

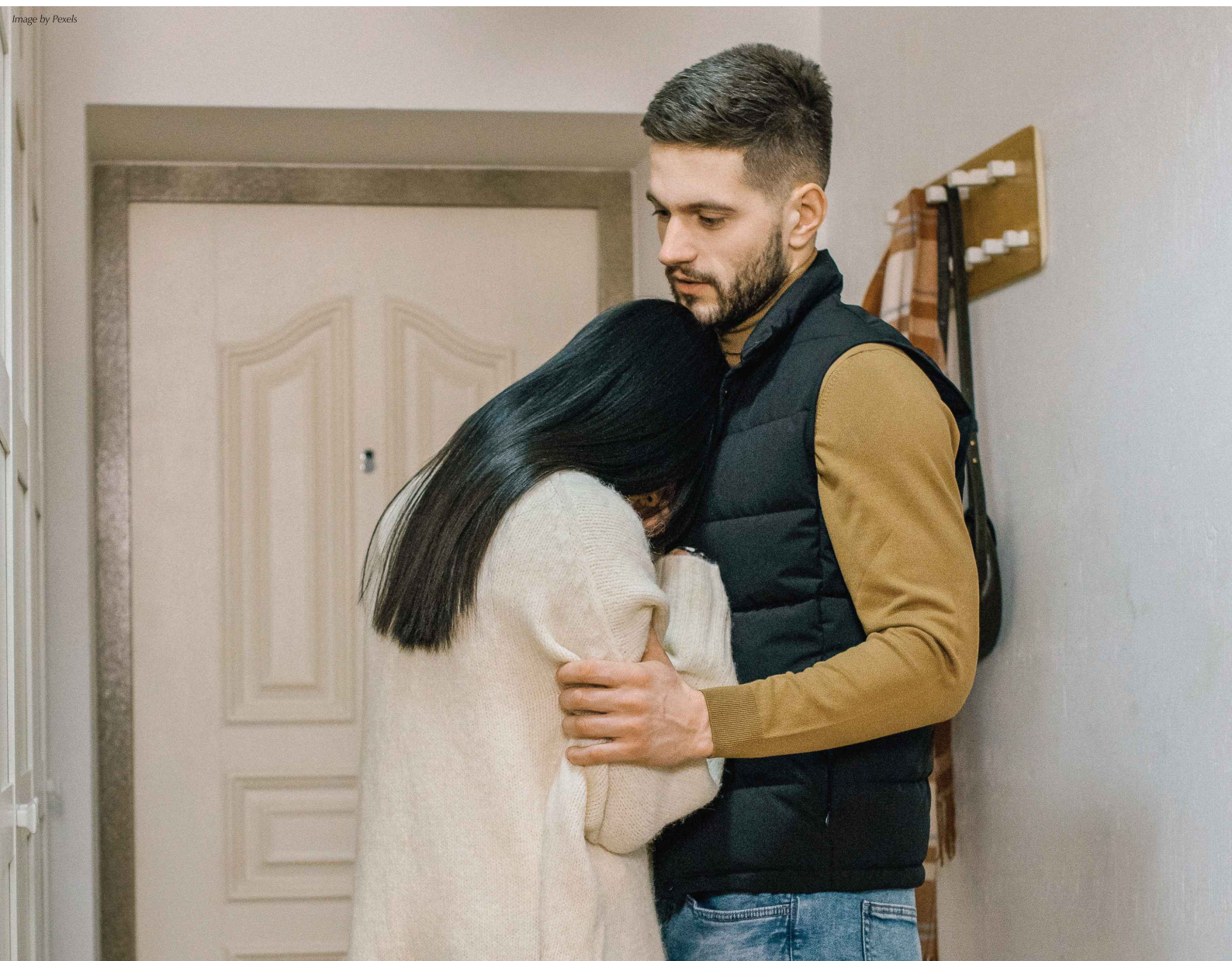
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in FOCUS

Volume 50/4, May 2023

# Infertility

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## Editorial

It may seem unusual to dedicate an issue of a church magazine to what is technically a medical issue. However, infertility strikes at the heart of who God created us to be as people – the creation mandate given to Adam and Eve to fill the earth and subdue it. When a couple is unable to “fill the earth”, to participate in the blessings of the covenant, this can be an incredibly difficult and lonely road to travel.

This is a topic which causes a great deal of pain and yet may go under the radar for many due to the sensitivity of the issue. I have known a number of couples dealing quietly with infertility while not wanting to tell everyone around them that they are doing so. This can be due to a sense of privacy, due to lack of understanding from people who don't understand the complexities of infertility, or due to a lack of desire to answer hundreds of questions! Some may not want to be treated differently, or they just don't have the energy to deal with probing enquiries.

