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The Value of Children according to the Gospels

Charles A. Gieschen

On September 18, 2012, it was widely broadcast through various forms of media that a small scrap of papyrus had been released for public view by a Harvard professor that contained a Coptic text which mentioned Jesus speaking of someone as “my wife.”¹ This fragment, provocatively named the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*, prompted immediate buzz concerning whether Jesus had been married and even if he possibly had children. Not surprisingly, about a month after its unveiling, it was shown to be a modern forgery.

The canonical Gospels provide no evidence that Jesus ever married or had children. It was not the will of the Father for the life of the incarnate Son. All four Gospels, however, do provide significant evidence of Jesus’ attitude towards women, marriage, and children. This paper will demonstrate that the Gospels testify that children are of central significance to Jesus and the mission he has put before the church. Jesus is not merely affirming cultural norms in his strong support of marriage as a divine institution that consists of a lifelong union between a man and a woman that typically results in the procreation of children. He is, in fact, going against some contemporary Jewish attitudes in his affirmation of that which he as the eternal Son created and instituted: marriage as the lifelong union between one man and one woman that typically is blessed with children. He is also going against the wider norms of both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies as he lifts up children as his exemplar of faith when he uses their example to speak of entry into his kingdom.

This study will consider four aspects of the value of children according to the Gospels. First, it will begin with some brief comments about Old Testament teaching on marriage and children, since such teaching is assumed and affirmed by Jesus. Second, it will focus briefly on the incarnation narrative in the prologue of John and the birth narratives of Matthew

¹ For a brief analysis of this fragment and evidence that it is a forgery, see Charles A. Gieschen, “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife: A Modern Forgery?” CTQ 76 (2012): 335–337.

and Luke as very clear testimony to the value of children with the Gospel writers' focus on the conception and birth of the child Jesus. Third, because any teaching about children assumes teaching about marriage, Jesus' teaching on marriage will be reviewed. Fourth, this study will examine how Jesus uses children in his teaching and what can be concluded from this evidence. Finally, three broad implications on the basis of this Gospel evidence regarding the value of children for our own preaching and teaching in the church today will be sketched out.

I. Old Testament Teaching of Marriage and Children

Inherent in the Genesis 2 narrative of woman being created to be with man is implicit testimony to procreation as necessary and children as having value.² Even though the birth of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) follows the fall into sin (Genesis 3), procreation and children are not the result of the Fall. It is vital to note that the creation of woman to be in a one-flesh union leading to procreation, as well as the command "Be fruitful and multiply [פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ] and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28), precedes the Fall and does not result from it. It is the pain of childbirth that results from the Fall, not procreation itself, as God pronounced in his curse: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen 3:16a).³

Nor does the situation of sin in the world that led to the flood dampen God's desire that those who trust in him should be fruitful and multiply. After what happened in the years between Adam and Noah that led to the worldwide deluge, one would think that there should have been a slight modification to God's plan, like "Do not be too fruitful or multiply too fast because I do not want to put up with this situation again." What is the command, however, that is given to Noah? It echoes the command given to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply [פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ], teem on the earth and multiply in it" (Gen 9:7; cf. 1:28).

With Abraham, God moves from a command to a promise: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful [וְהִפְרֵתִי אֹתְךָ בְּמֵאדָּ מְאֹד], and I will make you into nations" (Gen 17:6). With this promise came the sign of circumcision, Israel's covenant marker (Gen 17:9-14). Circumcision is a visible sign of the important role that procreation played in ancient Israel's identity. It testified not only to the Messiah who would be born from

² For a broad introduction to this topic, see Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 33-102.

³ Unless noted otherwise, all translations are this author's.

among Israel, but also to the value of procreation and children within marriage. The fear of Abraham and so many others in the history of Israel was not the birth of children, but, rather, *not* to be blessed with children in marriage (e.g., Gen 16:1-2; 18:9-15). The evident disappointment in Hannah's prayer over being childless, before she was blessed by the birth of Samuel, shows that the desire for children was not merely a paternal concern among Israelites: "O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life" (1 Sam 1:11).

Daniel Block summarizes several pillars of understanding about children that reflect the high value placed upon them in ancient Israel. His first three are especially noteworthy.

