

MOTHERS,  
CHILDREN,  
AND THE  
BODY  
POLITIC

ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY  
AND THE RECOVERY OF  
HUMAN DIGNITY

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InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Mothers, Children, and the Body Politic* by Nadejda Vladimir Williams.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).



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# INTRODUCTION



IN JULY 2023, I walked away from academia and tenure after fifteen years as a professor. This decision in and of itself was not so unusual. It is the twenty-first century, and plenty of people change careers, after all—especially in this post-2020 age of the Great Resignation. What shocked both friends and strangers alike, however, was what I decided to do instead. Instead of opting for the more typical alternative career choice for ex-academics, such as a consultant or UX researcher, I decided to stay at home full time (aside from some freelance writing and editing) to homeschool my children. “What a loss to the profession,” several friends and former colleagues commented. A couple of friends made tradwife jokes, all in good humor, about my becoming a stereotypical housewife. For what better image to evoke as the exact opposite of a serious academic professional, that stereotypical disheveled creature of crumpled tweed, elbow patches, and eyes perennially red from grading far too late into the night, powered by an excess of caffeine and peanut butter consumed straight out of the jar. With a spoon.

For the record, while everything else applies, unlike most male colleagues, I never did own a tweed jacket with elbow patches. Yet I am no tradwife frolicking in flower fields in a sundress and milking cows for cameras, rest assured. For one thing, sundresses are really not practical for either hanging out at flower fields or milking cows, I hear. But aside from the tradwife social

media cosplays, too many married women today, evangelical and secular alike, have generally internalized the message that feminist writer and cultural icon Betty Friedan first articulated in her 1963 bestselling book *The Feminine Mystique*—even if they have never read Friedan or even heard of her.<sup>1</sup> Friedan was a writer and journalist who was fired from her job for pregnancy, back when this was normal. She saw her contemporary stay-at-home moms (and, of course, herself) as bored, oppressed, and depressed. In response, she wrote her book as a manifesto for miserable modern married women’s liberation.<sup>2</sup> (She had hoped that her therapist would cowrite the book with her. Alas, he turned down this irresistible offer.)<sup>3</sup> An educated woman, in Friedan’s view, could never be truly fulfilled or happy if her life sphere were restricted to the domestic life. But what does such a view suggest about the value of motherhood and its essential companions—children?

## DEVALUING CHILDREN AND MOTHERHOOD

Fast-forward sixty years. In August 2022, Bloomberg broke a sensationalizing news story, confidently asserting that “women not having kids get richer than men.”<sup>4</sup> There it was, set forth already in the title of the article, a bold economic argument that put a price on human relationships and human life, leaping far beyond what Friedan, who was no absolute enemy of marriage and motherhood, had originally advocated. Marriage, the article aimed to show, cost something to women. And, of course, so did having children. In other words, if you are a woman and your chief aim is building up wealth and personal security (as the article presumes it surely should be), then your best course of action is clear. First, do not have children, and second, maybe marriage is not a good idea either. Here is an argument for a life of singlehood (albeit presumably not celibacy), and one that conflates

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<sup>1</sup>Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>For a sympathetic yet complex biography of Friedan, see Rachel Shteir, *Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

<sup>3</sup>Shteir, *Betty Friedan*, 79.

<sup>4</sup>Molly Smith, “Women Who Stay Single and Don’t Have Kids Are Getting Richer,” Bloomberg, August 31, 2022, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-31/women-not-having-kids-get-richer-than-men](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-31/women-not-having-kids-get-richer-than-men).

economic wealth and career success with that more elusive and less easily measurable goal—flourishing.

I read this article a few months before I had finalized my decision to walk away from academia, but I did read it as a married mother of three children. To be honest, it made me angry. The argument boldly put on trial women like me—married and mothers—and found our lives and choices lacking. To be clear, it did not affect my joy in my family, but it was upsetting to learn that the article’s author might look at women like me with pity mingled with outright hyper-Friedanian disdain. I can only imagine what she would have said about my career change.

