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Sermon follow-up notes

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Some highlights from the sermon:

1. Children are not the main purpose of marriage (as if marriage could not exist without them), but a very important sub-purpose (Mal. 2:15). The best thing a husband and wife can do for the kingdom of God is raise godly offspring. And the best thing they can do for their children is love one another faithfully.
2. Children disrupt marriage. Of course, it is (or should be) a *blessed* disruption. But it is a disruption nonetheless. Having children entails a major life change and a remarkable level of sacrifice. There is no point in pretending that raising children faithfully is easy. While there is no biblical law that governs how many children we should have (meaning that it is a matter of Christian liberty, guided by wisdom and general biblical principles), the church should affirm the goodness of large families. After all, who else will in our society? Our culture is hostile to children, viewing them as a *cursed* disruption.
3. Children entail risk. Children have minds and wills of their own. They are not puppets or robots. Having children makes you vulnerable because your future happiness is so tied to the decisions your child makes, the health of your child, etc. There is no guarantee your child will fulfill your hopes and expectations for him or her (and thus parents best hold those hopes and expectations loosely). There is not even an unconditional guarantee that covenant children will persevere in the faith. To have children is to expose yourself to potential embarrassment and possible heartache.
4. Covenant children are a reward. Such children are gifts from God and representatives of Jesus. God gives us children with covenant promises attached. They are arrows in our quiver, weapons to be used in holy war against Satan's kingdom. They are to be received and raised in a posture of faith. In this case, faith means trusting God to do what he said he would do – and what he has said he would do is found in texts like Gen. 17, Deut. 7:9, etc. Faith rests in the faithfulness of God to his covenant; unbelief cuts us off from the covenant promises. Thus, we need to entrust our children to God, and raise them up in the works and way of faith. Believe that your children are who God says they are.
5. Children are a responsibility. Parents are responsible not only for the physical well being of their children, but also their spiritual well being. Fathers are directed to bring their children up *in the Lord*. Faith always bears fruit. Thus, if

we *trust* our children to God, we will be *diligent* in our role and calling as parents (e.g., discipline, instruction, prayer, etc.).

Is the risk of having children worth it? Given all that can go wrong, why bring children into this fallen world? The fact is, there is no true love (for humans at least) without vulnerability because we cannot control the object of our love. C. S. Lewis explains:

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

So we should not reject children just because they entail risk. All love is risky.

But more than that, having children is a way that marriage can be used to serve God – which is the whole point of marriage, after all. Bringing children into the world, having them baptized, and raising them faithfully is a way to expand God’s kingdom. Yes, there is risk. Your child might get sick and die prematurely. You might fail as a parent and have a child go astray. But if we trust God and rely on his covenant, we can bring children into the world without fear. We can have confidence, knowing that God loves our children and will use our diligent nurture, discipline, and prayer as the means of growing them up to Christian maturity.

What if it appears to be too late, e.g. your child has already wandered from the path of righteousness? You may not be able to claim the promises in the same way if you have been negligent as a parent. Prodigal children are often the result of prodigal parents/parenting. But in such situations, you can confess your sin to God and your children, and cry out for mercy. It’s hard to undo mistakes and history only flows one way (e.g., children always grow *up*, never *down*). But we should never think that any of us are out reach of God’s mercy.

It is important to not oversimplify these matters. When a child from a Christian home apostatizes, it might be as simple as laying blame on the parents for their failures (e.g., Samuel in 1 Sam. 3). But then again it might not be. After all, in the

old covenant era, God the Father's son, Israel, went astray as well, and it was *not* due to some deficiency in his parenting. Israel simply rejected what was given to her. Of course, now that God's fatherhood has been revealed in new covenant fullness, with the coming of the Son who perfectly fulfilled his Father's will, we expect covenant succession to become the norm in a way it could not have been in the age of shadows.

There should be some comfort for distraught parents here: In the old covenant, we find that God himself knows the pain of having a wayward son. (In the same way, those who find themselves trapped in bad marriages should remember that God has been involved in the most difficult marriage of all time! And yet, despite being in the marriage from hell, he has always remained faithful! No one's spouse has sinned more against him than Jesus spouse has sinned against him!)

