

# OpenTheo

## The Case for Kids

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

Too often Christian leaders lay impossible burdens on their people, insisting that they solve a host of social ills and become experts in a thousand different areas, forgetting to assure them that to get married, raise children in the church, and stay married is a life well lived.

In this episode of Life and Books and Everything, Kevin reads from the article he wrote for First Things where he makes the case that the most significant thing happening in the world may very well be a thing that is not happening: Men and women are not having children, and how Christians ought to respond.

### **Transcript**

[Music] Greetings and salutations. This is Kevin DeYoung, Life and Books and Everything. Today I'm reading an article in First Things.

You can check out First Things Online or subscribe to the Print Edition. Well worth looking into the leading journal of public thought. This article I'm going to talk about.

This article I wrote is entitled The Case for Kids. The most significant thing happening in the world may very well be a thing that is not happening. Men and women are not having children.

The biblical logic has been reversed and the barren womb has said enough. The paradigmatic affliction of the Old Testament is now the great desire of nations. If Rachel wanted children more than life itself, our generation seems to have concluded that nothing gets in the way of life more than children.

True human beings are reproducing but in most countries not fast enough to replace themselves. Measuring total fertility rate TFR is not an exact science so the numbers vary from source to source but the trends are undeniable. Outside of Africa which is home to 41 of the 50 most fertile nations the planet faces a bleak demographic future.

Many major European nations such as Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Spain have a TFR of the world. TFR of 1.5 births per woman or lower. Disasterously below the replacement rate of 2.1. Italy's future is especially grim as that country has one of the lowest TFRs in the world.

Just 1.22. Virtually every country in Europe, including the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Finland and Denmark has a TFR below 1.8. Only France with the TFR of 2.03 comes close to the replacement rate. Decline is on its way. The Russian population is already contracting.

Germany's population is on pace to shrink from 83 million to around 70 million over the next 30 years. If trends do not reverse Europe's population will plummet from 750 million today to less than 500 million by the end of the century. The numbers for East Asia are even worse.

Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and Taiwan each have a TFR around 1.0. South Korea's is 0.81. These countries make aging and shrinking Japan with its TFR of 1.37 look almost vibrant. And whatever military and economic power resides in China, increasingly children do not. Despite the replacement of the notorious one child policy by a two child policy in 2016 and then a three child policy in 2021, China's birth rate has continued to tumble.

As recently as 2019, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences predicted that China's population would peak in 2029. But the decline has already started. This year, for the first time since the Great Famine 1959 to 61, China's population has shrunk.

By just over 1% since 2021, according to the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. For many years, the United States appeared to be an exception to the rule of declining birth rates in the industrialized world. In 2007, the United States had a TFR of 2.1, whereas the figure for the European Union was below 1.6. But since then, the US birth rate has fallen by 20% to as low as 1.73, according to some estimates.

What looked like American exceptionalism less than a generation ago now looks like mere delay. At no time in history have people been having fewer children. In most countries, the number of births per woman is well below the replacement rate, and even in countries with a high TFR, such as those of Sub-Saharan Africa, the rate is dropping.

The human race seems to have grown tired of itself. Reasons for declining fertility are no doubt many and varied. Surely some couples want to have more children but are unable to do so.

Others struggle with economic pressures or health limitations, but fertility does not plummet worldwide without deeper issues at play, especially when people around the world are objectively richer, healthier, and afforded more conveniences than at any time

in human history. Though individuals make their choices for many reasons, as a species we are suffering from a profound spiritual sickness. A metaphysical malaise in which children seem a burden on our time and a drag on our pursuit of happiness.

Our malady is a lack of faith, and nowhere is the disbelief more startling than the countries that once made up Christendom. "I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven," God promised a delighted Abraham. Today, in the lands of Abraham's offspring, that blessing strikes most as a curse.

In 1968, Paul Erlich predicted worldwide famine and a quote "race to oblivion" in his book, *The Population Bomb*. Fifty years later, the bomb has not detonated. Today, we must fear population bust rather than boom.

The list of very bad things, as Jonathan last calls the consequences of declining fertility in his 2013 book, *What to Expect When No One's Expecting*, is long and depressing. An aging population, a shrinking workforce, a declining tax base, a decrease in technological and industrial dynamism, difficulty in finding a spouse, empty buildings and crumbling infrastructure, unfunded entitlements, and a general disquiet as more and more people get older and sicker with fewer people to care for them. Some future president might be forced to coin the campaign slogan, "It's midnight in America." Last emphasizes economic and national concerns, the sort of development that gets the attention of presidents and parliaments, but the problems with declining fertility and the accompanying collapse of the family go much deeper.