Before I go on to address responses to this article by experts, I must acknowledge an important point. There is often a perception in evangelical circles that church life is rigged to include and support mothers and exclude single women, making them feel lacking in much the same way as the Bloomberg article did for me. There is certainly some truth to this perception—although the precise degree varies depending on the specific congregation, theological tradition, location, and so on. There is no denying that single women experience significant challenges, and the church should do more to support their flourishing.<sup>5</sup> And yet, there is also no denying that our surrounding culture is increasingly more hostile to motherhood and family.<sup>6</sup> The cultural hostility to one group of women, in other words, in no way negates the existence of similarly intense hostility to another group. This brings us back to the Bloomberg article and the obvious question: Is this true? Are childless women really wealthier and happier than mothers?

Critics swiftly debunked the article’s false premises and misleading methodology, which did not include any married women in the study. Compelling data exists, in fact, that it is married women with children who are the best off economically of all categories of women in modern American

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<sup>5</sup>I appreciate the work of Danielle Treweek in this area. See her book *The Meaning of Singleness: Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

<sup>6</sup>Timothy Carney, *Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be* (New York: HarperOne, 2024).

society.<sup>7</sup> Study after study shows that while single unwed mothers are not flourishing economically, people in happy marriages are financially better off, happier, and healthier.<sup>8</sup> The happiness and health effects seem especially noticeable for men, who live longer if in a happy marriage, but women benefit too—in terms of both finances and health.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Brad Wilcox, who directs the National Marriage Project, has echoed Pope Francis in describing marriage as “a matter of social justice.”<sup>10</sup>

The veracity or falsehood of the Bloomberg article’s arguments, however, is less important than the mere fact of its existence and subsequent popularity. The very attempt in this work to propose the argument that it makes, and to do it so boldly, is a symptom of a pervasive problem in American society: the problem of devaluing motherhood and children in every sphere of modern life. That is the problem that I seek to confront in all its ugliness in the present book, with the conviction that it is impossible to address a problem whose existence and full repercussions in our world and our own lives we do not recognize or acknowledge openly. It is a problem that is symptomatic of a larger devaluing of human life in our society more generally.

The choice of someone to conduct “research” and write the piece, not to mention the willingness of a prominent media corporation such as Bloomberg to publish it, shows a desire in our society, one that is hidden in plain sight, to devalue motherhood and children by pricing human life. In any attempts to make such pricing happen overtly and in distinctly economic terms, the value of mothers (the ones who produce children) and

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<sup>7</sup>W. Bradford Wilcox, “Two Is Wealthier Than One: Marital Status and Wealth Outcomes Among Preretirement Adults,” Institute for Family Studies, December 1, 2021, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/two-is-wealthier-than-one-marital-status-and-wealth-outcomes-among-preretirement-adults->. Erika Bachiochi also provides a historical overview of these trends in *The Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021). See especially chap. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Fry and Kim Parker, “Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living Without a Spouse or Partner,” Pew Research Center, October 5, 2021, [www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/](http://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/).

<sup>9</sup>Brad Wilcox and Nicholas Wolfinger, “Hey Guys, Put a Ring on It,” *National Review*, February 9, 2017, [www.nationalreview.com/2017/02/marriage-benefits-men-financial-health-sex-divorce-caveat/](http://www.nationalreview.com/2017/02/marriage-benefits-men-financial-health-sex-divorce-caveat/).

<sup>10</sup>Brad Wilcox, “Marriage as a Matter of Social Justice,” *The Atlantic*, September 26, 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/pope-francis-marriage-family/407494/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/pope-francis-marriage-family/407494/). Wilcox further expands on this concept as the central argument of his new book *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York: Broadside Books, 2024).

children (the products that mothers nurture at various costs—first and foremost to themselves) invariably seems to come up short. Even if the main claim of the article is faulty, there are real costs attached to children and motherhood—costs that Anna Louie Sussman has declared have led to “The End of Babies.”<sup>11</sup>

First, the health-care costs associated with pregnancy and childbirth alone are staggering—even for a perfectly healthy pregnancy and delivery. As one recent study notes, “Women who give birth incur almost \$19,000 in additional health costs and pay about \$3,000 more out-of-pocket than women of the same age who do not give birth.”<sup>12</sup> Then there is the cost of work hours lost to the employer, if a working mother takes leave according to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and the cost of wages lost to the employee. If the child has any disabilities that require assistance in school or later in life, then there is further economic cost to both the parents and society. In addition, the costs for disaster situations, such as those that require children to be placed in the foster-care system, require yet more financial resources from the state.