In the sermon I talked about "missional marriages" and raising "missional kids." Husbands and wives not only share deep companionship, they share in the common project of building the kingdom of God. The primary shared task that will absorb both of them for a good portion of their years together is raising children.

Christopher Ash's book *Married for God* gives a very healthy overview of how marriage (including child-bearing and -rearing) serve God's purposes in the world. The logic of marriage, sex, and child-rearing are not found in self-satisfaction, but in kingdom-building. Couples are not called to find their fulfillment in one another, but in enabling one another to serve more fruitfully in God's kingdom:

For this is delight [in sexual companionship] with a shared purpose, intimacy with a common goal, and companionship in a task that stretches beyond the boundaries of the couple themselves...[summarized as] *sex in the service of God....*

God's purpose for marriage is that those who are married serve him in and through their marriages (just as those who are single serve him in their singleness)...God has bigger purposes in the world [and in marriage] than meeting our needs...

It is too easy for Christians to think of marriage as a discipleship-free zone. So that outside of marriage we talk about sacrifice, taking up one's cross and so on.

But inside marriage we just talk about how to communicate better, how to be more intimate, how to have better sex, how to be happy... Instead we should want marriages that serve God. If they are sexually and personally fulfilled, well and good. But if they do not serve God, no amount of personal fulfillment will make them right...

Societies in which sex and marriage are viewed as a means to personal fulfillment encourage a man and woman to gaze soft-focus into each other's eyes, and encourage each to find in the other all they need, each to be all to the other. Such cultures promote what we may call a 'religion of coupledness,' in which the goal of every man and woman must be to live in such an exquisite union...

But this focus on the couple isolates them from the supportive influences of wider family and society. The defining moment is thought to be when they are alone in the bedroom, not when they serve together as a new social and family unit in the wider society...

If my dear wife ever thought I could be everything to her, then she certainly knows better now! And, of course, if I think marriage is there to meet my needs, what do I do when it fails to meet them?...

The moment I make my 'relationship' the goal of my life I doom myself to disappointment. Surprisingly, the key to a good marriage is not to pursue a good marriage, but to pursue the honor of God. We need to replace this selfish view of marriage with one in which we work side by side in God's 'garden' (that is, in God's world), rather than gaze forever in each other's eyes...

What it means [to be married in this way] is that each is supporting the other as best they can, so that between them, both apart and together, they serve God in and through their marriage...

[T]he whole of marriage is to be lovingly offered to God for his service...

[On the other hand] If we believe this [that marriage is only about the personal satisfaction of the couple], then relationship is all about you and me and our self-fulfillment. It is really 'sex in the service of us.' This is a far cry from the loving service of God in his world. What is more, if we think this way then it will not be long before we begin to think of sex as our savior. After all, it is through sexual intimacy that I hope to achieve fulfillment and indeed true humanness. Through the fulfillment of sexual satisfaction I become the person I was meant to be. Through sex I discover myself....

[Against this view, even sex must be used to serve not merely yourself or your spouse, but God:] Consider how your faithful love for one another, fed and nourished through the delights of bodily intimacy, can overflow outwards to bring love and faithfulness to a needy world. Think about how, in partnership with each other, helping one another, your love can provide a center of stable security; so that this safe home will become a refuge into which others can be welcomed. Think practically how in your marriage relationship your private intimacy can be at the heart of a relationship which overflows in love to others outside.

The principle is that faithful love cannot flow out from a marriage unless it is present as the heart of a marriage. As a good tree bears good fruit, so the usefulness of a marriage in bringing blessing to others depends on its inner secret of warm intimate love...

We conclude that sex must be put into its proper place in marriage. On the one hand it is not the be-all and end-all in marriage. Sex is not a god or goddess; sex cannot save us or give us our identity or fulfillment. But, on the other hand, sex is very important and the sexual relationship needs to be nurtured as the heart of a relationship of faithful love.

Around sex there is friendship and companionship. And out of these flow hospitality, a home into which others can be welcomed, a family which serves and loves others in friendship and loves the unlovely. So we must nurture sex, but not as an end in itself. We nurture the private intimacy of marriage in order to keep the fires burning that will warm others outside. When sex is put in its proper place, neither too important nor neglected, then it will thrive as it was designed to flourish, as sex in the service of God.