First, every human being is created as an image of God and endowed with dignity in keeping with the divine charge to govern the world on God's behalf. Therefore, to beget and bear children means more than mere procreation; it signifies co-creation—God involving father and mother in the creation of images of himself. Second, in a world languishing under the curse of death because of human sin, children—both male and female—represent the keys to the perpetuation of humanity and the fulfillment of the divine mandate to populate the entire earth. Third, although this prescientific world perceived conception as the implantation of the male seed in the fertile soil of a female's womb, children were viewed primarily as the product of divine action As divine creations children were viewed as special treasures, blessings, gifts granted graciously to parents, and the more children one had, the greater the sense of divine favor.⁴

If one were to select a representative text that expresses the attitude of the wider Old Testament witness about children as "special treasures, blessings, and gifts," the logical text would be Psalm 127.

³ See, children are a special grant of the Lord;
the fruit of the womb is a reward.

⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a mighty man,
So are the children of one's youth.

⁵ How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;
They shall not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.

Much more could be said about the many ways that the desire to be fruitful or simply to have sexual desires led to polygamy, the taking of

⁴ Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," 80-81.

concubines and pagan wives, adultery, and other vices that are not hidden from the reader of the Old Testament. This testimony, however, does not supplant the order in the Creator's design of a lifelong, one-flesh union between one man and one woman resulting in children. The purpose of relating briefly some Old Testament evidence here is to note that the perspective of Jesus in the Gospels assumes much of this evidence and reaffirms it. Much about marriage and children as established in the creation narrative is not restated in the Gospels because it is understood and assumed from the Old Testament as the narrative that was foundational for understanding marriage, children, and family within the ministry of Jesus and early Christianity.

II. The Incarnation and Birth of Jesus in the Gospels

Given the fact that Jesus was no ordinary child, one would think that there would be the temptation among the earliest Christians to depict Jesus at birth as much more than a helpless infant, even like the exalted depiction of the birth of Melchizedek in the Jewish document, 2 Enoch. There one finds this elaborate physical description of him at birth as a supra-human priestly messiah.

^{71:18} And Noe and Nir were very terrified with great fear, because the child was fully developed physically, like a three year old. And he spoke with his lips, and he blessed the Lord. ¹⁹ And Noe and Nir looked at him, and behold, the badge of priesthood was on his chest, and it was glorious in appearance. ²⁰ And Noe and Nir said, "Behold, God is renewing the priesthood from blood related to us, just as he pleases."²¹ And Noe and Nir hurried, and they washed the child, and they dressed him in the garments of priesthood, and they gave him holy bread and he ate it. And they called his name Melkisedek.⁵

Unlike this exalted depiction of a newborn messianic figure or even the "no crying he makes" of the Christmas carol "Away in a Manger," the canonical Gospels give very limited attention to the birth of Jesus. The details that are provided in Matthew, Luke, and John indicate that Jesus would have blended in quite well among other first-century Jewish babies. One of the starkest and most profound scriptural testimonies to the value of children in these narratives of Jesus' origin, even to life beginning with

⁵ This is the translation of recension J of 2 Enoch (c. first century AD) in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 206. For a discussion of Melchizedek in 2 Enoch, see Charles A. Gieschen, "Enoch and Melchizedek: The Concern for Supra-Human Priestly Mediators in 2 Enoch," in *New Perspectives on 2 Enoch: No Longer Slavonic Only*, ed. Andrei A. Orlov and Gabriele Boccaccini (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 369–385.

conception in the womb, is the climatic statement in John's prologue: καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο ("And the Word became flesh"; John 1:14). The Gospel of John contains no narration of how the physical birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary came to be. The prologue, instead, focuses solely on the miracle of the incarnation: the eternal Word, the Son, becoming also flesh. That the eternal Son would take on flesh to become man speaks volumes as to how much God values human life.

