

## Does God care that we make babies?

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**“D**oes God care how we make babies?” Willard Krabill asked at the conference on Pastoring at the Beginning of Life, held at Goshen College. The response of the conference planners and the editors of *Vision* is an unambiguous affirmation: “Of course God cares how we make babies!” If we did not believe this we would not be offering the material in this issue for your consideration.

**Both Old and New Testaments contain passages emphasising biological procreation and texts stressing missional growth; the church can benefit from the truth of both perspectives.**

I want to change one small word in Willard’s question and thereby ask an even more basic one, “Does God care *that* we make babies?” This question requires a more complex answer, and I want to offer reflections on a variety of biblical texts that suggest two different responses. On one hand, of course God cares that we make

babies, but on the other hand, it is not essential that we make babies. I want to explore these contrasting perspectives and reflect on how the church can benefit by allowing both of them to inform our theology and pastoral practices.

Before proceeding, some words about language are in order. My colleague Harry Huebner has pointed out a danger inherent in using the language of making babies: it suggests that human agency is the central factor in procreation. One of the key points of this article is that human life is first and foremost a gift of God. Therefore, as Harry observes, it is more appropriate for Christians to focus on how we will receive God’s gift of life than it is to speak of “making babies.”

The language we use shapes how we think about issues such as artificial reproductive technology, prenatal diagnostic testing, abortion, and stem cell research using fetal tissue. The secular and technological approach begins with the assumption that we

humans are the ones who make babies, and therefore we are free to decide how “our” babies will be made, and when it is appropriate to terminate the process that would otherwise lead to a new baby. As Christians we are called to begin at a different point, with the conviction that divine rather than human agency is central to procreation. If we take this beginning point seriously, then our major concern is not how we can exercise human control over the process of fertility. Instead, our primary focus is on how we as

human beings can cooperate and act in keeping with God’s creative process, in a way that cherishes the gift of new life which God grants.

Willard Krabill’s lighthearted question, “Does God care how we make babies?” can remind us that God does care, and that God wants us to remember the primacy of divine over human agency. Although I use the language of “making babies” in this article, I want to avoid the suggestion that we need only consider human activity when we discuss beginning-of-life issues. I use this risky language because of its potential to encourage reflection on how we will exercise our human agency in a way that is in keeping with God’s agency in procreation and with God’s purposes for the world.

### **Making babies is essential**

According to the Bible, the first words God speaks to humankind are “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). These words are a command, but in Genesis they are referred to as words of blessing, implying that God gives both the command and the power to fulfill it. Having children is not just an obligation laid on humans; the ability to procreate is a gift bestowed on humanity by a God who desires that a thriving human community inhabit the newly-created world. After the flood, when Noah and his family emerge from the ark, God extends the same blessing and exhortation to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:1), again indicating concern that the human race flourish and prosper. When the disciples of Jesus wanted to keep the children at a distance, he welcomed the little ones and

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blessed them, declaring that God's kingdom belonged to such as these (Mark 10:13–16). Surely Jesus' action is another illustration that children are a precious gift, and that indeed God cares that we make babies.

Bearing children is important not only for the welfare of the larger human community, it is also critical for the formation of God's people. This is most evident in the book of Genesis, which devotes much attention to how the promised son can be born to the aged Abraham and Sarah. Then we read of Jacob, another son of the promise, whose twelve sons become and represent the twelve tribes of Israel. In Genesis, children are essential as God begins the great task of creating a special people through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3).

### **Making babies is not essential**

The Old Testament contains many stories of non-Israelites joining the covenant community, and Jews of the later Hellenistic period

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were open to accepting converts from other religions. Still, the dominant paradigm for the people of God was of a community created by biological growth. According to this model, the community of faith was ethnically homogeneous and all Jews were related by virtue of being descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this paradigm (not unlike the one that has sometimes been at work in

the Mennonite church), making babies is essential, because the community of faith perpetuates itself primarily by means of procreation.

Jesus promotes a different paradigm. When he receives word that his mother and brothers wish to see him, he asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then he declares, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34–35; see also Matt. 12:48–50; Luke 8:19–21). Jesus downplays biological connections and thereby redefines the nature of family. His family is not defined by blood relationships, but by the relatedness that comes from a shared commitment to doing the will of God. Many implications follow from this assertion, not least of which is that making babies is not essential for the people

of God. The community grows primarily by inviting people to faith, by evangelism.

On another occasion a woman says to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you” (Luke 11:27–28). Jesus responds, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” The woman’s statement assumes that Jesus is a great man, and that his mother is blessed by virtue of producing such a remarkable son. So why does Jesus reject this compliment to both himself and his mother? The woman’s statement reflects the values of a patriarchal society, which taught that a woman’s greatest contribution was to produce good sons (see 1 Tim. 2:15), and that a woman should live out her aspirations through these sons. For women, bearing children was deemed essential to a meaningful life. Jesus challenges these patriarchal assumptions by stressing that faithfulness to God is far more important, even for women, than making babies.