Numbers, one could say, do not lie. Children in this day and age are expensive, which means that motherhood is as well. This makes both children and motherhood luxury goods by economic default. It seems callous and crass to speak of motherhood and children in terms of plain economics, even as this has been the implied reality since the original legalization of abortion in 1973. The legal right to abortion made having children an economic choice, and the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* has not reversed this deeply embedded societal belief. Arguments for abortion as a necessary measure of poverty relief continue unabated.

At the same time, we know instinctively deep down—or, at least, we should know it, if we reflect—that this is not how it is meant to be. This is

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<sup>11</sup>Anna Louie Sussman, “The End of Babies,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2019, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/opinion/sunday/capitalism-children.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/opinion/sunday/capitalism-children.html).

<sup>12</sup>Matthew Rae, Cynthia Cox, and Hanna Dingel, “Health Costs Associated with Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Postpartum Care,” Health System Tracker, July 13, 2022, [www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/health-costs-associated-with-pregnancy-childbirth-and-postpartum-care/](http://www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/health-costs-associated-with-pregnancy-childbirth-and-postpartum-care/).



not how God looks at any of us—in his eyes, every single image bearer is priceless. Nevertheless, so often in our society, we conduct this kind of pricing of human “goods” without even thinking. The deadly storm over the past two years of the converging trifecta of the Covid-19 pandemic, reactions to the repeal of *Roe*, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to mention just some relevant examples, has brought such conversations and questions to the fore more openly than before.

What is a human life worth? Are some lives more economically beneficial to society than others? And are there not ways of estimating the worth of a life that are not economically driven at all? As a historian of the ancient world and the early church, I am reminded of the way the earliest Christians challenged the longstanding values of the pagan world around them to display a love of all humanity that was utterly radical—and costly. The early Christians’ pro-life stance included, at the economic level, a radically different and selfless use of money for the benefit of others.<sup>13</sup> That we do not do so in our society today is a powerful reminder that the values of our society at large, including those of many confessing Christians within it, are values of the post-Christian culture all around rather than the church.

**Without God and without the understanding of the *imago Dei* within each human being, what is a human life worth? The pre-Christian Mediterranean world gives us a terrifying answer: it depends.**

Those same values were also the values of the pre-Christian culture. Without God and without the understanding of the *imago Dei* within each human being, what is a human life worth? The pre-Christian Mediterranean world gives us a terrifying answer: it depends. We are living in a crisis of devaluing all human life, and especially the lives of children, even as the June 2022 repeal of *Roe* is lending a false veneer of security or even victory for the pro-life cause.

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<sup>13</sup>Nadya Williams, “Pricing Human Life,” *Current*, September 20, 2021, <https://currentpub.com/2021/09/30/pricing-human-life/>.

## **GOD'S ECONOMY VERSUS THE MODERN SECULAR ECONOMY**

In March 2020, the conversations around the shutdown of the economy brought up questions about the value of human life in direct and tangible ways. In those days, as the pandemic was cruelly carrying off one in every one hundred Americans over the age of sixty-five (a milestone achieved by December 2021), Texas lieutenant governor Dan Patrick openly called for older people in society to sacrifice themselves so that the economy could get back on track. Meanwhile, in an NPR conversation, economists brought up a very straightforward number, shifting the question from the metaphysical to the literal: a human life is worth around \$10 million, although the cost of death, more precisely, for a family breadwinner could be calculated more along the lines of \$800,000.<sup>14</sup> Then, in September 2021, in another instance of pricing human life, a Texas law proposed a \$10,000 reward for those who successfully prosecute abortion providers. Precious lives, again, reduced to mere numbers.

