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Papers

Towards a biblical mind

# Too many people on Planet Earth?

## Family size and new ethical considerations for Christians

By Matthew Ferguson

### Summary

Having children is being regarded increasingly in Western societies as an optional lifestyle choice; for some, an irresponsible one at that. Climate anxieties, pursuit of personal happiness, and disillusionment with human beings' place on earth have contributed to a cultural shift away from family and children. Population decline looms in much of the world, with potentially drastic economic and relational consequences. This paper considers how the church can respond – and remain distinct – in a world which is turning its back on childrearing as a source of blessing and hope.

### Introduction

'Is it okay to still have children?' So asked Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; a question which would have been unthinkable throughout much of human history. Yet, today, the question is becoming commonplace. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex committed publicly to having no more than two children, citing climate change fears.<sup>1</sup> Sir David Attenborough has become an advocate for limiting population growth, even describing human beings as 'a plague on the earth',<sup>2</sup> and newspapers repeatedly return to the theme of 'overpopulation'.

Such anxieties are not necessarily unfounded. For most readers, it will not seem long ago that the world population hit seven billion (2010), or six billion (1998), or even five billion (1987). It is projected to reach eight billion by this year's end. Many connect recent unusual weather events, such as severe flooding and record heat, with the population explosion and conclude that the world is overpopulated. The ethical considerations around having children have expanded beyond questions of personal circumstances to the very fate of the planet. Meanwhile, many in the West continue to overlook the flipside prospect of population decline, and the drastic impacts it could have on affected societies.

How should Christians respond to these emerging ethical dilemmas? Many, especially of childbearing age, will feel conflicted: should Christians embrace the idea of large families<sup>3</sup> or limit family size to protect the planet? At the same time, any discussion of this topic can be deeply painful for many, especially among those who are unmarried or unable to have children. This paper aims to bring greater clarity to this difficult yet vital subject and, in particular, to help Christians navigate some of the issues which surround starting families in the twenty-first century.

### Childbearing in the Bible

#### *Childbearing is a creation mandate*

In the beginning, having fashioned the heavens and the earth, God placed the crowning glory of his creation in the garden: man and woman. These were the first words the Lord spoke to Adam and Eve: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth' (Genesis 1:28). Human beings, made in the image of a creator God, are likewise to create new life and bring glory to God through filling the earth with divine image-bearers.

1 'Prince Harry won't have more than two children over climate concerns' (31 July 2019; accessed at <[www.news.sky.com](http://www.news.sky.com)>).

2 'David Attenborough – Humans are plague on Earth' (22 January 2013; accessed at <[www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)>).

3 Kevin DeYoung's advocacy of large families has prompted debate: see 'It's time for a new culture war strategy' (17 June 2020; accessed at <[www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org)>).

This 'creation mandate' was given by God to all generations (Genesis 9:1) and will culminate, at the end of days, in 'a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...' (Revelation 7:9).

#### *Childbearing is a source of blessing*

Raising children is, however, not simply a 'mandate', but a source of immense blessing – to parents and the wider church. The Bible speaks of the great joys of parenthood and children. 'Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord... Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!' (Psalm 127:3–5). 'Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their fathers.' (Proverbs 17:6). Indeed, at the level of community and nation, population increase was a mark of God's favour. The Old Testament has, Christopher Ash observes, a 'strong and consistent pro-life orientation... To grow in number is a blessing for God's people, to diminish is judgment.'<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament, children are given a particular welcome into the kingdom (Matthew 19:13–14). Now, the Bible is also clear that the onset of sin has complicated and diminished these joys. Some cannot have children, and for many this is a source of real grief;<sup>5</sup> meanwhile, in some families, fractured relationships can cause anguish and despair (King David's family being just one tragic example).

#### *Childbearing gives us hope for the future*

Throughout the Bible, the creation of new life is anticipated as a dawn of hope in a darkened world. The covenants of God in the Old Testament brim with promises of rescue and salvation through offspring. In the same passage that God multiplies the pains of childbirth, he also vows to bring salvation through a descendant of Eve, who will crush the serpent (Genesis 3:15–16). To Abraham, aged and childless, God pledged to build a nation as numerous as the stars in the sky and sand on the seashore.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that God's salvation plan for mankind is unfolded through the birth of a child (Isaiah 9:6; Luke 2:11). Families, children, relationships: all these have been vitiated by the Fall. Yet God uses these damaged gifts to bring the hope of salvation to the world. As Christ taught, 'When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.' (John 16:21).