Paul adopts the principles expressed by Jesus and spells out some further implications. He develops lengthy arguments to demonstrate that the “true Israel” is not composed only of physical descendants of Abraham but of people who are committed to Jesus Christ (Rom. 9:6–33; Gal. 3:23–29, 4:21–31). Gentile Christians are “children of the promise, like Isaac” (Gal. 4:28), and they have been destined “for adoption as [God’s] children through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:5). For the writer of Ephesians, salvation involves Jesus Christ reconciling both Gentiles and Jews to God by destroying the dividing walls between them, thereby creating one new humanity (2:13–22). According to Paul’s vision, making babies is not essential. The church lives by proclaiming the good news, not by procreation.

### **The value of diverse perspectives**

When confronted with two different biblical perspectives we may be tempted to use our western either/or system of logic and opt for one or the other. In this case, because the Old Testament places more weight on one perspective and the New Testament on the other, Mennonites might be tempted to play off the New Testament against the Old as we are sometimes prone to do.<sup>1</sup> Two reasons not to adopt this approach are: both testaments contain passages emphasising biological procreation and texts stressing

missional growth, and the church can benefit from the truth of both perspectives.

In the New Testament Jesus highlights the importance of children by blessing them, despite the objections of his disciples. Second Timothy 1:5 refers to third-generation Christian faith; “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” This text witnesses to what must have been a concern even in the early church already: biological growth and nurturing children of believers into the faith.

The Old Testament contains exceptions to its dominant vision of God’s people as an ethnically homogeneous community that perpetuates itself through procreation. These exceptions are particularly prominent in the book of Isaiah. In 2:2–4 we see a glorious vision of the nations streaming to Mount Zion so that they may learn how to live according to the words and way of the God of Israel. The so-called suffering servant is to be a channel of God’s salvation to the nations (42:4, 49:6). Eunuchs who are faithful to God’s covenant (but incapable of fathering children) are promised “a monument and name better than sons and daughters” (56:5). In this same passage God asserts that foreigners are invited to become part of the covenant community and to worship, because God’s desire is that “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7; compare Mark 11:17).

Diversity of perspectives in the Bible is often seen as a problem to overcome or resolve, sometimes by ignoring or denying its existence, and sometimes by determining which is the theologically and ethically “correct” perspective. Sometimes Christians should opt for one biblical perspective over another, as in the case of texts that legitimate slavery versus those that undermine slavery. In other cases we do well to avoid either/or choices. If the Bible contained only the prophetic critique of Israel’s sacrifice and worship (see 1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:10–15; Amos 5:21–23; Mic. 6:6–8), what biblical basis would we have for stressing the centrality of worship in the life of God’s people? If the Bible contained only the priestly emphasis on the details and sacramental effect of worship and ritual (see Exodus 25–31, 35–40; Leviticus 1–10), what biblical basis would we have for asserting that worship may be perfect in all its details but still not

please God if it does not inspire just and righteous living? Sometimes biblical diversity is not a problem to overcome but a resource to use.<sup>2</sup>

Many of our deepest theological convictions may be true, but by themselves they remain only a partial expression of the gospel, and therefore it is important to supplement them with the truth of other perspectives. What then can the church gain by considering the two contrasting biblical truths about making babies?

### **Some theological and pastoral implications**

**Recognising how central being fruitful is to our human nature can provide a pastoral basis for acknowledging the deep pain and emptiness many couples and also single people feel because they are not able to bear children.**

God's first words to humankind, "Be fruitful and multiply," are a vivid testimony to how central procreation is to our nature and calling as human beings under God. In secular terms we sometimes speak of the biological urge to have children. As Christians we have a theological basis for acknowledging this powerful biological drive, and we can affirm it as nothing less than a gift from God. Recognising how central being fruitful and multiplying is to our human nature can provide a pastoral basis for acknowledging the deep pain and emptiness many couples and also single people feel because they are not able to bear children.

Our churches have tended to downplay or be oblivious to the pain and loss arising from infertility. As a result, many people suffer in silence, deprived of the support and rituals that a caring Christian community could offer.

The truth that making babies is central to who we are as human beings needs to be supplemented immediately by another truth: it is by no means essential that we make babies. As Jesus indicated, obedience to God is far more important than procreation. Pastorally, this fact becomes the basis for declaring that the inability to bear children, or the decision not to, in no way diminishes our faithfulness or our worth before God and the community of faith.

Keeping the two theological truths mentioned above in creative tension can also guide us in assessing artificial reproductive technologies. Because bearing children is a calling

from God, Christians can be open to at least some forms of artificial reproductive technologies. But because having children is not essential, we are also free to set limits on how far we are prepared to go. We are also free to ask hard questions about the ethics and cost of such technology, and about what priority to give such technology in relation to other medical needs in our society and larger world.