But, again, it is not these figures that should shock us as much as their sheer existence. It is a disturbing reflection of our society's disordered vision of human beings vis-à-vis money that it occurred to so many people to sit down and determine complex formulae that would enable such calculations. What is a human life worth? The answer can, it turns out, be presented as a simple, albeit quite large, number. In contemporary America, making these calculations has become just regular business—a good business practice sometimes, as long as *good* is defined by sheer profit numbers. Here's another example.

In the 1970s, the Ford Motor Company decided not to make safety improvements to its subcompact car model Pinto based on financial calculations. The car manufacturers knew that a safety flaw existed in the Pinto: the positioning of its fuel tank made an explosion likely even in a low-speed rear-end collision. The manufacturers knew how it could be fixed. But calculations based on costs concluded that while recalling the car and providing the necessary safety improvements would have saved lives, the safety

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<sup>14</sup>Sarah Gonzalez, Kenny Malone, and Betsey Stevenson, "Lives vs. the Economy," NPR, April 15, 2020, [www.npr.org/transcripts/835571843](http://www.npr.org/transcripts/835571843).

improvements would have cost more than paying the families of a few people who were expected to die in this defective car model (*Grimshaw v. Ford Motor Company*, 1981). In other words, the company made a profit-driven decision after pricing the safety features needed vis-à-vis the price of paying for the deaths of a few drivers.

Ford's calculations are far from the only time a modern company has used cost-benefit analysis about human life to reach similar conclusions. I could continue listing examples, but the point is clear. Whenever calculations of pricing human life come into the equation, it turns out that people and their well-being are generally not worth as much as industrial or corporate profit. This economics-driven, practical approach to estimating the value of life may seem to make sense in a utilitarian society, in which the chief goal is to do what is most useful and the least costly for the greatest number of people around. But is the United States today a utilitarian society?

Ford's economics-driven approach to pricing human life—an approach that invariably results in devaluing human beings—is an example of a secular company prioritizing profits. Companies do this all the time, we might say and dismiss this example as irrelevant to the present conversation. And yet, while evangelical Christians claim to be staunchly pro-life, both evangelical individuals and institutions are no less guilty on a regular basis of promoting utilitarian policies that, if we analyze them more closely, amount to pricing human life and devaluing motherhood and children. I was shocked to learn, for example, that many evangelical colleges have maternity-leave policies for employees that are even worse than at the secular state university where I taught.

Seeing such inconsistencies grieves me as an evangelical woman and the mother of three image bearers. Christ-followers are people who believe in God's incredible love for all human beings, who are made in his very image, in Christ's atoning death on the cross for this sinful human race, and in his resurrection, which changed everything and is a radical call for Christ's followers to live transformed lives of caring for others. If this is who we are, we need to recognize the clash of values that our identity in Christ presents with the worldly value of pricing human lives in economic terms.

In God's economy, children (and, really, all people) are not goods. Rather, in God's vision of creation, children are *good* in that absolute sense that goes back to the very beginning of creation, in which God expressly pronounced that blessing, the proclamation of goodness. But without God's proclamation that everything and everyone in creation is good, there is no worth except that which people arbitrarily bestow on goods (including people). Without the idea of every single human being as bearing the *imago Dei*, an economically driven universe—the sort that secular economists gleefully ordain with their complex formulae—makes perfect sense.

My goal in this book is to push back against the acceptance of this clash of worldly and Christ-centered values regarding human life, especially the lives of children and by implication mothers, in our society today, particularly in evangelical circles. Indeed, the devaluing of children is inextricably connected to the disdain our society conveys for the work of mothers—from the process of pregnancy to the work and resources expended on child rearing and education. In other words, our society has a built-in disdain for motherhood as a concept. So, I want to begin with an examination of the symptoms that we overlook in our body politic—those nagging body aches and mysterious rashes that we have lived with for so long as to not notice them. We have suffered them so long that we do not realize that anything is wrong, even as the body so desperately tries to tell us that something really has gone terribly awry. This was not how we were created to live, think, and perceive our own worth and the worth of other human beings.