#### *The created world is to be stewarded and preserved for future generations*

Within the 'creation mandate', alongside the instruction to 'multiply and fill the earth', there is a 'stewardship mandate': human beings are to subdue and have dominion over the earth. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden 'to work it and

keep it' (Genesis 2:15). People have been given the privileged responsibility of tending to God's creation: to cultivate it and bequeath it. This responsibility can mean many things. Taken most literally, Christians are to care for the planet, its flora and fauna, as a gift from God for all generations. We should enjoy the fruits of all creation, but not for mere exploitation or perpetual economic growth. In addition, Christians are to pass on a proper inheritance to future generations (Proverbs 13:22). The privilege of raising children is accompanied by a duty to steward the earth as a proper abode for future inhabitants. If such considerations collide, as Christopher Ash notes, 'it may indeed be a matter of Christian freedom for a couple to make responsible decisions about the number of children they intend to have...'<sup>7</sup>

#### *A Christian has a new allegiance to the family of God*

Despite all the blessings and hopes arising from bearing and raising children, the calling to 'go... and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19) has a greater claim on the Christian. The death and resurrection of Christ, and the inauguration of the New Covenant, heralded a kingdom of spiritual renewal. As Paul explains, 'This means that it is not the children of flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise...' (Romans 9:8). In the New Testament, membership of God's kingdom is no longer through birth and circumcision, but by being born again in the Spirit (John 3:5–8). Jesus, when approached by his family, taught that 'whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.' (Matthew 12:48–50). How does this influence Christians' understanding of 'filling the earth'? Like Jesus, Paul, though

he bore no physical children, led countless people to spiritual rebirth. The apostle regarded his singleness as a gift, as it allowed him to pour his life into making disciples (1 Corinthians 7:8). So, while marrying and having children remains an honoured way of life for Christians, and instructing children in the faith is as much a part of the Christian mission as evangelism, we must not idolise family. Our first allegiance is to Christ and his kingdom (Luke 14:26),

and Christians who are childless are equally, sometimes more, involved in enlarging God's family.

With these principles in mind, we turn now to some contemporary debates around population and childbearing.

#### **Climate crisis?**

The wide-ranging debates around climate change, and weighing up all the proposed responses, are beyond the scope of this paper; the focus here is whether taking deliberate action to scale back, first population growth, and then absolute population levels is an appropriate or effective response.

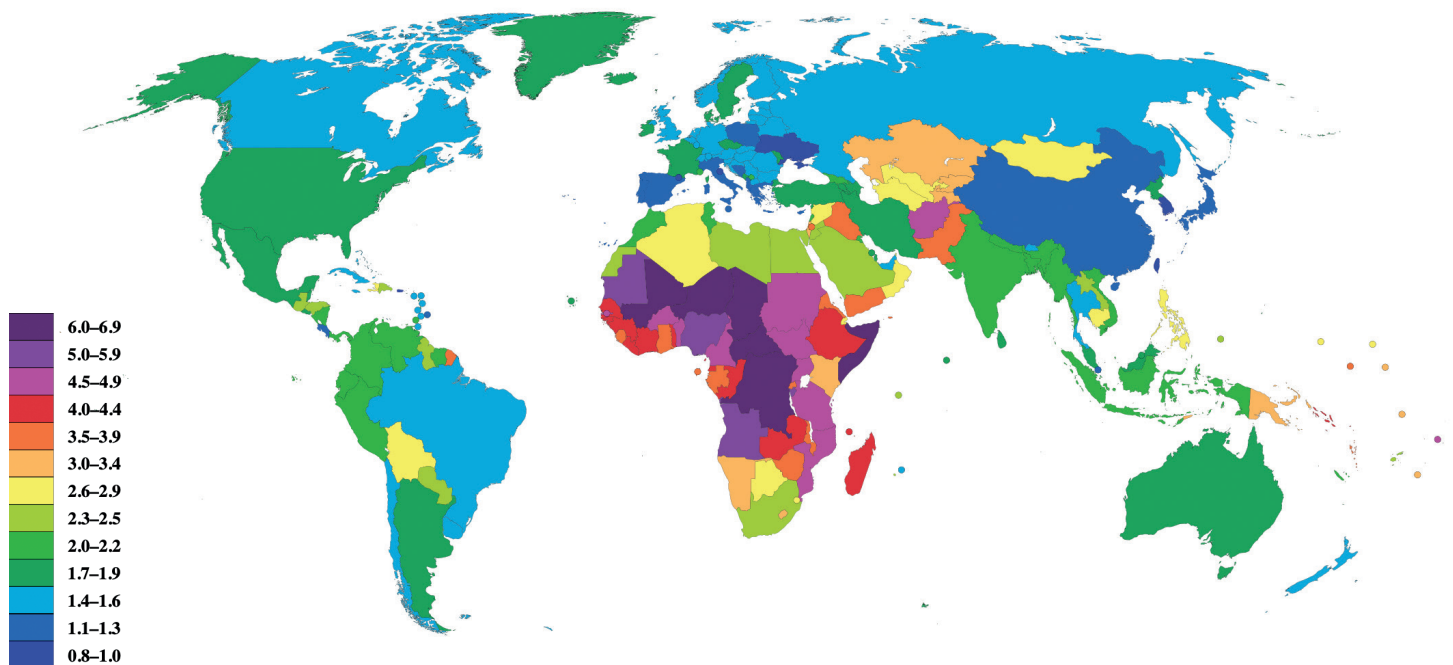
While it took the whole of history until 1800 for the population to lumber to 1 billion, the agricultural and industrial revolutions meant that within two hundred years another seven billion had been added. A simultaneous and