Whitaker Chambers was led to reject atheism by studying the miracle of his infant daughter's ear, as he watched his daughter eat in her high chair, and involuntary and unwanted thought entered his mind. "Those intricate perfect ears," he said, "could have been created only by immense design. Faith can give us a heart for children, but children can also give us the eyes of faith." When family formation fails, so does the inculcation of faith.

This is Mary Eberstadt's argument in "How the West Really Lost God." Family decline is not merely a consequence of religious decline, it is also a cause of it. Religious people are more inclined toward family life, but it is also the case that something about family life inclines people toward religion. There is no need to prioritize chicken or egg, it is the indissoluble connection that matters.

The fortunes of faith and family rise and fall together. There are many plausible reasons for this connection. The Christian story is set within the matrix of family, from the expectation of Eve's snake crusher to the promised seed of the patriarch's to great David's greater son to the birth of the Christ child to Mary with Joseph at her side.

The presence of children often drives parents to church, whether for help and raising them or because the experience of creating children helps us apprehend our creator.

Sacrifices required in parenting are the same kinds of sacrifices required in the life of Christian discipleship. The connection between faith and family cuts in the opposite direction as well.

As Eversstadt observes, "In an age when many people live lives that contradict the traditional Christian moral code, the mere existence of that code becomes a lightning rod for criticism and by two parations, which further drives some people away from the church." In other words, if your parents were divorced or you grew up with two mommies or you were currently sleeping with your girlfriend or you were not particularly enamored of the thought of monogamy and raising children, the Christian faith, which has always been a scandal for sinners, carries an additional offense, which previous generations did not have to overcome. People do not like to be told they are wrong, Eversstadt notes, or that those whom they love have done wrong, but Christianity cannot help sending that message. No doubt secularization is undermining family formation.

Just as surely though, the collapse of the married intact childbearing family has made the Christian faith harder to swallow. The biggest plausibility structure for faith is not intellectual, but familial. Carl C. Zimmerman's "Family and Civilization" (1947) is remembered as a book about family types, but it is fundamentally a book about fertility.

Borrowing from Augustine and Aquinas, Zimmerman argues that marriage has historically had three functions, pearls, feed-ass, and sacramental. That is to say, the good of marriage and of family life more broadly depends on childbearing, sexual fidelity, and the permanence of the marriage bond, whether one holds to a Catholic view of the sacraments or not. Peter Lombard ordered the marital goods somewhat differently, placing fidelity before childbearing, but Zimmerman observes that the ordering of Augustine and Aquinas emphasizes childbearing, or prior to marriage the intention of it, as the first and determinative step in the development of marital marriage.

Without children, or an openness to children, the other two commitments lose their moral and logical coherence. Already in 1947, Zimmerman saw that the atomistic family, the family based on individualistic assumptions about happiness in the role of marriage, would lead to rapid and groundless divorce that looser family structures would be proffered as solutions to family problems only to make those problems worse. That the stigmas inhibiting adultery would deteriorate, that fertility would decrease, and that sexual perversion would be normalized.

He also predicted that the decline of fertility among intellectuals would embolden them to challenge the validity of marriage itself, that it would take two generations, slowed by immigration, for family decay to become evident, and that the Christian church would be the only cultural institution capable of encouraging a view of family grounded in something more than personal fulfillment. One popular view holds that the birth control

pill led inexorably to declines in fertility. In his 2018 book *Birth Control in American Modernity*, Trent McNamara examines newspaper accounts in the rhetoric of popular moralists in the first half of the 20th century, to show that "natalism declined in accordance with changing norms more than an account of new technologies." Americans did not decide to have fewer children because they had run out of land, or because industrialization had made children less valuable as farm hands.

Those common accounts make little sense, as if children came out of the womb ready to milk cows and did not need to be fed and clothed and looked after. Americans started having fewer children for reasons at once simpler and more comprehensive. Combination of moral pragmatism and liberal social optimism did the trick for most.

20th century Americans became convinced that the new technologies would give their fewer children better lives than they themselves enjoyed. They saw birth control as prudent economic altruism. They prioritized observable results over first principles.

Above all, McNamara insists, they believe that fewer children meant more security and more happiness. Almost a century later, that moral calculus has probably changed very little. The new wrinkle in our day is the perceived threat of climate catastrophe.