When we consider the inability to have children it becomes difficult to reconcile our view of a loving God, who has our best interests at heart, with the reality of the helplessness of the process of infertility. How do we navigate the complex ethical minefield of medical options that are available to help? How do we cope with family members and friends' well meaning but sometimes unhelpful advice? What do we do with all the emotions that well up at births, baptisms and children's parties? There are no easy answers to these questions, only the truth that God gives us in his word:

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble. Psalm 46:1*

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. Proverbs 18:10*

Given that friends and family members around us may be quietly suffering, let us consider how we may encourage and support one another through the winter seasons of our lives, of which infertility can be a long one. Let us not leap in with hasty words of advice, be that medical or spiritual, but with prayerful consideration and large doses of brotherly and sisterly love. It is our hope that everyone who reads this issue may find helpful information and encouragement for themselves, or a deeper understanding of this difficult topic.  
*Joanna Voschezang*

Many thanks to our contributors for their insight and perspectives on this topic.  
*Soli Deo Gloria.*

Mrs Jenny Waldron writes on the impact of infertility.

Rev Josh Flinn writes on a personal journey through infertility.

Doctor Hans Snoek gives us a medical perspective on causes and treatments.

The opinions expressed in this magazine are not to be considered the official position of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand unless they expound the biblical system of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, or the Westminster Confession of Faith, or reflect the successive Acts of Synod of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. On the other hand, care is taken to ensure that articles and opinions do not directly contradict the official position of the Reformed Churches as contained in the above sources without attention being called to that fact.

**NB:** In line with common publishing practice *Faith in Focus* reserves the right to publish the names of all contributors with their articles, unless compelling reasons are given to the editor for not doing so. This applies to both print and online versions.



JENNY WALDRON

# Infertility and miscarriage



*Image by Pexels*

In many Christian circles, it is expected that once a couple gets married, a baby, or three, will follow in the not-too-distant future. What is it like when this doesn't happen, and the couple really want to have children? What impact might this have on a couple's marriage or spiritual life? How can family/friends/the church support those who are struggling with infertility and its close relative, miscarriage, when emotions are big and raw and difficult to share?

Infertility is defined as not being able to become pregnant (conceive) after one year

of trying, or an inability to carry pregnancies to a live birth. It includes "primary infertility" when somebody has never been pregnant (never conceived), and "secondary infertility" when a couple are unable to conceive after previously having conceived or had a child. Parents may mourn that they are unable to have any more children, as may their child/ren, that they won't be welcoming a brother or sister. Grandparents, too, may also grieve for the lost hopes and expectations of grandchildren.

With 1 in 4 couples currently experiencing infertility in New Zealand<sup>1</sup>, there is a high

Infertility can be very difficult on a couple. It can pull them apart, one may blame the other, one may want to try, or continue with, IVF and the other may be emotionally exhausted by all the procedures and cannot bear to try or hope again. Sexual relations can become all about doing it at the right time and hyper focused on conception rather than the physical joy of being a married couple.

probability that you or someone in your church/school/work/family circles will be struggling with this issue. It feels almost callous to reduce this down to an “issue” when infertility and/or miscarriage may well be playing a huge part in your/their lives and in the lives of those around you. Many women choose not to tell anyone they are pregnant until they are “safe”, which perpetuates the silence of their grief and the inability to give and receive support.

Yes, there are the wonderful tales of a birth of a child after a long period of infertility, including Sarah in the Old Testament and Elizabeth in the New Testament, and of children adopted into loving families but let us not overlook the pain and suffering of infertility that many couples go through, often silently.

My mother had 13 miscarriages before she and Dad decided to try adoption. There was no IVF or other procedures, no understanding of the emotional toll, no support, in or out of church, and all she had wanted, all her life, was to have babies. Back in those days, it was relatively easy to adopt, and my 2 brothers and 2 sisters and I feel very blessed to have been adopted into a Christian home. However, she often spoke about her inability to have her own children with great sadness.

**Faith:** Infertility is an extremely personal and intimate issue that strikes at the very core of who we are, at our desires and purpose in life. It is totally understandable for men and women in this situation to question their faith in God, one who (we are told often) “has good plans for us”<sup>2</sup>, where “all things work together for good”<sup>3</sup>, who repeatedly says “children are a blessing”<sup>4</sup>. To question God, who is loving, caring, kind and compassionate, and yet allows some of His children to go through this immense suffering is understandable. There is no human answer to this. No helpful trite answers. No fix-it verses. I can only point you to Christ and his suffering, particularly as he went to the cross and became separated from His heavenly father. A suffering that separated son from parent. I know people who have left the faith because of a “callous” God who would not give them children, “the desires of their heart”. I have also seen faith deepened, enriched, and become more trusting as God has remained at the heart of the marriage and the individual.

There are no 10 steps to work through grief, or a right or linear way to mourn, especially as a reminder turns up every month. Emotions are fickle things that are

huge and overflowing or hidden and shy only to flare up at unexpected moments. It is important to acknowledge the emotions and to give them names and space to be expressed. This may seem counter to how many of us have been raised. We may have been told “you’ll be alright”, “you don’t need to cry” or somehow caught the idea that we are a burden to others if we share our difficulties. People may say “are you over it now?” or “you just need to trust God [more]”! It can be very helpful to express our emotions and it is an encouragement to others to be allowed to journey with another, to help carry another’s burden for a while. It is a blessing to “one another” someone going through a time of suffering and distress.