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Lev. 26:9, 22; Deut. 1:10; 7:13; 10:22; 13:17.

<sup>5</sup> The Bible recognises, with compassion, the griefs of those who cannot, for whatever reason, expect children (1 Sam. 1:8; Gen. 30).

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 15:4–5; Gen. 17:4–8; Gen. 22:17.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (IVP, 2008), p.183.



Map of countries by fertility rate (2020) according to the Population Reference Bureau<sup>21</sup>

astonishing rise in living standards has meant that people across the world also consume far more, materially, than their ancestors.<sup>8</sup> Together, these developments have caused a dramatic rise in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions since the late nineteenth century, and the concern is that, if not brought under control, global temperature could rise 3–5°C on average, rendering many parts of the populated world uninhabitable.<sup>9</sup>

Although a matter of ongoing debate among climate scientists,<sup>10</sup> a significant body of opinion has come to regard the reduction of the global population as necessary to avert climate change's worst impacts. From a 2017 survey asking 50 Nobel laureates about the biggest threats to mankind, the most frequent answer was 'population rise/environmental degradation' (one-third of respondents). No other issue except nuclear war (23 per cent) garnered more than a 10 per cent response.<sup>11</sup> Advocates of population control believe we have exceeded the 'carrying capacity' of earth, and are now depleting its resources. One study, having considered factors like sufficient wealth, human rights and biodiversity preservation, calculated the earth's carrying capacity at 1.5–2 billion;<sup>12</sup> another that, for everyone to enjoy the lifestyle of an average European, the world population should be reduced to 3.1 billion.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the entrepreneur Elon Musk believes the world can sustain a population far larger than today's.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in their recent book *Superabundance*, Marian Tupy and Gale Pooley demonstrate that our modern lives of abundance have been achieved through ever greater innovation and efficiency in deploying resources.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, the idea that 'the greatest impact individuals can have in fighting climate change is to

have one fewer child...' is gaining traction.<sup>16</sup>

However, serious questions must be asked of those who promote population reduction as a response. First, for Christians, fatalistic and doom-laden language – such as 'there is no Planet B' and '12 years to save the planet' – jars both with our awareness that 'concerning that day and hour no one knows' (Matthew 24:36) and that, until that day, God has undertaken to preserve 'seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter' (Genesis 8:22). This is not a call for complacency; disasters can happen, and have happened – just consider the Old Testament prophecies which were fulfilled. However, although many Christians will be persuaded of the need for climate action, the context within which decisions are made should be one of confidence in God's commitment to our world, rather than alarmism and hysteria.

Secondly, the human capacity for creativity and innovation should not be underestimated. There is a long history of doomsday predictions on population which have proved wildly wrong: in 1798 Thomas Malthus predicted that population increases would always be reversed by starvation and war; in 1968 Paul Ehrlich, coiner of the phrase 'population bomb', claimed the world could no longer feed itself and four billion would starve to death.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, their error was to discount the capacity of human advances to overcome obstacles. Although today's climate forecasts may seem daunting, promising innovations in carbon capture, cattle emissions reductions, small-scale nuclear reactors, and the distant prospect of nuclear fusion energy, give us reason to hope that humanity will more than meet these daunting challenges.