If marriage and sex exist for self-fulfillment, rather than service to God, it is hard to see how children fit in. After all, children sap one's strength, change the shape of a woman's body, put a drain on financial resources, etc. After children come, spouses often have to make a concerted, coordinated effort just to have daily conversation, much less "date times."

Or, to the extent that children *do* fit in a marriage aimed at self-fulfillment, it is as "accessories," to complete a "designer lifestyle" and fulfill one's "ideal portfolio" of success. But when children are regarded this way, it almost always shows through in the way they are raised. No sacrifices are made to raise the children up in truth and obedience. Instead parents try to keep kids appeased and out of the way. The final results are predictable.

It is vital that we recover a kingdom-centered view of marriage. Yes, meeting one another's needs and getting our own needs met will fit into that to a certain degree. But human needs are secondary and tertiary in marriage. The primary thing in marriage is to glorify God by displaying and embodying his faithfulness. Children fit in not because they bring so much personal fulfillment to their parents – though they should do that – but fundamentally because they expand and advance God's kingdom.

In the sermon I talked about the need for husbands and wives to be basically on the same page in their practice and philosophy of raising children. They need to be able to present a united front to the children. It is best (though perhaps unrealistic) for kids to never see their parents in tension with one another over these things. They should feel like mom and dad are so united, they are *one*. Mom and dad need to be consistent disciplinarians, backing one another up and enforcing one another's standards. Kids should never be able to play one parent against the other or manipulate them.

In the nature of the case, most corporal punishment will fall to dad. But even when mom does the disciplining, the kids should know that dad's shadow (and authority) stands behind her. Discipline needs to be consistent. Inconsistent discipline is almost as bad as no discipline at all. The rod is not a magic wand that solves all discipline problems, and other forms of discipline will be required for some children. But, in general, parents today are too soft and squeamish to apply the wisdom of Proverbs to their children.

As I said in the sermon, husbands and wives need to pour their unity and love into the common project of raising their children. They need to make their children a kingdom priority. They are not just raising up children for themselves but for God. Frankly, many couples are afraid to have children (or very many children) because the only children they know have been undisciplined and therefore unattractive. But it need not be this way. The church needs to train parents (in very practical ways) to raise their children up in the Lord with confidence.

Robert Farrar Capon has some wonderful words of wisdom for Christian fathers in *Bed and Board*:

Be their Lover. Give yourself, your humor, your small talk, and the minor affections of your hands and eyes. Don't keep it all in the solemn now-let's-you-and-Daddy-talk-about-your-report-card vein. Give them the best of your offhand style. Let your sons grow up learning what a man who acts out his caring looks like. Let your daughters learn what it's like to have a man around who works at quickening their response. It might just pay off in a decent son-in-law.

Be a just Judge. Children can stand vast amounts of sternness. They rather expect to be wrong; and they are quite used to being punished. It is injustice, inequity and inconsistency that kill them. Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, lest they be disheartened. It is precisely the sight of injustice that triggers anger, and it is precisely the helpless rage of inferiors that takes the heart out of them and produces most of the cynics, skeptics and smart alecks in the world...

Delight in them openly. Speak your praise to them. Be

their Priest. Look at them with the widest eyes you can imagine, and don't be ashamed to be seen at wonder. You will not see their like again. What a shame if they should leave without ever knowing they have been beheld and offered up by an astonished heart.

I think a big part of delighting in children is being appropriately permissive. When your child wants to do something, *unless you have a good reason*, why not say, "yes"? Some parents seem to make their default drive "no" every time their child comes with a request. It seems to me that that is exactly backwards. Children should be encouraged to develop their youthful sense of wonder and adventure. Foolishness has to be driven out – but Jesus obviously thought some aspects of childhood should be permanent features of the Christian life. Saying "yes" as often as you can is a way of doing that.