These general themes, of course, are nothing new. Catholic theologians, including Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, have been leaders in this conversation about the sanctity of human life for a long time.<sup>15</sup> Evangelical thinkers have not lagged far behind. The work of Francis Schaeffer readily comes to mind, as he spent much of his career charting this very history of the devaluing of human life and worth in Western civilization, and warning against

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<sup>15</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html).

consequences yet to come if these trends were to continue.<sup>16</sup> More recently, over his prolific writing career spanning six decades and counting, Wendell Berry has also considered similar questions in connection to local culture and agriculture. Human dignity and worth, for Berry, are under extreme threat in our industrialized and viciously and unnaturally industrializing world.<sup>17</sup>

I cannot improve on their works, but this book has something new to add to the conversation yet. My focus is specifically on ways in which the problem of devaluing human life manifests itself so insidiously and pervasively in our society's widely accepted attitudes toward children and those who invest so much into children, beginning with the very investment of their own bodies—mothers. Through this focus I pursue the attendant historical and theological question—What difference does the belief in *imago Dei* make?—and also aim to propose countercultural answers, likewise rooted in a historical exploration.

There are important new implications and applications that emerge from this narrower starting focus on devaluing of children and motherhood in our culture, if considered from the perspective of a mother who holds evangelical theological views. It seems that too often, after all, reflections on children and motherhood come from a worldview that is thoroughly secular and feminist, a tradition ranging from Virginia Woolf's writings to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* to, most recently (to name just a few representative examples), Sophie Lewis's books *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* and *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, and Julie Phillips's *The Baby on the Fire Escape: Creativity, Motherhood, and the Mind-Baby Problem*.<sup>18</sup>

In such examinations and manifestos, children are forced to give way and get written out of the narrative exalting mothers' creative impulses. There

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<sup>16</sup>Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), and, to note a less famous book in which he also addresses this, *Back to Freedom and Dignity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1972).

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), and *Remembering* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008).

<sup>18</sup>Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006); Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019); Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2022); and Julie Phillips, *The Baby on the Fire Escape: Creativity, Motherhood, and the Mind-Baby Problem* (New York: Norton, 2022).

are other equally worthy—or, Lewis contends, much worthier—competitors for the mother’s affections than children. This, as I will show, is yet another symptom of the devaluing of both children and motherhood in our society. In God’s economy, even the most amazing works of art will never compete with people, every single one of them made in his very image. Besides, as Jennifer Banks shows in her book *Natality: Toward a Philosophy of Birth*, it is reflections on birth and on being born, even if not always in connection with motherhood proper, that define the creative thought and writing of many leading thinkers of the modern world, from Mary Shelley to Hannah Arendt and Toni Morrison.<sup>19</sup>

To be clear, several thoughtful voices have recently advocated for the recovery of a different kind of feminism from that presented by Woolf, Friedan, and Lewis. In her book *Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision*, Erika Bachiochi presents a poignant call to growth in virtue for both men and women based on the philosophical writings of Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>20</sup> Women’s full flourishing, Wollstonecraft argued over two centuries ago, requires supporting their full intellectual development and access to education. It also requires seeing marriage and the work of child rearing as a joint project of men and women together, growing in virtue as parents. Wollstonecraft’s vision of feminism—and we would be remiss to not recognize it as feminism!—involves celebrating mothers and furthermore viewing women’s education in moral and intellectual spheres as essential for their ability to fulfill their calling as mothers, wives, and productive members of society.

In her book on the history of pregnancy, *Showing: What Pregnancy Tells Us About Being Human*, Agnes Howard makes a similar case for the natural growth in the virtues that pregnancy fosters in expectant mothers.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in her book *Motherhood: A Confession*, Natalie Carnes tracks this personal growth that a mother experiences through her journey into this

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<sup>19</sup>Jennifer Banks, *Natality: Toward a Philosophy of Birth* (New York: Norton, 2023).

<sup>20</sup>Erika Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2021).