8 Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now* (Penguin, 2018), p.82.

9 'Effects of climate change' (accessed at <www.metoffice.gov.uk>).

10 For arguments for consumption reduction rather than population control, see <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/climate-change-and-population>.

11 'Population growth, environmental degradation and climate change' (accessed at <www.un.org>).

12 G. C. Daily, A. H. Ehrlich & P. R. Ehrlich, 'Optimum human population size', *Popul. Environ. A.J. Interdiscip. Stud.* 15 (1994) 469–475.

13 T. P. Lianos, & A. Psiridis, 'Sustainable welfare and optimum population size', *Environ. Dev. Sustain.* 18, (2016) 1679–1699.

14 'Elon Musk Believes Earth Can Sustain A Global Population Higher Than Current Figures' (6 June 2022; accessed at <www.republicworld.com>).

15 Marian L. Tupy and Gale L. Pooley, *Superabundance: The Story of Population Growth, Innovation, and Human Flourishing on an Infinitely Bountiful Planet* (Cato Institute, 2022).

16 'Want to fight climate change? Have fewer children' (12 July 2017; accessed at <www.theguardian.com>). The article adds: 'researchers calculated [that this] equated to a reduction of 58 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> for each year of a parent's life'.

17 Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, ch. 7.

In the meantime, Christians may do well to consider how their lifestyles affect the wellbeing of the planet, its people and wildlife, and to exercise the virtues of thrift, stewardship and generosity. However, if the raising of children resonates with the theme of hope, might not children, brought up in the instruction of the Lord, grow into adults who can contribute to tackling the world's material and spiritual challenges?

Thirdly, as we discuss below, the call to limit population in an 'overpopulated' world, for the sake of the planet, is too simplistic: it overlooks the complex pattern of rising – and falling – population in different parts of the globe, the challenges posed by shrinking populations, and the range of factors – economic, social, and cultural – which affect family size.

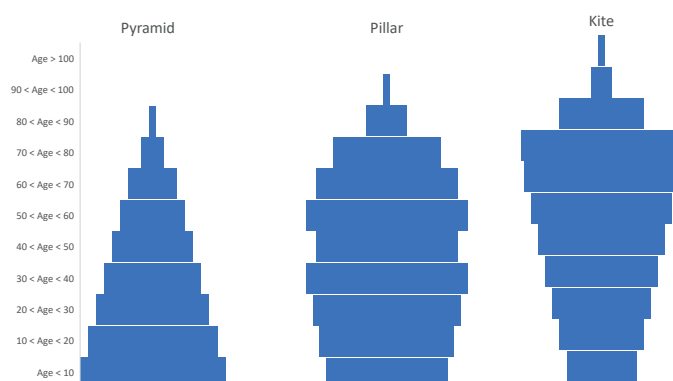
## Social catastrophe?

The world's population will continue to grow based on the strength of Sub-Saharan Africa's demographic trajectory, caused primarily by a sharp fall in infant mortality and an increase in life expectancy. As Johan Norberg remarks, population growth 'happens not because people in poor countries start breeding like rabbits but because they stop dying like flies.'<sup>18</sup> However, two-thirds of people today are living in countries where the total fertility rate (TFR) is already below the replacement rate (i.e. the average number of babies per woman needed to keep the population stable) of 2.1 per woman. In these countries, the indigenous<sup>19</sup> population is therefore projected to decline and, in some, has already begun to do so.<sup>20</sup> The map on page 3 shows how widespread this surprising phenomenon is: countries tinted any shade of blue or darker green will not be producing enough children to sustain their population levels through births alone.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, some countries have already begun to contract. Japan's population fell by a million between 2010–2015 – a decline that shows no sign of slowing.<sup>22</sup> Birth rates have fallen most precipitously in East Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe. Already the lowest in the world for several years, South Korea's TFR keeps dropping, slumping to 0.81 per woman in 2021.<sup>23</sup> Other countries, outside Africa, will soon feel the pinch. For many, the predictions are momentous: a 2020 *Lancet* study projected that 23 countries can expect their population to halve by 2100, including Thailand, Spain and China.<sup>24</sup> In societies accustomed to population growth, what will decline mean?