In the Gospel of John, the Son taking on flesh becomes the center of God's salvific action that climaxes in Jesus' death. His nine-month residence in the womb, therefore, is as important for our salvation as his three-day rest in the tomb. The miracle of the incarnation becomes the basis for John's proclamation of universal atonement for sin, using the words of Jesus: καὶ ὁ ἄρτος δὲ ὃν ἐγὼ δώσω ἡ σὰρξ μου ἐστὶν ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ζωῆς ("And the bread that I will give on behalf of the life of the world is my flesh"; John 6:51).⁶ This interest in the fleshly humanity of Jesus in the canonical Gospels stands in stark contrast, for example, to the Gnostic Gospels, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*,⁷ where the interest is solely in what Jesus supposedly taught (i.e., secret *gnosis* or knowledge), but not in what he did by taking on flesh and dying an atoning death for sin. That the Son "became flesh" and entered this world as a tiny child in the womb of his mother trumpets out the value of each child from the moment that the miracle of life begins.

The genealogies and birth narratives concerning Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide additional testimony to the value of the created order of marriage blessed with children.⁸ These genealogies testify to the pattern of children as the means by which God fulfills his promise to multiply Abraham's offspring and to bless all nations (e.g., Gen 12:2-3; 17:6), even when the children are the result of illicit unions such as Judah

⁶ Charles A. Gieschen, "The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John: Atonement for Sin?" *CTQ* 72 (2008): 243-261.

⁷ In contrast to the canonical Gospels, Gnostic Gospels like the *Gospel of Thomas* consist of *logion* ("sayings") with little or no interest in narrating Jesus' life, especially his passion. For a translation of these so-called Gospels, see *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, third completely revised edition, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). For analysis, see Jeffrey Kloha, "Jesus and the Gnostic Gospels," *CTQ* 71 (2007): 121-144.

⁸ See the exegetical discussion of the genealogy in Matt 1:1-17 in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006). See the exegetical discussion of Luke 3:23-38 in Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996).

with Tamar and David with Bathsheba (Matt 1: 3, 6) or non-Israelite unions such as Salmon with Rahab and Boaz with Ruth (Matt 1:5).

Both Matthew's and Luke's narration of the events related to the birth of Jesus testify to the miracle of life in the birth of children. The conception of the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the prophet John who will prepare the way for Jesus, happens in spite of their age and Elizabeth's bareness. The angel delivers this promise to Zechariah as recorded in Luke 1.

¹³ "Do not fear, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear a son for you and you will call his name John. ¹⁴ And he will be your joy and exultation, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great before the Lord, and wine or strong drink he will not drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while still in his mother's womb, ¹⁶ and he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go before him in the Spirit and power of Elijah, to return the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."⁹

John would be Zechariah's "joy and exultation" and many would "rejoice" in this birth: καὶ ἔσται χαρά σοι καὶ ἀγαλλίασις καὶ πολλοὶ ἐπὶ τῇ γενέσει αὐτοῦ χαρήσονται (Luke 1:14). Zechariah's song following John's birth reflects this joy (Luke 1:68-79). The angel states that John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). This presence of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated vividly later in the narrative by John leaping in his mother's womb when in the presence of Jesus who was yet in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:41; 43). In order that this leaping not be misinterpreted simply as an active child in the womb, Luke mentions this event twice, including Elizabeth's conviction that John recognized the presence of Jesus in the womb of Mary: "For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the baby leaped for joy in my womb" (Luke 1:43). Arthur Just comments, "Here John, the forerunner, responds to the presence of Jesus, the Messiah, and thus John foreshadows his own role as precursor."¹⁰ What does this account say of the value of this child and other children? They are priceless.

With the birth account of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, the conception is even more miraculous than that of John the Baptist, since no earthly father is involved and the child not only has the Holy Spirit, but is conceived by the Holy Spirit: τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματος ἔστιν ἁγίου (Matt 1:20). Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-56 rejoices in many things, but it

⁹ English translation from Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 48.

¹⁰ Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 75.

certainly does rejoice in the child she is carrying in her womb and his forthcoming birth:

⁴⁶ My soul magnifies [Μεγαλύνει] the Lord and
⁴⁷ my spirit rejoices [ἡγαλλίασεν] in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ because he has regarded with favor the low estate of his servant.
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ because the Mighty One has done great things to me, and holy is his
 name.¹¹

Although the angel's announcement to the shepherds and the heavenly host's *Gloria in Excelsis* testify to the birth of Jesus as savior (Luke 2:8–14), these events and words also testify to the miracle of human conception and birth as well as the value of children that the Christ-child was born to save.