Capon also has some good words about motherhood:

To be a Mother is to be the sacrament -- the effective symbol -- of *place*. Mothers do not *make* homes, they *are* our home: in the simple sense that we begin our days by a long sojourn within the body of a woman; in the extended sense that she remains our center of gravity throughout the years. She is the very diagram of belonging, the *where* in whose vicinity we are fed and watered, and have our wounds bound up and our noses wiped. She is geography incarnate...

....The mother is the geographical center of her family, the body out of whom their diversity springs, the neighborhood in which that diversity begins ever so awkwardly to dance its way back to the true Body which is the Mother of us all. Her role then is precisely to be there for them. Not necessarily over there, but *there* -- *thereness itself*, if you will; not necessarily *in* her place but *place itself* to them; not necessarily *at* home but *home itself*...

But remember, you are a landmark....You are and remain the bodily link with our origin. You are the oldest thing in the world; don't be in a hurry to forget any of your history....

You are not only a link with something. You are the *thing* itself; and you are the sacrament, the instrument, by which we learn to love the things that are. Your body is the first object any child of man ever wanted. Therefore dispose yourself to be loved, to be wanted, to be available. Be *there* for them with a vengeance. Be a gracious, bending woman. Incline your ear, your heart, your hands to them. Be found warm and comfortable, and disposed to affection...Children love fat mothers. They like them because while any mother is a diagram of *place*, a picture of *home*, a fat one is a clearer diagram, a greater sacrament. She is more *there*. I can think of no better wish to all the slender swans of this present age than to propose them a toast: May your husbands find you as slim as they like; your children should always remember you were fat.

In the sermon, I talked about how our culture is basically hostile to children. This can be seen in a variety of ways:

- Declining birth rates, especially in Western Europe
- Abortion, which kills millions of unborn babies each year in the West
- Comments made to parents with large families such as "Don't you know what causes that?," "Boy, you sure need a tv!," "Don't you know the world is over-populated!," etc.

Hatred for children is not really a new thing (see, e.g. Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, p. 141f, for some data on how ancient cultures showed hatred and hostility towards children). But it is epidemic in our day.

This is an area where the church needs to be truly counter-cultural. The biblical view is very different and very clear. For example:

- Obed-Edom was blessed by God. The blessings included an expansion of his family.
- The matriarchs cried out for children as blessings from God in Genesis and elsewhere in the OT. To be sure, this had to do with the preservation of the seed line in Israel, but in a more general way (apart from the specifics of redemptive history) we see that children are a longed for blessing on the part of the godly.
- God judges people through barrenness and/or killing their children (e.g., Dt. 28:18; Hos. 9:11; etc.)

- The special blessing bestowed on the godly but barren woman of Psalm 113:9 is not a career, but children.
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In some Reformed circles, a new “patriarchy” movement is gaining momentum. The details vary, but in its most pernicious form, the “patriarch” acts as a “pastor” to his family and continues to have authority over his children even after they are grown

Late in life R. J. Rushdoony began advocating a form of patriarchalism that has become influential in some circles. Unfortunately many of those who seek to follow his model overlook the fact that it was a complete disaster for his family. You can get some of the details in Gary North’s book *Baptized Patriarchalism*.

Genesis 2 makes it clear that God intended marriage to mark the beginning of a new covenantal family entity. That’s what “leaving and cleaving” are all about. Society can be organized in a variety of ways, as we see in the OT movement from tribal families, to a full-fledged nation, to international empires. But in every instance, marriage creates a new family. To *require* grown, married sons to live under the authority of their fathers is a legalistic requirement and virtually guaranteed to fail in the long run. It simply isn’t the way God designed families to work. To be sure, in more agrarian societies, there may be powerful economic incentives for grown children to remain close to parents and even work a multi-generational farm or business. But there is no biblical *necessity* for such a practice and in our increasingly complex economy it will become increasingly rare.

The problems with patriarchalism are many. I have enumerated some of them in my paper “The Church and Her Rivals” (available upon request) and my two sermons, “Against the Family” and “Focus Off the Family,” preached in September, 2005 (available on the TPC website).