A fall in TFR leads, first, to a fall in the number of children and the indigenous population and, second, to an ageing society. These two occurrences, in combination, will

drastically reorient society and its capacity to sustain itself – economically, socially and existentially. The population profile of an ageing society transitions from 'pyramid' to 'pillar' to 'kite'.<sup>25</sup>



What will a country with fewer and fewer young people and more and more elderly people look like? From a fiscal perspective, a higher proportion of elderly people generates a vast increase in public spending, in particular for pensions, healthcare and social care. Pressure on public expenditure will create problems, with challenging discussions around appropriate medical treatment near end of life and the risk of old-age poverty.<sup>26</sup> Soaring costs for provision will fall on the shoulders of fewer workers. Countries with rising populations enjoy a 'demographic dividend', a period with a high ratio of workers to dependants (represented by the 'pyramid') but, over the long term, countries with a falling population suffer a 'demographic deficit'. South Korea's age dependency ratio, already high at 37 dependants per 100 people in 2017, is expected to rise to an astonishing 117.8 by 2065.<sup>27</sup> In other words, dependants will outnumber providers.

The problems of demographic decline are not limited to economics. The 'epidemic of loneliness' already found among the elderly can be expected to worsen through shortage of care providers and relatives.<sup>28</sup> The increasing burden falling on younger generations may stir intergenerational resentment: in China, the phrase '4-2-1 family' has come to describe, with pity, the magnitude of duties faced by adults caring for their parents, in-laws and child. Political fissures will emerge, and have begun to emerge, when the young are consistently outvoted by the old.<sup>29</sup> Tensions are reflected in new and uncomplimentary slurs against the old, such as the Japanese term '*rougai*' which refers to 'problems caused by the elderly'.

The solution of Western governments has been to plug vacancies for essential workers through mass immigration.<sup>30</sup>

18 Ibid., p.125.

19 'Indigenous' here meaning the non-migrant population of a country.

20 'Are population fears unfounded?' (19 July 2022; <[www.theweek.co.uk](http://www.theweek.co.uk)>).

21 This diagram (accessed 19 October 2022) appears at <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total\\_fertility\\_rate#/media/File:Total\\_Fertility\\_Rate\\_Map\\_by\\_Country.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_fertility_rate#/media/File:Total_Fertility_Rate_Map_by_Country.svg)>, credited to Korakys, and is reproduced, with minor adjustments, under Creative Commons CC BY SA 4.0.

22 'Japan's population declines for first time since 1920s – official census' (26 February 2016; accessed at <[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)>).

23 'Korea's fertility rate drops even further to 0.81 in 2021' (23 February 2022; accessed at <[www.koreatimes.co.kr](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr)>).

24 S. E. Vollset *et al.*, 'Fertility, mortality, migration, and population scenarios for 195 countries and territories from 2017 to 2100: a forecasting analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study' (*The Lancet*, 14 July 2020) DOI: <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30677-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30677-2)>.

25 These stylised population profiles are based on data for Japan for 1955 and 2005, and forecasts for 2055: see 'The old and the older: Japan is ageing faster than any country in history' (19 November 2010; accessed at <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>).

26 'Prolonging life at all costs: quantity versus quality' (*The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 15 February 2016). DOI: <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(16\)00059-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(16)00059-X)>.

27 'S. Korea's dependency ratio to become highest in OECD scale by 2065' (28 March 2019; accessed at <[www.pulsenews.co.kr](http://www.pulsenews.co.kr)>).

28 J. E. Davis, 'The Epidemic of Loneliness' (9 November 2021; accessed at <[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)>).

29 Paul Morland, *Tomorrow's People: The Future of Humanity in Ten Numbers* (Picador, 2022), p.140.

30 Since 2004, net migration to the UK has been running at over 200,000 entrants per year.



Whatever the pros and cons of migration in the ‘host’ country, resorting to large-scale immigration can turn into a zero-sum game, one in which poorer countries are deprived of essential workers and families are scattered.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, while in the past, Europe welcomed labourers from countries with surplus populations, very soon, few countries outside Africa will be able to make such provision. In an age of widespread population decline, attracting workers from overseas will create as many problems as it solves, and may become untenable.<sup>32</sup>

How should Christians react towards population decline – looming or present – in their societies? Although many will be concerned about the trajectories of their societies, Christians are not to be vexed but to stay faithful to God’s word. Instead of being anxious about tomorrow, we believe in a sovereign God whose restorative mission for the world cannot be thwarted by climate crisis or demographic decline. Whether in a world with 10 billion people or 10 million, our calling is the same: to make disciples of all nations. Christians, seeking to live distinctly from the world, should support childrearing and nurturing within the church community. Where intergenerational ties are hampered, Christians should model right relationships through mutual love and assistance between generations (Ephesians 6:1–4; 1 Timothy 5:1–8). Indeed, if demographic decline makes the state incapable of providing for people in old age, it may well be that those with larger families (or those connected to the church family) will find material and relational sustenance from their children (or their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters in Christ) – as, in many cases, they already do.