<sup>21</sup>Agnes Howard, *Showing: What Pregnancy Tells Us About Being Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

unfamiliar land by rewriting Augustine's *Confessions* from her own perspective as a new mother.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the new journal launched in 2023, *Fairer Disputations*, and its contributors—including Bachiochi, Leah Libresco Sargeant, and Mary Harrington, among others—argue effectively that contrary to its claims, modern secular feminism has been decidedly antiwoman in its treatment of women's bodies and psyches.<sup>23</sup>

This book contributes to the valuable dialogue that these and other thinkers have started, but my chief contribution to this conversation comes in my capacity as a classicist and historian of the ancient world. The contrast between the pre-Christian Roman world and the values of the early church provides a striking argument for the role of Christianity in creating a wholly countercultural valuing of human life, no matter age, gender, social status, family connections, or ability level. This story, in turn, shows ways in which the recovery of these values of the early church could yet reshape our own society's blighted discourse on human life.

It is ironic indeed to acknowledge that at this moment, following the repeal of *Roe*, the number of abortions in the United States has not diminished significantly. In fact, in states where abortion is legal, it has increased dramatically.<sup>24</sup> The numbers may be even higher than reported, as increasingly more abortions are completed by medication.<sup>25</sup> Acrimonious divisions only foment further polarization over the subject of abortion access in different states and smaller locales. Meanwhile just to the north of the United States, in Canada, euthanasia continues to grow and expand. It is only through the recovery of the valuing of all human life, so deeply countercultural in our world, that there is a chance to change the broader culture, at

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<sup>22</sup>Natalie Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>23</sup>Fairer Disputations, <https://fairerdisputations.org>; Leah Libresco Sargeant, Other Feminisms Project, <https://otherfeminisms.substack.com/>; and Mary Harrington, *Feminism Against Progress* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2023).

<sup>24</sup>So reports the Guttmacher Institute, a pro-choice organization that actively supports access to abortion: "New State Abortion Data Indicate Widespread Travel for Care," September 7, 2023, [www.guttmacher.org/2023/09/new-state-abortion-data-indicate-widespread-travel-care](http://www.guttmacher.org/2023/09/new-state-abortion-data-indicate-widespread-travel-care).

<sup>25</sup>Rachel K. Jones et al., "Medication Abortion Now Accounts for More than Half of All US Abortions," Guttmacher Institute, February 24, 2022, [www.guttmacher.org/article/2022/02/medication-abortion-now-accounts-more-half-all-us-abortions](http://www.guttmacher.org/article/2022/02/medication-abortion-now-accounts-more-half-all-us-abortions).

least in some circles. How we talk about human life has the potential to reshape the current conversations that have largely stalled.

## **PRICELESS: RECOVERING THE COUNTERCULTURAL VALUING OF ALL HUMANITY**

There are three main questions I want to answer in this book. First, in what ways does this devaluing of motherhood and children in our own society manifest itself? Just how deep does this problem go? Second—and this is where my historical expertise will particularly come into play—how might the history of the extraordinary and unconditional valuing of human life in the early church help us to get back on track?

The early church, while not always living up to its own teachings, aimed to be deeply countercultural in the cruel setting of the ancient Mediterranean. We need to restore this countercultural valuing of all humanity in our own world. While this means not thinking of human life primarily in economic terms, it also means recognizing, as the early church did, that we sometimes must redeem others at a cost to ourselves. Cost-benefit analysis is not a Christian approach to thinking about human beings. The work of Charlie Camosy, among others, in advocating for family-friendly policies in contemporary America as the key to reducing abortions thus directly responds to some of the calls of the earliest Christians to fight against the dominant culture that was as antilife as it is in our own world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Charles Camosy, “Why Believe Better Family Policies Will Reduce Abortions? Well, There’s the Data,” Religion News Service, June 7, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/06/07/why-believe-better-family-policies-will-reduce-abortions-well-theres-the-data/>.



Third, where do we go from here? In responding to this final question, I consider the ideas of three select thinkers, two ancient and one modern, who have been pushing us to see the preciousness of all humanity in ways that acknowledge the challenges of this present life while insisting on the eternal truth about the priceless value of every human life.