I recently read remarks from an elite liberal journalist to the effect that the number one question people ask him after speeches and at dinners is whether they should have kids at all, knowing that kids will contribute to the climate crisis. Quite apart from debates, we might have about the science of, or solution to, climate change, the intellectual assumptions behind the question are profoundly anti-human. The Bible encourages us to see the beauty of God's creation, and the Bible is not indifferent to the frogs and dogs and fireflies.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. The Bible's narrative arc is not geocentric as if the redemptive story were mainly about Earth, or biocentric as if it were mainly about plants and animals. The Bible's story is anthropocentric.

God sent his son to save those made in his image. What's more, as those made in his image, we are not an alien species on the planet, malignant tumors that only devour and destroy. We are sub-creators.

We are meant to tend the garden. We can solve problems and make the world more inhabitable. If the climate crisis is as dire as we are told, lasting solutions will come from the efforts of our children, not their elimination.

It is striking to note how different our version of the good life is from Isaiah's eschatological vision. In Isaiah 65, the prophet unveils the coming of the new heavens and new earth. The vision includes elements all people would cherish, peace, prosperity, protection.

But the vision is also surprisingly domestic. We hear of children no longer dying in infancy, and children born for blessing instead of calamity. We read of building houses and inhabiting them, of planting vineyards and eating their fruit.

The picture is familial and generational, with an old man, a young man, an infant, and descendants together with their parents. Today's version of the good life is more individualistic and more consumeristic. The good life has migrated from the home to the marketplace, to places of entertainment, and to the inner recesses of the self.

Blessing is found in escaping the home, in travel, in consumption, in freedom from the bonds of domesticity. My aim is not to make a theological case for or against birth control. The predicament we are in as a nation does not require Christians to eschew every form of family planning.

Even with nine children, I am not a fertility maximalist. My wife has been blessed with relatively easy pregnancies, easy for me to say, and we have more household space and household income than many other families. Our sacrifices are not what a couple with a gaggle of children living in a squallet apartment in New York City in 1930 would have made.

I do not urge Christian couples to have as many children as possible, but I do urge them to have more children. How many more, I cannot say? Many couples must weigh risks pertaining to age, illness, miscarriage, or difficult pregnancies. But more than two kids, and more kids than you think you can handle, might be a good place to start.

The fertility gap between religious and non-religious Americans has been growing for two decades and now is wider than ever. The gap is not enough to offset the defections of the nuns from the ranks of the church, but it could, if religious Americans increase from barely hitting the replacement rate to about 2.4 children each. In other words, the difference between three kids and two kids, provided the culture of faith is thick enough in the home and in the church to keep those kids among the faithful, could be the difference between an America in which religion is declining and an America in which it is on the rise.

Unfortunately, contemporary American life does not make raising lots of children easy. I'm reminded of the line from the comedian Jim Gaffigan, a Catholic in *Father of Five*. Big families are like waterbed stores.

They used to be everywhere. Now they're just weird. Parking lots and parking garages are not made for 15 passenger vans.

My family almost never eats out, for which many restaurant-goers are thankful. Flying all of us anywhere without a lot of planning and saving is crazy expensive and just plain crazy. Though the vast majority of people in our church-dominated lives have been

extremely supportive of our big family, occasionally we get a vibe from strangers that communicates, "Are you foolish or just ignorant?" When our kids attended public school, we constantly heard that stories and examples in the classroom needed to represent the diversity of our community, which always meant more stories about LGBTQ families never about big families going to church.

A culture with declining fertility will become accustomed to smaller and smaller families. The feedback loop is hard to interrupt. With fewer children, parents become more child-centric, and as parents become more child-centric, they do not see how they could possibly have more than one or two children.

Even good parents, perhaps especially good parents, are susceptible to the assumptions of a Kindergarky, where children rule the roost and moms and dads are expected to be all things to their children. How can parents have more than a couple kids if each child needs from the parent, a constant companion, a camp director, a gourmet chef, a vacation planner, a coach, and an omnipresent safety net? To say nothing of the gargantuan car seats that must be installed and uninstalled, the slew of forms that must be filled out at every stage of life in the cost of raising a child in an age when young people are expected to consume much and contribute little. It takes a stubborn other-worldliness for parents to dare to give their children more by giving them less.

Important as fertility is for the health and existence of a nation, pro-natalist governments have had little to show for their interventions, when Japan sounded the demographic alarm in 1990 and established an Inter-Ministry Committee on, quote, "creating a sound environment for bearing and raising children." Its TFR was 1.54. After 30 years of angel plans, child care leave acts, and a plus-one plan, and a next-generation law, Japan's TFR stands at 1.36. This is not to say that governments should not enact pro-family tax policies and legislative priorities. I'm all for making it easier and less expensive to raise children. Governments can help people to have the children they want, but they have not proven capable of convincing people to have children they do not want.