### Cultural forces

In historical terms, we find ourselves in uncharted territory. How did we get to a world where, in some cases, the average number of births per woman is less than one?

The question of why young people in many countries are having fewer children today is a vast, complex topic. Government policy can play some role in demographics, notably in forcing population reduction (such as in China’s one-child policy), and potentially by incentivising growth (such as through Hungary’s generous parental benefits schemes). However, generally, population trends spring less from government demographic policy and more from other factors; to date, the impact of state intervention to support increases in family size has been quite limited.<sup>33</sup> The role of economics is undeniable: record house prices, stagnant wages, high childcare costs, the need for two incomes in many households, student debt – all serve to price parents out of having children, or to delay the age at which they can

afford them.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, a ‘materialist’ explanation for long-term trends towards lower birth-rates – that is, that they are an inevitable consequence of transition from agrarian to economically developed societies – had been, until recently, demographic orthodoxy.

However, recent developments reveal the insufficiency of this theory. Firstly, economically poorer countries, such as Thailand, are seeing plummeting TFRs. Secondly, clear distinctions are emerging between groups within society which are and are not having children. For instance, data from places like Israel and the United States reveal that those from religious and politically conservative backgrounds have far larger families than the national average.<sup>35</sup> As Paul Morland observes, we are seeing a ‘decoupling of population and economics’,<sup>36</sup> and that, ‘instead, fertility is increasingly linked to attitudes, ideology and religion.’<sup>37</sup>

In a 2021 Pew US poll of adults without children, some respondents offered specific reasons for remaining childless. Most commonly cited were medical reasons (19 per cent), financial reasons (17 per cent), having no partner (15 per cent) and age (10 per cent).<sup>38</sup> However, more than half (56 per cent) of respondents replied, simply, that ‘they just don’t want to have children’. Although the climate crisis is often cited as a reason why people refrain from starting families, Pew received this response from only 5 per cent.<sup>39</sup> If climate change is not – after all – the primary motivation behind the reluctance to become a parent, what is? The answer, in large part, lies in the impact of cultural forces on people’s values.

The last sixty years have seen a transformation in the moral and cultural landscape across the West. Technology has been a major impetus: the innovation of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s heralded a sexual revolution. As Glynn Harrison explains, ‘At a stroke, sex was uncoupled from childbearing and all the responsibilities that go with it. People’s bodies were their own, and they were free to do with them as they wished.’<sup>40</sup> This went hand in hand with a new emphasis on consumer choice, the pursuit of personal happiness, and the dream of ‘having it all’. Christine Percheski, a sociology professor, argues that the falling birth rate is ‘about women having access to education and employment opportunities. It’s about the rise in individualism. It’s about the rise in women’s autonomy and a change in values.’<sup>41</sup> In this new cultural landscape, men likewise find it easier to sidestep relational, and parental, commitments once fostered by marriage and community expectations.

When assessing these social changes of the twentieth century, we must take the good with the bad. It is excellent that both men and women are able to make fulfilling choices in their lives, compared to the constraints and challenges

31 Many immigrants to the UK have come from Eastern European countries like Poland and Romania – but Eastern Europe faces some of the lowest TFRs in the world and, in many places, population decline.

32 Morland, *Tomorrow’s People*, p.144: see, for example, Thailand, just one country which will become old before it becomes rich, and thus unable to copy the West by bringing in migrants or borrowing cheap debt in international markets.

33 Generous welfare spending for parents in Scandinavian countries has had little effect: <<https://www.norden.org/en/news/record-low-birth-rates-three-nordic-countries>>.

34 Later marriage/partnership is a predictive factor for smaller families, as women’s fertile years remain largely fixed – regardless of the (very) limited success of IVF and other treatments to date. See Morland, *Tomorrow’s People*, p.101.