The value of each child is also seen in Joseph's protection of Jesus during the flight to Egypt in order to escape King Herod's effort to eradicate a possible political contender (Matt 1:13–15). Very few people can read of the slaughter of the innocent boys "in Bethlehem and all the region" by Herod (Matt 2:16–18) and not be moved. In this senseless taking of life, there is a clear message: the life of the baby Jesus is valuable and must be protected for the future salvation of the world, and the lives of these little boys are valuable to God, even if not to men like Herod, Pharaoh of old (Exodus 1), or a Sandy Hook school shooter of our day.¹² Here is Matthew's quotation of Jeremiah: "A sound in Ramah was heard, weeping and much mourning, Rachel lamenting her children; and she was not willing to be comforted, because they are not" (Matt 2:18).¹³ What does this communicate about the value of children? They are priceless.

III. Jesus' Teaching on Marriage

What has been expressed to this point about marriage and children is neither new nor shocking. Yet, what may be obvious to many of us is not obvious to others who are impacted much more by societal attitudes than scriptural revelation. For example, theologian Gerald Loughlin makes this startling claim: "Procreation, though natural, is an inessential part of marriage."¹⁴ He also stated that "Christian couples need a good reason for

¹¹ English translation from Just, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 78.

¹² This is a reference to the tragedy that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, when Adam Lanza fatally shot twenty children and six adult staff members on December 14, 2012.

¹³ English translation from Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 129.

¹⁴ Gerald Loughlin, "The Want of Family in Postmodernity," in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 323.

having children, since faith in the resurrected Christ frees them from the necessity to reproduce.”¹⁵ And such nonsense is coming from a theologian? This is the sort of thing that Paul confronted in 1 Timothy when he warned against some Christians teaching that marriage and bearing children was part of the old order that should now be set aside with Christ’s first coming.¹⁶ With this kind of theology, it is no wonder that mainline churches are in rapid numerical decline. This is a case where theology has a direct impact on membership numbers. Against such false teaching, it must emphasized that Christians have been redeemed by Jesus to live out their lives within the created order, if possible, of a lifelong marriage between one man and one woman with procreation resulting in children. This position has been crucial to the fulfillment of Christ’s mission and the future of Christianity in past ages.

The scriptural accounts about marriage in the Gospels, such as Jesus’ presence at the wedding in Cana in John 2:1–12 and his teaching about divorce in the synoptic Gospels, are important in this discussion because they confirm that Jesus reaffirmed this created pattern of marriage, procreation, and children. Although the Cana account is much more than merely a statement of Jesus’ affirmation of marriage between a man and a woman, yet it is certainly that. The first miracle in John’s Gospel is done at a wedding for the benefit of those who had just been married. The eternal Son, who had formed Adam and then Eve to be “one flesh” (Gen 2:18–25), is present at Cana, saving the bridal couple from serious shame due to a shortage of wine. There the bridegroom of Israel (John 3:29) affirms that two becoming one in marriage and having children continues to be the God-pleasing pattern for the end-times that have commenced with his arrival.

It is especially when confronting Jewish teaching about divorce that Jesus shows all of his cards regarding marriage.¹⁷ The Pharisee’s question about Mosaic law on divorce, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” reflects an ongoing debate among Jews about divorce. There were at least two rabbinic schools of thought on divorce at the time of Jesus,

¹⁵ Loughlin, “The Want of Family in Postmodernity,” 323.

¹⁶ 1 Tim 4:3; cf. 2:15. See further Charles A. Gieschen, “Ordained Proclaimers or Quiet Learners? Women in Worship in Light of 1 Timothy 2,” in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, 3rd ed., ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 102.