Part of being a conservative is being realistic about what we can achieve on Earth. The disintegration of the family will not be undone in five years. Maybe 50 if the Lord allows.

Still, we can do our part to promote social health in the here and now, and to sow seeds for a later harvest. To that end, I offer two modest proposals. First, we must put the institution well-being of the family at the center of a renewed conservatism.

One need not agree with all of Yorim Hazoni's critique of classical liberalism to recognize that his proposed rediscovery of the family in conservative thought is long overdue. Many of the philosophical fathers of liberalism were not fathers at all. It's been out to Locke, Hume, Mill, and Bentham were all childless.

In Rousseau abandoned his five children to orphanages. Conservatives must find a way

to defend the God-given rights of the individual while affirming that the exercise of those rights takes place chiefly within the gift of the family. Such a conservatism will not just insist on vaguely defined family values.

It will stand resolute in the conviction that all efforts to redefine the family as something other than a pre-political institution rooted in sex differentiation and procreation will not lead to civilizational health. Second, if we must place the family at the center of our conservatism, it is even more critical that we place it at the center of our lives. Not a God, of course, but one of the very best things God wants us to pursue.

Christian schools should reassess whether they are preparing students just for college and career, or whether they are preparing them also for the family. Pastors and priests should make sure their people know that the most direct path to changing the world starts with changing a diaper. Too often Christian leaders lay impossible burdens on their people, insisting that they solve a host of social ills and become experts in a thousand different areas forgetting to assure them that to get married, raise children in the church, and stay married is a life well lived.

Women in particular need to know that motherhood is not a lesser calling, an interruption in the real business of life, or an impediment to their being truly purposeful, which usually means being more like men. Just once I'd like to see a Christian college spotlight a stay-at-home mom in its alumni magazine. From the way Christian schools market themselves, you would never imagine that most of their women graduates become mothers or that normal family life is an honorable calling.

Moreover, we must understand marriage as the exchange of duties and obligations, not merely of emotions and experiences. And we must admit, scary as this sounds to me as a parent of four teenagers, that many young men and women should be getting married earlier. The post-war baby boom was actually a marriage boom.

The average size of families did not increase as much as the number of people forming families did. Since 1950, the average age of first marriage for women has increased from just over 20 years old, almost 28. Women are having fewer children in part because they are having fewer married years in which to have children.

And surely for both sexes, resisting the allure of pornography and fornication is not made easier when sexual desires burn hot for 10 or 15 years before marriage is ever considered. The Bible never says, "Thou must finish thine education before marriage" or "backpack through Europe before marriage" or "make time to binge watch Netflix before marriage." The Bible does say that it is better to marry than to burn. Above all, we must believe what the scriptures tell us.

That children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Having children is not for the faint of heart. Kids are expensive.



They are messy and exhausting. They take your time and can break your heart. They probably will never love you as much as you love them.

Let's not be romantic about it. Children are a burden. But they are also one of the greatest earthly blessings.

Have we turned Rachel's cry of desperation on its head? Asking God to keep children from us lest we die to ourselves? The promise to Abraham of Progeny was not his curse and neither is it ours. A man like a warrior with arrows in his hand, a wife like a fruitful vine, and children like olive shoots around the table. These are the Lord's blessings from Zion.

Throughout America and around the world, we see that faith and family stand and fall together. Conservative devoutly religious persons have more children than their liberal and secular counterparts. Even within the Church, mainline denominations have dwindled in part because their members are dying off without faithful children to replace them.

Conservative churches have grown or at least held their own because their parishioners have had babies and kept more of those babies in the fold. The meek will inherit the earth, especially those humble enough to raise children. In the end, having children is not merely an act of dogged obedience or even simply an act of faith.

It's an act of transcendence. When I tell my child as he heads out the door, "Remember you are a de-young." I'm not only exhorting him to act and keeping with our values, I'm sending our family name out into the world, into places where I cannot be and a future too distant for me to reach. "And I will make you a great nation," God told Abraham.

"Then I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing." The Bible is full of genealogies that show that we are a people with a past and a future. When Genesis 5 traces the line from Adam to Noah, the refrain, "And he died" is a reminder of the curse of death, but that each man had a son is a reminder of the promise that comes through birth. The God who has put eternity into our hearts also means to put children into the womb.

We grasp one, we will grasp the other.

[Music]

[buzzing]