With these overall questions in mind, part one of the book focuses on the symptoms of the disease in the body that is modern American society. Each chapter offers a close examination of those symptoms, which suggest that something truly is wrong and that our society at large, including Christians and non-Christians alike, has absorbed the view that motherhood and children are too costly and insufficiently valuable in economic terms. I argue that different people may not project this assumed disdain for motherhood and children in exactly the same ways. Yet, regardless of who we are, where we live, and even how many children we have (or don't have), this devaluing of children and motherhood has become so deeply and universally ingrained that we project it in some way, thought, or behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Chapter two looks at the death of the dream of becoming a parent, which used to be a natural part of expectations of a fulfilling life as recently as the mid-twentieth century but no longer. In examining the signs of the death of this dream, which show the devaluing of motherhood in our world, I consider the modern approach to pregnancy and delivery. For instance, what messages do expecting mothers encounter when they go to a typical doctor's office for prenatal care? You'd be surprised.

In the third chapter, I turn to the objectification of children as commodities, as seen in fertility practices and the educational system. I argue that in both cases, there is a desire to engineer the ideal child, and this desire ultimately ignores personhood and the uniqueness of God's own design for each child. Ultimately, the modern view of children proposes an assembly-line life that denies any personhood and individuality, preferring instead to

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<sup>27</sup>A Catholic economist who has most recently and poignantly analyzed this tendency in our society is Timothy P. Carney in his book *Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be* (New York: HarperCollins, 2024).

commodify children to their parents' and society's preferences. Faulty models at all stages of the assembly line ought not to be tolerated.

To conclude part one of the book, I consider in the fourth chapter the most personal of all the symptoms of devaluing motherhood and children, at least for me as a wife and mother who also happens to be a writer. This symptom is the encouragement of women, over the course of the second half of the twentieth century on, to think of themselves as writers, intellectuals, artists, and capitalist producers, all at the expense of thinking of themselves as mothers. Instead of thinking of these identities as overlapping and supplementing each other, the emphasis is rather on competition for a woman's time and energy. In this particular economy, children yet again come up short in the writings of such leaders as Roland Barthes, Betty Friedan, and Julie Phillips. All three writers' arguments in favor of women's liberation and empowerment as creative doers ironically dismantle women's value as women and mothers. In the process, their arguments reflect a devaluing of children in favor of the idol of self-gratification. Furthermore, I argue, the mother becomes reduced in the process to the role of mere surrogate.

Taken together, the chapters in the first part of the book show remarkable similarity in our world's devaluing of children and motherhood to that in the pre-Christian pagan Roman world. So, shifting gears to dig deeper into the historical background, part two of this book examines the contrast between the overwhelming devaluing of life in pre-Christian antiquity with the revolutionary embracing of the value of life, and especially of mothers and children, in the early church. While the undervaluing of life in the pre-Christian Roman world is obviously not an exact correlation to the modern American experience, the similarities to our increasingly post-Christian society should nevertheless give us pause. Without the doctrine of *imago Dei*, what is the perception of humanity and the worth of any life, including those of women and children? The answer that emerges is clear: without an understanding of the value of humans as made in God's image, there is no reason to regard them as priceless.

Chapter five turns to the devaluing of women and children in the pre-Christian ancient Mediterranean. The surviving sources from classical Greece and into the Roman Empire show clearly that in the socially and economically stratified communities of the ancient Mediterranean, misogyny was rampant, women were largely valued as mere sex objects, and children's value depended on their status and perceived health. As table IV of the earliest Roman law code, the Twelve Tables, states, the father of the household had the duty to kill a deformed infant upon birth.

Chapter six will consider the perception of the members of ancient Mediterranean society who did not fight in war—meaning women, children, and the elderly—as *achrestoi*, the useless ones. The connection between the value of people for the military and their value in society was definitive in antiquity. Citizenship was only available to those eligible to serve in the military as well. At the same time, civilians were most likely to be victimized by war in various ways—from systematic rape and genocide to sale into slavery. Julius Caesar's own account of the Gallic Wars will be one of our chief guides in considering this phenomenon. In addition, the treatment of captive women as portable trophies to be traded at will, seen already as early as in Homer's *Iliad*, further underscores the objectification of women and the devaluing of their lives in the pagan worldview.<sup>28</sup> Overall, this is what a world without Judeo-Christian theology of personhood looks like. Last but not least, however, ancient warfare practices also show that valuing life is connected to stewarding the land. By contrast, devaluing life is connected to destroying the land in which people live. This has implications for today, to which I will turn in the concluding chapter of the book.