Another problem I will mention here is that a patriarchal model is a form of slavery for the younger generation, and thus locks them into a form of immaturity. Because the next generation is under the lordship of the patriarch, they never learn to make their own decisions or carve out their own vocation in life. There is “no leaving and cleaving.” Some parents who embrace a form of patriarchy no doubt mean well and intend to protect their children, but in reality they are holding them back and resisting the plan of God. Remember the point I made from Psalm 127 in the sermon: children are like arrows in the quiver of a mighty warrior. But God did not intend for fathers to keep the arrows in the quiver forever. Rather, the arrows are to be strung and shot out into the world.

When children are in the home, it is disastrous if they do not obey their parents. But when they are older, it can be disastrous if they *do* obey their parents. They need to outgrow that kind of parent-child relationship. They have to always honor their parents, but they are not required to obey them for the entirety of their lives. The point of covenantal parenting is to prepare children for life on their own, as faithful and mature members of God's kingdom. Parents who put the kingdom first will be able to let their children go when the time comes.

I think there are two reasons evangelical Christians in America have lost cultural influence and dominion over the last two generations:

1] We abandoned cities, the centers of cultural influence. It goes beyond my scope to deal with this here, but it's worth noting that the decline of evangelical dominion in our culture largely coincided with the evangelical "hollowing out" of American cities.

2] We lost our children to the world. We have had to start over every generation, with a net loss of maturity. You cannot build a godly civilization if you are always beginning again. Some of this loss of ground is probably due to the fact that the vast majority of Christian families have given their children over to a secularized (public) education system. That's not to say Christians can never make use of public educational institutions, but the restoration and reformation of Christian education should be a high priority. Thankfully, home school and Christian school options are growing and becoming more accessible. (See Doug Wilson's books, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*, *Paideia*, and *Excused Absence* for further thoughts on the necessity and shape of Christian education.)

It is critical that we learn how to pass the baton of faith on from one generation to the next so that our children can stand on our shoulders and build on our work.

A wonderful historical case study of covenant succession as God's normal pattern is the family tree of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a leading pastor-theologian in Puritan New England in the 18th century. Here is how one biographer recounts the impact of his faithful family across generations.

Their eleven children [born to Jonathan and Sarah Edwards] have been a gift to American cultural history. In 1900 a reporter tracked down 1400 descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards. He found they included 13 college presidents, 65 professors two graduate school deans, 100 lawyers, 66

physicians, 80 holders of public office, including three senators and three governors of states. Members of this clan had written 135 published books, and the women were repeatedly described as 'great readers' and 'highly intelligent.'" These people seemed to have a talent for making money: their numbers included a roster of bankers and industrialists. Of course there were platoons of missionaries. The report concluded: "The family has cost the country nothing in pauperism, in crime, in hospital or asylum service: on the contrary, it represents the highest usefulness."

For more, see Robert Andrews' book, *The Family: God's Weapon for Victory*, ch. 23. The heritage of Edwards may be unusual in some ways, but it serves to illustrate the glorious things that can happen when God's people take seriously their duty of raising their children faithfully. Edwards' influence resonated down through the generations because he trained his children well.

Fathers have a basic responsibility for raising their children. This is borne out in the language of Eph. 6, as I mentioned in the sermon. Another example is Job 1, where Job intercedes on behalf of his children, offering sacrifice for them in case they have sinned. Interestingly, Job is willing to take at least some measure of responsibility even for those sins he doesn't not actually know about.

How does the responsibility of the parents (especially the father) for raising up his children in the Lord relate to the children's responsibility to own the faith for themselves? There are multiple layers and levels of responsibility here.

Fathers have a covenantal responsibility for their children. We see this in Deut. 6, Proverbs, etc. But this responsibility is not absolute. In an ultimate sense, fathers cannot be responsible for the response their children make to the training they receive. Children are individuals who will stand on their own before God and answer for their actions.

Of course, we also have to point out (as I did in the sermon) that ordinarily there is a deep connection between godly parenting and godly children. In parenting, as in the rest of life, you reap what you sow. For more on this, see my book *Paedofaith*, Ed Gross' *Will My Children Go to Heaven?*, Robert Rayburn's paper on covenant succession (<http://www.faithtacoma.org/doctrine/covenant.aspx>), and Doug Wilson's *Standing on the Promises*.