God's blessing of humankind with the exhortation to be fruitful and Jesus' blessing of the children indicate how the church ought to view children—they are precious gifts of God. This means that our churches and homes ought to be child-friendly places. Practices such as making pastoral visits to new parents, placing a flower at the front of the church to acknowledge the arrival of new life, and publicly introducing babies the first time their parents bring them to church are important ways the church expresses its conviction that children are a blessing from God and are welcome in the faith community. Such practices also acknowledge the significance of a new child for parents and other relatives.

The ritual of child dedication affirms that children are a gift from God, and also affords parents the opportunity to publicly commit themselves to raising their child in the context of a faith community and a loving Christian home. One of the most important parts of the dedication ritual is the church's pledge to support both child and parents by participating in the raising of the child. I once asked a friend, who had grown up in a somewhat dysfunctional family, how she had managed to turn out so well as a person. Her immediate response was "I got much of what I needed from the church."

In a society that overvalues work and certain kinds of productivity, the church's conviction that children are a blessing from God encourages us to affirm that raising and nurturing children is both a privilege and an important form of Christian ministry. The church should support mothers, fathers, and others who decide to forgo paid employment in order to devote more time and energy to raising children. (The church should also be aware that staying home to raise children may be a luxury that only certain classes of people can afford.) The church should support parents who temporarily reduce their committee and

other church involvements because they recognise that raising the next generation of Christians is one of the most important contributions they can make to the mission of the church.

Last summer, just before reading the papers that form the core of this issue of *Vision*, I read two books by Jean Vanier, founder of the l'Arche movement, which provides homes for adults with physical and mental disabilities. I was struck by some profound contrasts. Sherry Wenger notes how prenatal diagnostic testing is sometimes encouraged so that prospective parents can abort "abnormal" fetuses and thereby avoid having a child with disabilities. Vanier is certainly correct in observing that our society often regards such individuals "as nature's mistakes, as sub-human."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Vanier believes that every human life is to be welcomed into this world because it is a precious gift from God, no matter how broken the body or mind may be. "There is meaning to every life, even if we cannot see it. I believe that each person, in her unique beauty and worth, lives out a sacred story."<sup>4</sup> These convictions about life as a gift provide a more helpful Christian starting point for discussing issues such as abortion and prenatal testing than does the debate about the exact moment when human life begins.

While the church should affirm that children are a special blessing from God, it should do so sensitively, because this affirmation can intensify the pain of people unable to have children, and may even leave the impression that childless people are less than whole. Pastors should exercise care in planning and leading child dedications and Mother's Day services. When celebrating and praying for our children and families, we should also acknowledge painful experiences related to children. There will most likely be people present who have been unable to conceive, or who have miscarried. Someone's child may have a disability, or may have died. Someone's adult child may have made unhealthy life choices, and someone may be unable to see their child because of separation or divorce. By naming these realities in the context of worship, we validate people's painful experiences, and we bring those experiences into the healing presence of God.

The Bible's contrasting responses to the question "Does God care *that* we make babies?" intersect in a fascinating way in one



particular use of the exhortation to be fruitful and multiply. The command is first given to humanity at the time of creation (Gen. 1:28), and then to Noah and his sons who emerge as a new humanity after the flood (Gen. 9:1). Then Jacob receives the command, but the timing is most peculiar (Gen. 35:11). Jacob

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has already fathered the sons who represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and his days of being fruitful are over. Here the exhortation to be fruitful and multiply functions not as a literal command that Jacob is to produce more children. Rather, it signals that what God is doing through Jacob by creating the people of God is on par with the creation of humanity in Genesis 1 and the re-creation of humanity after the flood. The emergence of God's people in some sense represents the creation of a new humanity. Procreation is important in this text, but it is subsumed under the broader concern for the creation of God's people.

This text and Jesus' words about family remind us that commitment to the family of faith is more basic than our commitment to biological family. These two commitments

need not be at odds with each other, provided we remember that how we live in our biological families should be determined by our even more fundamental commitment to the family of Jesus Christ. Stressing the priority of our faith community can bring comfort and encouragement to childless people by affirming that infertility does not prevent them from living out their true calling in life. Giving priority to the faith community can also help reorient the priorities of people whose over-preoccupation with their biological family and its needs hinders them from living out their calling to follow Jesus.

According to the New Testament, God's new humanity is created by proclaiming the gospel. Many of our Mennonite congregations still operate explicitly or implicitly with the model that the church perpetuates itself by means of biological growth. The biblical texts explored in this article remind us that making

babies and biological growth are extremely important, but that we are also called to adopt the paradigm of a missional church, which lives by witness, service, and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Making babies is both essential and not essential.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this Mennonite tendency and why it is inappropriate, see Waldemar Janzen, “A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation,” in *The Church As Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg: CMBC Pubns., 1990), 90–100.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of how the church can deal in a helpful way with biblical diversity, see Janzen, “A Canonical Rethinking,” 107–10.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Vanier, *Our Journey Home: Rediscovering a Common Humanity beyond Our Differences* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1997), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

## About the author

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