¹⁷ For a broader discussion of divorce in the Scriptures, see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002).

articulated by the stricter Shammai and the more liberal Hillel. Their positions are expressed in these words from the *Mishnah*:

The School of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything* [Deut 24:1]. And the School of Hillel say: [He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything*. R. Akiba says: Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, *And it shall be if she find no favour in his eyes . . .*¹⁸

Jeffrey Gibbs notes that “the Pharisee’s question about divorce ‘because of *any* charge’ (19:3) seems to be asking Jesus to declare whether his own views on lawful divorce conform to those of Hillel.”¹⁹ Although Jesus lines up much more closely with Shammai on the issue of divorce, he does not draw on that rabbi or any other as the source of his teaching, but instead goes back to the institution of marriage with Adam and Eve in Genesis, as narrated in Matthew 19:

⁴ But he answered and said, “You have read, haven’t you, that the One who created them from the beginning made them male and female?” ⁵ And he said, “Because of this a man shall leave his father and his mother, and will be joined to his wife; and so the two will become one flesh. ⁶ So then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, let not a person separate what God has yoked together.” ⁷ They did say to him, “Why then did Moses command [us] to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He did say to them, “Moses, with a view to your hardness of heart, permitted you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning it has not been like this. ⁹ “And I say to you that whatever [man] divorces his wife (not on the basis of immorality), and marries another [woman] commits adultery.”²⁰

In spite of concessions for divorce already present with Moses in Deuteronomy (e.g., 24:1–4), Jesus stands with Genesis 2:24 and the Creator’s original intention for marriage. He makes this clear by providing a forceful conclusion to what is stated in Genesis: “Therefore, let not a person separate what God has yoked together” (Matt 19:6). Furthermore, when he is standing for marriage as the lifelong, one-flesh union between one man and one woman first instituted by God himself through the crea-

¹⁸ *Gittin* 9:10, *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 321; emphasis original.

¹⁹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 949–950; emphasis original.

²⁰ English translation from Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 942.

tion of Eve from Adam, he is also standing for procreation, children, and their inherent value as the result of this union.

The exchange between Jesus and his disciples after this strict teaching on marriage and divorce is also worthy of attention. Their response to Jesus was, "If such is the case . . . it is better not to marry" (Matt 19:10). Jesus does not agree with this blanket conclusion, so he qualifies it significantly by saying: "Not everyone can receive this saying [i.e., "it is better not to marry"], but only those to whom it is given" (Matt 19:11). He then goes on to acknowledge that in the present and future there will be those who live out their Christian life in celibacy: "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs [εὐνοῦχοι] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:12).²¹ Jesus uses the term "eunuchs" in this statement as a metaphor to signify those in the kingdom who do not marry and lead celibate lives. These individuals "have made themselves eunuchs" by choosing not to marry and practicing celibacy; they are not eunuchs by castration or physiological defect.²² Although Jesus acknowledges celibacy "only for those to whom it is given," his teaching here reaffirms the practice of marriage, procreation, and children as the norm for those in his kingdom.

IV. Jesus' Teaching about Children

Far from being marginalized in the ministry of Jesus, children were central and visible. For example, Jesus' healing ministry included the healing and raising of children: Jairus' daughter (Matt 9:18–19, 23–26; Mark 5:21–24, 35–43; Luke 8:40–42, 49–56); the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (Matt 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30); and the demon-possessed boy (Matt 17:14–21; Mark 9:14–29), and possibly the son of the widow of Nain who is addressed by Jesus as "young man" (νεανίσκε), although we do not know exactly how old he was (Luke 7:11–17).

²¹ Typically a eunuch in the ancient world was a male who had been castrated in order to stop normal sexual development and render him impotent. The "eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men" (Matt 19:12) mentioned in this context is an obvious reference to castration. Those "who have been so from birth" (Matt 19:12) is a reference to males who were born with some physical problem that rendered them impotent. It should be noted that being a eunuch from birth does not signify someone who is a male homosexual. In the ancient world and in this biblical text, eunuchs and male homosexuals were distinct categories. For further discussion, see Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 953–956.

²² The Apostle Paul is sometimes seen as an example of someone who lived a celibate life without becoming married. Notice that Jesus clearly does not command celibacy for his apostles, as the Roman Catholic Church does later for its clergy.

It should not be assumed that Jesus' attitude towards children, especially children with special needs, reflects the wider cultural norm of the Greco-Roman world. Although there is widespread testimony to the value of children, there is also extensive evidence in the Greco-Roman world, prior to and contemporary with Jesus, of the practice of infant exposure for children who were not accepted into the family. Here is a chilling description of this practice.