One of the best ways for parents to think through their tasks is to look at how God “raised” Israel. The old covenant, after all, was a period of immaturity for the people of God (cf. Gal. 3-4). In her minority, the nation was “under the law.” It was the equivalent of living under a totalitarian police state in some ways – their every move was governed by direct divine command, and when punishment came, it usually came with swiftness.

But in the new covenant, as God’s people have entered a state of maturity, there is greater freedom and flexibility. Discipline comes, but not with such an obvious one-to-one correspondence between the sin and the punishment. We are expected to act in wisdom and maturity. God has not provided a law covering every situation we face. Instead, we have to take what he has already taught us and apply it to ever changing situations.

Parents should begin with a measure of strictness, and grant greater freedoms as their children mature. (All too often parents do it the other way around – they are lax in the early years, then try to clamp down when the kids are old enough to cause or get into real trouble.) When the kids are young, parenting is quite simple: “You’re bigger than they are, make them obey!” as Doug Wilson puts it. Of course, discipline should always be administered in a context of love, forgiveness, prayer, instruction, and humility. But for the good of the child, discipline needs to be firm and consistent. When parents refuse to discipline their child, they may say they “love” their child too much to spank him. But really they just love themselves: their convenience, their ease, their approval, etc.

As the child grows older, the parent recedes more and more into background, moving from a teacher/disciplinarian, to a kind of coach who mentors, and finally to a kind of advisor who provides direction only as it is solicited. The movement is away from the rod towards verbal reasoning and instruction as the child matures. It is important that parents follow God’s example in imposing a pattern of life upon their children, as well as giving them verbal instruction. One without the other is insufficient.

Parents should always remember that kids pick up more from their parents’ example than anything else. They will imitate you! Set a godly example before them in all things. Make sure there is a match between what you show them and what you teach them.

I’ve said before that attraction between a man and woman should be much more than physical. The physical is important, of course (e.g., Ecc. 9:9; Gen. 26:8; Gen. 29:20; Prov. 5; Song of Sol.), but not exhaustive. In fact, attraction to another person is quite complex (often referred to, appropriately, as “chemistry”). An

important ingredient in attraction should be *missional attraction*. You should be drawn to one another's "mission" life, especially as that mission is entwined with kingdom of God. In any Christian marriage, that mission should include children. (God sometimes withholds children for his own wise purposes – more on that below.)

As I said in the sermon, children are ordinarily integral to marriage (Mal. 2:15). Willfully refusing to have children is not an option for a Christian couple. Multiplying is an obligation (Gen. 1:26-28). I can perhaps imagine exceptional cases where a couple serves on the mission field, or the health of the wife makes having children impossible or too risky. But ordinarily Christians should "be fruitful and multiply." If you do not want children, I would suggest that you probably aren't called to marriage. Further, I would suggest that you need to check your attitude towards children against that of the Jesus and the Scriptures.

Having many children is not quite a natural necessity as it was in the past. Our technology allows us to sever the link between sex and children to some extent. Nature no longer dictates the size of families to the same degree as before the rise of popular, cheap, and effective forms of birth control. (See Lauren Winner, *Real Sex*, p. 64ff.)

Thus, in the modern world, the place of children within marriage needs to be given more careful thought than in previous eras. The question, "Why have children at all?" never really came up on a consistent basis for married couples the way that it does today.

There are many ways to for Christian couples to justify bringing children into the world (even in large numbers!). Christopher Ash gives a helpful explanation of the place of children in his fine book, *Married for God*. Many of his thoughts are helpful, showing how marriage, sex, and children all fit into a life of kingdom service. Christian marriages should have a basic *openness* to children. They should be places of hospitality, where children can be welcomed in the name and love of Christ. But that's not to say Christian couples must have as many children as they possibly can. Here are Ash's thoughts:

[Against the Roman Catholic view of contraception, the Bible] teaches simply that children should be viewed as a blessing and a gift. Sex within marriage does not consist of isolated 'acts' of sexual union. Rather, sex in marriage is the delightful focal point of a whole lifetime of companionship and shared service, lived together in love. The point is that a couple's marriage *as a whole* ought to welcome and

pray for the blessing of children. But as to exactly when, or how many, these are matters of Christian freedom. Each couple makes their own decisions before God in freedom, and the rest of us are not to judge them. The important thing with contraception is that it should be part of a lifetime together which is fundamentally turned *towards* the blessings of children, rather than turned *against* (which is, of course, the reason contraception is so often used in other contexts).