35 Ibid., pp.94–99.

36 Ibid., p.7.

37 Ibid., p.98.

38 ‘Growing share of childless adults in U.S. don’t expect to ever have children’ (Pew Research Center, 19 November 2021; accessed at <[www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)>). Those surveyed were adults of childbearing age (i.e. 18–49).

39 In another US survey climate change was not a relevant consideration for 75% of respondents, and a major reason for only 11%. See ‘1 in 4 Childless Adults Say Climate Change Has Factored Into Their Reproductive Decisions’ (28 September 2020; accessed at <[www.morningconsult.com](http://www.morningconsult.com)>).

40 Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing* (IVP, 2017), p.4.

41 ‘5 reasons more millennials are choosing not to have children’ (24 January 2022; accessed at <[www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)>).

people faced historically. Yet it is no coincidence that, in the shift towards radical individualism, traditional institutions for childrearing have suffered.<sup>42</sup> Marriage and children have been collateral damage of the sexual revolution. The marriage rate, which is a key predictor for higher birth rates, has been on a sustained fall in the UK since 1972.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, a survey in the US found that only one-in-three adults regarded marriage and having children as necessary for a fulfilling life.<sup>44</sup>

Consider this quote from *The Guardian*: ‘Child rearing is a miserable, thankless, expensive grind that I don’t see as necessary and that I don’t want to participate in. Of course, my mother loves me and I love her, but why would I want to repeat what I put my parents through? Guilt? Obligation? Duty? No thanks. I get to travel, save money, sleep in if I want to.’<sup>45</sup> For many, the commitments of marriage and children may be seen as inconvenient obstacles to their personal life goals.

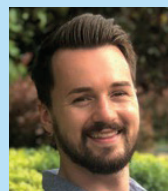
More troubling is an emerging regard for human life in nihilistic terms, as – in David Attenborough’s words – a ‘plague’. Whereas the Bible speaks of new life invariably in terms of joy, many in the West now see human life, and by extension the unborn generation, in the negative. Philip Larkin’s dispiriting poem, ‘This Be the Verse’, ends: ‘Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf. / Get out as early as you can, / And don’t have any kids yourself.’<sup>46</sup> Such attitudes have become more prominent in recent years, ranging from the extreme anti-natalism movement, which claims that childbearing is immoral, to the more respectable charity Population Matters, which advocates policies to reduce the human population. Could it be that secularism struggles to articulate an unequivocally pro-life worldview?

How should Christians respond to a culture where having children has come to be viewed not only as optional and inconvenient, but even – by some – immoral? What does it mean for the church to be salt and light in such a world? The Bible teaches us that children are gifts from God, granted for the blessing of his people. Although childrearing can raise many challenges, for Christians children are never to be viewed as a burden or something that spoils one’s life plans. While not

all Christians will have their own children, the New Testament vision of the church is of a community where everyone supports one another’s spiritual, material and relational needs (Acts 4:32) – it takes a church to raise a child! At the same time, the church should channel the gifts of all its congregants in its central mission to preach Christ crucified – a mission in which childless believers so often devote themselves fully, as heroes of the faith. Where the world is caught up in future anxieties and lifestyles of personal contentment, Christians should be distinct in modelling confident relationships of love. Where the world frets about death and despair, let Christians embody life and hope, certain of the day when a multitude numbering the stars in heaven will assemble in the New Jerusalem.

## Conclusion

And so to answer Ocasio-Cortez’s question, ‘is it okay to still have children?’ A resounding yes! Human beings are the crowning glory of God’s creation, and he has given them stewardship over all creation, to be fulfilled by filling the earth and tending to it. God created the institutions of family for our relational and material flourishing, placed within the community of the church. Far from being a source of fear, new life brings hope for the future, reaching its zenith on that final day when countless believers will gather before Christ. Whichever way God has called us, we are to celebrate life in its abundance; whether through children or adopted children, or in welcoming sons and daughters in Christ. If we come to live in a world which turns its back on childbearing, then let Christians become known as the ‘people of life’, who honour and cherish this most precious gift.



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42 Harrison, *A Better Story*, pp.95–96; 107–109.

43 ‘Marriages in England and Wales: 2019’ (Office for National Statistics; accessed at <[www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk)>).

44 ‘No Need to Marry, Have Kids to Be Fulfilled: New Survey’ (3 December 2018;

accessed at <[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)>).

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**Next issue: The loneliness of the digitally connected**