Before the child was accepted into the family by the father, it was not regarded as a person. If children were not accepted they would be exposed, meaning they were taken to a remote location, or even flung onto a dung heap, to die. There were ostensibly a number of reasons for this cruel practice, including spare resources (starvation in years of bad crops was a real threat to ancient families), unwillingness to leave an inheritance to more than one or two sons, birth of an illegitimate child to a *betaira* or to a concubine, or the birth of a girl. (Girls needed dowries to get husbands and hence threatened the sometimes meager resources of the *oikos*.)²³

The practice of keeping one child over another is vividly evident in this first-century BC letter from an Egyptian recruit in the Roman army to his sister.

Hilarion to his sister Alis very many greetings, likewise to my lad Berous and Apolloniariion. Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not be anxious; if they really go home, I will remain in Alexandria. I beg and entreat you, take care of the little one, and as soon as we receive our pay I will send it up to you. If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be; if it is a girl, cast it out. You have said to Aphrodisias, "Do not forget me." How can I forget you? I beg you then not to be anxious.²⁴

In contrast to such attitudes found in the wider Mediterranean world, Jesus' most significant statements about children are in soteriological contexts where he is discussing salvation. Every society can point to examples where children, especially infants, are marginalized because they cannot advocate for themselves. It is not ironic that right after Jesus' teaching on divorce and marriage in Matthew 19 and Mark 10, children, the fruit of

²³ S. M. Baugh, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Greek Society," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 123.

²⁴ This text is quoted in Baugh, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Greek Society," 125. It is P. Oxy. 744, in *Select Papyri* vol. 2, *Public Documents*, Loeb Classical Library, no. 282, trans. A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), no. 257.

marriage, are being brought to Jesus. Here is the account in Matt 19:13–15 (cf. Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17):

¹³ Then little children [παιδιά] were brought to him in order that he might put his hands on them and pray. But his disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But Jesus said, “Allow the little children [παιδιά], and stop hindering their coming to me; for the reign of heaven is of such ones.” ¹⁵ And when he had put [his] hands on them, he journeyed from there.²⁵

What is especially noteworthy is Jesus’ action, twice noted, of “when he had put hands on them” (ἐπιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῖς). Those who have read the Old Testament narrative know that this is a formal action used in bestowing blessing (e.g., Gen 49:14). Those who have been ordained know that this action has spiritual significance (e.g., 1 Tim 4:14). Jesus words, “Allow the little children, and stop hindering their coming to me; for the reign of heaven is of such ones,” not only signals the importance of children in his earthly ministry (τὰ βρέφη or “infants” in Luke 18:15), but their centrality in the future baptismal ministry of the church, where the Spirit is bestowed by water and the divine name. Here Matthew understands that Jesus is signaling the centrality of infant baptism for the missiology of his church.²⁶

The theological foundation for this missiology is expressed earlier in Matthew 11:

²⁵ At that time Jesus answered and said, “I praise you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you hid these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to infants [ἀπεκάλυψας αὐτὰ νηπίοις]. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for in this way good pleasure happened before you. ²⁷ All things were entrusted to me by my Father; and no one truly knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone truly know the Father, except the Son, and [the one] to whom the Son wishes to reveal [him]. ²⁸ All you who are laboring and are heavily burdened—come to me, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me that I am gentle and humble in heart, and so you will find rest for your lives. ³⁰ For my yoke is pleasant, and my burden is light.”²⁷

²⁵ English translation from Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 960.

²⁶ Contra Gibbs, who sees this conclusion as “an exegetical stretch”; see *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 961, n. 4. It should be kept in mind that Matthew understands the significance of this saying more fully after Jesus’ command to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching (Matt 28:19).

²⁷ English translation from Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 582.

Here Jesus sounds forth the foundational truth that underlines his statement about the kingdom “belonging to such as these”: the wise and understanding can overlook things about Jesus that have been revealed to babes (νηπίοι). This is a rebuff to the high status given to wisdom within both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. This text testifies to infant faith because faith in Jesus is not a rational activity that goes with acquired reasoning and logic skills; it is a divine gift that can be given to babes but resisted by the so-called wise and understanding. One does not come to know the Son or the Father on one’s own; to use the infant birthing vocabulary of Jesus in John 3: one must be “begotten from above” (γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν). Andreas Köstenberger notes that Jesus’ words Matthew 11 turn “. . . out to be prophetic when in Matthew 21:15 the children are shouting in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ (NIV) while the chief priest and the teachers of the law are indignant at the sight of the children’s praise of Jesus and of ‘the wonderful things he did.’”²⁸ The children believe the foolishness of God, while the so-called wise stumble over him.

