a willful and permanent refusal to have children on principle constitutes a reduction of the purpose of marriage and the order of creation a sundering of what God has joined together and therefore something that is not the proper will of God.

[38 : 01] And I think that can be the only conclusion if we take Scripture seriously. Now let me say quickly that there may be exceptions to that, where in principle, of course, a couple is open to the hope of family, but where certain circumstances in their case mean that it's godly wisdom to refrain from having children.

It might be health problems that would make a pregnancy just so dangerous as to be unacceptable. It may be some carrying some terrible genetic disease. It may be just an issue of advanced age.

There may be a number of things. But that is quite different because such people very much agree in principle that parenting is desirable, that it's good. They would want it, but it's just that in their particular case, very sadly often, it can't be.

But in essence, deliberate non-parenthood does seem to be, for the Bible, very contrary to what God's plan and purpose is for human marriage.

Well then, what about planned parenthood, what I would call proper family planning? That's very, very different from planned non-parenthood. This is the question, can faithful Christians take into their own control the management of their own fertility?

[39 : 22] The Roman Catholic Church essentially says, no, you must leave it all to nature. And some evangelical Christians would similarly feel rather difficult about that issue as well. So what can we say about that?

Lots of things, but let me just make two points. First of all, the Roman Catholic view is bound up with all sorts of conceptions of natural law that really has more to do with medieval philosophy than the teaching of the Bible.

He wants to say that every single act of sexual union must be open to procreation because you cannot separate the personal aim of personal union in sex from the aim of procreation in the sexual act.

You don't need to think long before you realize that view is full of problems. I mean, for one thing, is it realistic? Is it at all real to say that the aim of procreation is always equally uppermost in people's minds in the midst of the sexual arousal of intercourse?

That's a preposterous thing to say. But more importantly, it really just reduces the whole relational and unifying aspect of sexual intimacy down to mere biology.

[40 : 34] It means that mere individual sexual acts themselves are the only things that matter, forgets the whole context of a chaste and exclusive relationship in an ongoing way.

Surely, it is possible to honor and value and very much hope for the blessing of children within a marriage without necessarily seeing every single sexual act as having to be open to procreation.

So that's the first thing. The second point is this. Again, Helmut Thieliker makes a very helpful and a very necessary distinction between what we might call the order of nature and the order of creation.

Some Christians worry, you see. They say, well, aren't we just interfering with nature by using contraception? Shouldn't we just trust God? But God created man as a distinct creature within creation, not just under nature, not to be controlled by nature, but indeed to have dominion over nature and to be the controller of nature, under God's commands and rules, of course.

And since the fall, that also involves, doesn't it, working against the curse that has caused God's good world to be in bondage to decay. So, for example, you don't get up in the morning and say to yourself, well, shall I put clothes on today before I go to work or shall I just leave it to nature?

[41 : 58] I mean, if you do that, you'll probably be arrested before you get to work, and rightly so. But when you cut your leg, you don't just say to yourself, well, shall I leave this to nature or God's providence?

You put a bandage on your leg, of course you do. Well, the same goes for all of life, doesn't it, including planning and managing fertility.

Tillica says, letting things go as they come would not be the responding and responsible attitude appropriate to the claim of the order of creation, but only a bondage to nature camouflaged by religion.

See, and so we seek to be responsible stewards of creation and to live serving the kingdom of God in all things, including parenting. There's nothing necessarily wrong with planning our families and doing so responsibly.

Indeed, in a fallen world, there are so many factors that make life more complicated than we'd like it to be, that very often that planning requires a lot of real wisdom. So we needn't fear planning families provided that we are driven by godly and right attitudes to serve the kingdom of Christ in this, as in every other aspect of our life, not just to serve our own selfish desires and our own comfort.

[43 : 19] And we need to challenge ourselves about that. Is our use of contraception godly, or is it just selfish? I can't tell that, but you can. You have to ask yourself. And we must, because whatever is not from faith to serve God is sin.

But if we're seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then we are surely given liberty to wisely steward the task of parenting. There's nothing wrong with planning the size of your family insofar as you can, provided you're open to God surprising you, and he sometimes does surprise you.

Some people can cope with having lots of children, and they want to. Others just can't for all kinds of reasons. It might be irresponsible for them to have a large family. And it's not wrong to plan.

It's not wrong to plan the size of your family, provided decisions are made in faith. Seeking children is a blessing, not out of selfishness, not out of self-serving.

Nor is there anything wrong, I think, in planning the timing of parenthood. Again, as long as it is a matter of faith and godliness and the worship of God, not of unbelief and ungodliness and the selfish worship of yourself.

[44 : 35] And both those attitudes are possible, aren't they? We have to ask ourselves. So one couple might desperately want lots and lots of kids and want them straight away, and there's nothing wrong in that.

But, on the other hand, they need to ask themselves, don't they, is this wise? Maybe they're both still students. They've got no money at all. They've got to pass exams if they're ever going to get a job and be able to support a family. Maybe the wise thing is, well, wait a little while until you can do it sensibly.

On the other hand, another couple might be putting off children for years and years and years. That's much more likely today, I think. Well, they need to ask themselves, do we really need all this time to get used to marriage, all this time to accrue enough money to support a family and so on?

Is my attitude really godly or is it just selfish? Maybe you're not seeing parenting as the blessing and the responsibility that God wants you to have. Maybe you're much more affected by our worldly culture than you think.

And it's so common today, isn't it, especially to hear women saying, oh, I want time for me. I want time for my career. I want time for all these other things. And then later on, when I've done all these things, I'll have babies.

[45 : 46] And the trouble is that later on, it may not nearly be so easy as you would like it to be. Well, friends, all of these things, all of these things need careful godly thinking.

We need to give serious consideration to the Bible's view of what parenting is for. It is for the glory of the kingdom of God. That's its purpose.

So that purpose must guide both our practice of parenthood and, indeed, our planning of parenthood. It's a missionary task. We seek to bring to birth in order to nurture in faith, in order to bring to fruitful service within the kingdom of God.

That's the way of faith for Christian family life. So let's rejoice in that. And let's encourage one another in this task, whether we ourselves are parents or not, so that as a church, we will be a church where parenting is for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Where parenting is the greater glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a sovereign, even over these intimate and personal affairs of our lives.

[47 : 12] For some of us, no doubt, these things are very hard and even painful to think about, far less to talk about. But we need your help, Lord, and we need one another to encourage us in this task that you have given us as your people.

For those who are married and those who are parents and shall be will be helped by one another and by your spirit working through one another as we apply your gospel to each other's lives.

That we might do in this, as in all things, to live for your glory and for the furtherance of your gospel of grace. So help us, Lord, in our weakness.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.