In other words, Christians may use birth control to space or limit their children. But they must be *pro-children* on the whole. And their use of birth control will have quite different motivations than those found in the world. If they limit their number of children, it will be so they can maximize service in other areas. Children are a blessing, but not the *only* blessing God offers us in the world. How we balance the pursuit of God's blessing in the form of children versus other forms of blessing is a decision each Christian couple has to make for themselves.

Finally, it's worth remembering that our technological control of reproduction is not absolute. We can never dictate family size or schedule births as totally as we might be led to think. God opens and closes the womb as he wills.

In my sermon, I described the way in covenant children should "grow up Christian." Normally, a covenant child who grows up in a context of faith will never know a day when he didn't trust God. And yet this must be carefully distinguished from what I would call "covenant presumption" – that is, assuming, "I'm ok with God" because I was raised in a Christian family, got baptized young, etc. Presumption is NOT faith. We don't presume upon God; we trust him. Children need to be given covenant promises, but also covenant warnings, to maintain the proper balance.

Given the importance of children to a kingdom-centered marriage, what about those who find themselves unable to have children? As I said in the sermon, this is a painful providence, but barren couple should look to God for help and comfort.

There are some potential solutions, including the use of *some* reproductive technologies which do not involve the destruction of fertilized eggs, as well as adoption. But those can be expensive and will not be available to all barren

couples. What if childlessness is an ongoing burden? Such couples should know that God cares for them in a special way (Isa. 56:5).

Christopher Ash has some helpful thoughts (*Married for God*, p. 58f):

The pain of childlessness is a unique pain. It has been called by one childless couple 'that strange grief which has no focus for its tears and no object for its love.' There is no date on which such a couple become childless, no funeral anniversary on which to focus grief, no photograph or memory of the son or daughter who never was.

What does the Bible say to such couples, and to the rest of us? To them, it says they are right to feel a sense of loss. They are right to want a child, to count as blessing what God calls a blessing and to pray for it. Their grief is a proper grief. Again and again in the Bible story, childlessness is a cause of grief, and salvation is expressed by the gift of a child...It is right for a married couple to be sad if they are not given the gift of children...

To the rest of us, the Bible says we should 'weep with those who weep' (Rom. 12:15). In the nature of things the inability to have children is a matter to be handled with discretion. Such couples do not usually want the whole world to know and pry into the intimate part of their life together. But it is a great help if they can find a few trusted friends in whom they can confide, who can sorrow with them and commit themselves to pray for them in their pain and uncertainty.

Also we need to say to childless couples that fruitful service does not depend on having children. Many such couples have a deep sense of failure. They see children at the school gate, children in nurseries, in the crèche at church. They hear announcements of parenting courses, and they listen to preachers talking about their families. And every one of these can be like an arrow to the heart, a sharp reminder of deep pain. Why has God denied us this? Is it because we are no good? Does this mean that our marriage is to

be, in a spiritual sense, a barren and fruitless thing?
Would we have done better not to have got married?

All these questions go through their minds. But there is absolutely no spiritual need to feel a failure. The Bible teaches that we ought to love God with all our heart. But beyond that, it suggests that there are many different ways in which that loving service is worked out even within marriage...

Many a childless couple has lived a life of deeper spiritual fruitfulness than many who are parents. It may be through generosity, through loving hospitality, or through prayer and costly Christian service. In all sorts of ways, doors open to them for fruitful work together.

Childlessness closes certain doors of service, but opens others. And while nothing makes the pain go away easily, such couples will be much happier if they seize those opportunities for service and make the most of them.

Family size – whether we have no children or many children – is ultimately in God's hands. Remember, Abraham and Sara only had one child together, but their small family was part of God's design. Through that one son, God is fulfilling his promise to fill the earth with faithful families.

If you are without children, also remember that all the children of the church belong to you (Mk. 10:30). You are actually part of a very large family! You can play a vital role in Spiritual multiplication and fruitfulness.