The baptismal missiology seen in Matthew 19 is even clearer in Matthew 18:1–6, which is the closest synoptic teaching in content to the Johannine Nicodemus narrative (cf. Mark 9:33–37; Luke 9:46–48):

¹ In that hour the disciples approached Jesus, saying, “Who, therefore, is greatest in the reign of heaven?” ² And when he had summoned a child [παιδίον], he stood it in their midst, ³ and he said, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will surely not enter into the reign of heaven! ⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself [to become] like this child [τὸ παιδίον], this one is the greatest in the reign of heaven. ⁵ And whoever receives, in my name, one such child receives me. ⁶ But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble—that a donkey millstone be hung around his neck and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea is better for him!”²⁹

The relationship between the name and baptism is intriguing in Matthew 18: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matt 18:5). This is not a reference to the personal name “Jesus”; it is a reference to the divine name possessed by Jesus that is also possessed by the Father and the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Therefore, this is not only an encouragement to being nice to children, but primarily a reference to re-

²⁸ Andreas Köstenberger, “Marriage and Family in the New Testament,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 270.

²⁹ English translation from Gibbs, *Matthew* 11:2–20:34, 897, 905.

³⁰ Charles A. Gieschen, “The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003): 115–158, esp. 143–146.

ceiving children through the use of the divine name in baptism.³¹ When a child is received in this manner, Jesus is received through the dwelling of the divine name (cf. Matt 10:40). This understanding is stated in the same context of Matthew: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20). This is a reference to the assembled Christian congregation invoking the divine name given them in baptism and shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even as the Name dwelt in the temple of old, now the Name dwells in the baptized; where they gather, there YHWH is present. The closing words of Matthew are the source for such an understanding. After the command to baptize in the divine name, Jesus says: “I will be with you always, even to the end of the ages.” Because the divine name is given and dwelling among the baptized, the Son is present, as is also the Father and the Holy Spirit. David Scaer has been an untiring advocate for the implicit teaching of baptism from texts like this.

Matthew has made it clear at the beginning of his gospel that Baptism is required for inclusion in the kingdom. In both the ministries of John the Baptist (Mt 3:1–6) and Jesus (Mt 4:17), preparation for the kingdom which is coming with Jesus involves confessing and being baptized. Suddenly the baptism of John is not an incidental historical question, because quite evidently those whom Matthew lists as coming to Jesus and being found acceptable by Him are those who confess and are baptized. The argument for infant Baptism is virtually proven.³²

The warning at the end of this text is also significant: “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble—that a donkey millstone be hung around his neck and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea is better for him!” (Matt 18:6). A millstone was a very large and heavy stone; everyone hearing this in the first century would understand it as a dire warning. What does it tell us about the value of children to Jesus in his kingdom? They are priceless.

V. Implications for the Church Today

This paper has demonstrated that children are of central significance to Jesus and the mission he has put before the church. What does this now say to the twenty-first-century church? Three significant implications of Jesus’ teaching for us today will be presented here.

³¹ This conclusion is also clear from what follows in Matt 18:6a: “but whoever causes one of *these little ones who believe in me* to sin.”

³² David P. Scaer, *Baptism*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, vol. 11 (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 1999), 137.