Chapter seven highlights some of the ways in which the early church overturned these deeply ingrained values by seeing all people as precious and valuable, because they were made in God's image. One particularly key point that emerges is that valuing single people, the childless, and other

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<sup>28</sup>Strikingly, a recent so-called vitalism movement of right-wing intellectuals seeks to recover this very sort of pagan view of women. See John Ehrett, "The Impossible Bronze Age Mindset," *American Reformer*, April 15, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/04/the-impossible-bronze-age-mindset/>.

“rejects” in ancient society sets the stage for valuing all other human life, including mothers and children. In Christ, every human life is precious, and this valuing stands in sharp contrast to the ancient world, where one’s value depended on family of origin, marital status, and childbearing, among other factors.

The concluding part of the book aims to present more practical reflections that might heal our world and encourage the church to be countercultural in its treasuring of mothers, children, and all humanity. In the third part of the book, I examine closely the arguments of three thinkers, two ancient and one modern, who offer exemplary voices of life. All three push us in different ways to embrace a comprehensive and consistent pro-life ethic of valuing children and motherhood and all humanity as good in an absolute sense. All three have relevant answers for us in considering where to go from here, if we want to advocate for the kind of countercultural valuing of life that the early church defended. This means embracing a slower-paced life that provides comfort in the difficulties of raising children, challenges the idolization of technological progress, consistently condemns war and violence, and, finally, recovers the importance of rootedness in a specific place as an essential aspect of valuing human life and flourishing.

The first of these three thinkers, whose writing I examine in chapter eight, is the martyr Perpetua, who was killed along with an enslaved Christian woman, Felicity, in Carthage in AD 203. Perpetua’s prison journal while she was awaiting martyrdom brings up questions of priorities, earthly and eternal, for Christian mothers, presenting a powerful answer to the anti-motherhood ethos of modern feminist manifestos.

In chapter nine, I turn to Augustine. For him, valuing life involved acknowledging the horrors of war head-on, as we see especially in the brutal Gothic sack of Rome in AD 410, which inspired his *City of God*. Augustine’s emotional retelling of Roman history in the wake of this tragedy that rocked the Roman Empire shows his conviction that a proper understanding of history is essential for a theologically accurate valuing of human lives in all periods, including in the present. Augustine’s response to the sack of Rome

gives us powerful tools for processing modern traumas of devaluing human life. Finally, Augustine's love of writing for the church reminds us of the importance of maintaining Christian community through writing that convicts, encourages, and transforms. This is what the redemption of writing looks like. It is not just an act of self-fulfillment but a transformational act of evangelism and love.

I conclude the book with a chapter examining the thoughts on personhood and the valuing of life by Wendell Berry, a writer who has devoted his life to writing about ways we could honor and value humanity in connection to God and the land. He speaks of the power of words and seemingly simple actions to heal and make whole bodies, hearts, and souls that have been wounded by life in the modern world. Ultimately, valuing mothers and children for who they are, rather than bemoaning their economic cost, is about celebrating the preciousness of human life in the context of family and community. This means stripping away all the extras that we sometimes make into idols that move us more than the real image bearers all around, who need and deserve our love.

We live in a time of crisis. In fact, we live in a time of many crises, but as has been the fate of the weak in all of human history, this crisis, revolving around the valuing of children, has simply not been taken as seriously as some others. It is a social and ethical crisis that encompasses such hot-button issues as the nature of the family, the definition of marriage and its purposes, abortion and fertility treatments, and larger questions about human flourishing in a world that reduces people to machines while elevating machines to the status of persons. But we cannot forget that at its heart, this is a theological crisis. Without acknowledging the existence of this crisis and seeing it for what it is—the seeping of societal values into the church—God's people will only continue to lose their saltiness. Ultimately, a society that lives as though the *imago Dei* is not true has a crisis of unbelief.

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