First, in his strong affirmation of marriage, Jesus also strongly affirms procreation through the one flesh union of marriage as well as the inherent value of children as the typical fruit of marriage. In our generation, where such an understanding is by no means widespread, it is vital that we proclaim and teach this perspective in all possible settings, especially with couples preparing for marriage. As pastors, we should not sit silently by as couples come to our congregations asking to be married and then wring our hands when there are not many births and baptisms from these marriages. It is our responsibility in every generation, especially in the confusion of this generation, to teach procreation and the gift of children to a generation where sexual intimacy is increasingly being distanced and disconnected from marriage and procreation. Given the choice between fulfilling personal needs versus the challenging task of juggling the unending and costly needs of children, individuals are increasingly voting for *their* needs and against those of children. Pastors need to tackle the uncomfortable topic of “contraception,” since what was sold as family planning now is also being used to avoid conception and birth except when it is on our terms, our timing, and our number. As pastors, we should not sit silently by as children are killed and ripped out of the protective wombs of their mothers and then wonder why the birth rate has dropped and children are not universally valued in our land and congregations. The influence of *Roe v. Wade* over the past forty years has made our nation the location of a holocaust that makes the horrors of Hitler’s Auschwitz look tame.³³

Second, rather than viewing children as peripheral to his mission, Jesus places children at the front and center of his earthly ministry, as well as his mission of making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching (Matt 28:19). Children are not only valued and loved by Jesus, but they are a primary focus of his salvific activity and models of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. It is not reason and intellect that lead to the assent of faith, but the work of the Holy Spirit; we are passive receivers of God’s gift of salvation. Children, especially infants, illustrate this passive reception, and it is visible no clearer than in infant baptism, where God powerfully works and we passively receive. If we take Jesus’ teaching seriously, it leads us to conclude that children should not only be included in our missional focus, but should be at the center of it. In former days, Lutherans were aghast when they discovered that a child was not yet baptized. When we know that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these, and such as these are not yet baptized, we should seek by all means possible to offer this sacrament so that the Holy Spirit can begin his good work in the child. The

³³ It is estimated that over 50 million babies have been aborted in the US since 1973.

testimony of the Gospels about children is one that renews our zeal to be about biblical and Lutheran missiology: baptizing and teaching!

Third, there is the tendency to view children as second-class citizens in the church. For example, the confirmation rite in *Lutheran Worship* (1982) gave the impression that the baptized really were not yet members of the congregation until they were confirmed.³⁴ Such nonsense! In his teaching, Jesus emphasizes that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I would further assert that an implication of this teaching is that we should capitalize on the key time of catechesis in the life of a child by moving our catechesis and confirmation program to an earlier age before puberty and hormones hit. In no way am I advocating infant/toddler communion; but I am convinced that it is time that we as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod study further the issue of earlier catechesis and communion in order to bring our sacramental practice more in line with the sacramental theology of the Scriptures, for the kingdom of God is given not only in baptism, but also in the body and blood of Jesus. At what age should we be offering these children more than a blessing at the communion rail?³⁵

What, then, shall we do as pastors in this twenty-first-century context? A few of the prophetic words from YHWH through the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon have particular relevance to our situation today. Like ancient Israel, we increasingly find ourselves in a foreign land that does not know the ways of the Lord. Do we despair and retreat? No, as with ancient Israel, God encourages us through Jeremiah to build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, and multiply. Listen to what YHWH says:

^{29:4} Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply

³⁴ See the rite of Confirmation in *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 205–207. Among the questions asked of the confirmand was this one: “Do you desire to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?” (206). Then, toward the end of the rite, the pastor states: “Upon this your profession and promise I invite and welcome you, as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and this congregation . . .” (207). While I used this rite, I found it necessary to add the adjective “communicant” before “member/members” in these lines.

³⁵ A helpful place to begin might be a study of the rite of First Communion prior to Confirmation in *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 25–27.

there, and do not decrease.⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Why is it that Mormons and Muslims know the importance of children for the future, but Christians seem to have lost sight of this?³⁶ Having children and bringing them to the font is one of the most missional activities of the church. The ancient command given our first parents in Eden is still very relevant for the church today and until our Lord's return: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28).

³⁶ The average size of Mormon and Muslim families in the United States is substantially larger than that of Christians. See, for example, the results of the 2008 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" prepared by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life: "Members of the LDS Church have the most children living at home. Mormon households with four or more children are 9 percent of the membership, compared with 3 percent nationally. Runners-up are Muslims, with 6 percent. Only 4 percent of Catholics have four or more children." David Bauman, "LDS Have Largest Families in US," *Deseret News*, February 26, 2008. <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/695256406/LDS-have-largest-families-in-US.html?pg=all> (accessed November 19, 2013).