**Emotions:** Infertility is a rollercoaster of emotions, a constant roundabout of appointments and procedures, a “lucky dip” that keeps offering a no, a see saw of anxiety and depression, a swing of hopes and monthly periods, a firing range of blanks, an apple-bobbing for a fertile egg, a slippery slide of grief and anguish and watching the helium balloons of expectations float away. Some other emotions that may come: grief, anger, frustration, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, shame and guilt, jealousy and envy, heartbreak, disillusionment, embarrassment and confusion.

**Marriage:** Infertility can be very difficult on a couple. It can pull them apart, one may blame the other, one may want to try, or continue with, IVF and the other may be emotionally exhausted by all the procedures and cannot bear to try or hope again. Sexual relations can become all about doing it at the right time and hyper focused on conception rather than the physical joy of being a married couple.

A couple, I’ll call them Jane and John, married in their late twenties. They tried for many years to fall pregnant and Jane, who was a “natural mother” to so many community children, longed for her own babies. Eventually they attended a clinic to find out “what was wrong”. John had a low sperm count. He felt (and still feels) “such a failure. Not my fault, but still, such a failure”. They tried several treatments and procedures, did everything the doctors told them until, by their mid 30’s they could no longer take the emotional strain of the hope offered by these and the disappointments that followed. They accepted, on some level, that they “were not going to have children and this was God’s plan”. I say

accepted and yet 22 years later the pain is still raw as we talked about it. John said, "Failing to have children was an unexpected blow. We never had, don't have, the family [we believe] God had planned for us. That continues to be difficult when it is in mind."

### What might be helpful for a couple to do?

- Keep reading your Bible, meditating on helpful passages (e.g. Psalms), and listening to God's word preached. Ask God (plead with him) for His peace that surpasses all understanding which will guard your hearts and minds.<sup>5</sup>
- Prayer (I find writing out my cries to the Lord very helpful as it helps unjumble the thoughts and emotions that are very loud in my head). Ask for God's grace to get through today or even until morning tea time, then lunch time and so on.
- Surround yourselves with people who are supportive and understanding. These may be family members, friends, church family or online support.
- Keep talking to each other (marriage 101).
- Journal, blog, write a rap! Get your thoughts and emotions out into words.
- Find gratitude and thankfulness in the small things and moments. God is still there blessing us, if we can but look for God's many goodnesses and blessings in an otherwise tumultuous and difficult time.
- Have a ceremony for the baby who miscarried. This may bring a sense of recognition of what has happened to this precious life as well as giving a time and space to yourselves, and others, to mourn. Naming the baby can be helpful too.
- Ask God how He can use you, in what you have been or are going through, to help others.

This may be another way of thinking about miscarriage. One young couple had had difficulty conceiving but when they finally did, they were quick to announce their good news. They firmly believed that a baby was created at conception. Sadly, 4 months later, they lost the baby. The couple received a lot of support from their family and friends and church, as they "felt privileged to have been able to carry a baby even for such a short time". This always stuck with me as a powerful statement in the world we live in, where so many people believe we carry "tissue" before birth (and therefore, nothing to grieve and mourn



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over). This could be a way that we could show to the world our belief in God who is the creator of babies at conception and to receive support and understanding as we grieve and mourn.

### How can I help a couple struggling with infertility?

- Educate yourself on infertility. It is outside the scope of this article to go into details, but there is a lot of information available, then you will know what procedure(s) they are talking about, the causes, the myths, the facts.
- Don't suggest they try this, that or another thing. They probably already have or talked about it.
- **LISTEN to understand, not to respond.** Don't try to fix it or offer stories of a couple you know who conceived when they stopped IVF, or of adoption or how "they are such a great aunt and uncle". Don't start any conversation with "at least...": "...you know you can get pregnant (after a miscarriage)", "... you don't have 7 children!", "you can have another go at IVF".
- Help them to negotiate the playground of emotions.
- Offer to attend medical appointments with them.
- Offer to look after older child(ren), if secondary infertility, while they attend appointments etc.
- Don't assume they want to talk about it. Wait for them to bring it up when they are ready.
- And ... Pray! For the couple, and also how can God use you in this situation.

Finally, the Psalmist says "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me"<sup>6</sup>.

Whatever we are going through, whether it is infertility, miscarriage, accompanying others through this difficult journey, or some other struggle, our God is with us.

### References

- 1 <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/i/infertility/>
- 2 Jer 29:11
- 3 Rom 8:28
- 4 Ps 127:3, Prov 17:6
- 5 Phil 4:7-8
- 6 Ps 23:4

*I have not had to experience infertility personally although I have had 2 miscarriages. I bring the experience of my roles as pastor's wife, daughter, counsellor, and friend as I have journeyed with those for whom infertility and miscarriage has been a part of their lives. This is my humble offering.*

*Mrs Jenny Waldron is a qualified counsellor, currently working for Drug Arm Christchurch. She is also on the executive committee of the New Zealand Christian Counsellors Association, and a member of the Christchurch Reformed Church (Cornwall Street).*



JOSHUA FLINN

# Infertility: an often hidden (*but not uncommon*) pain

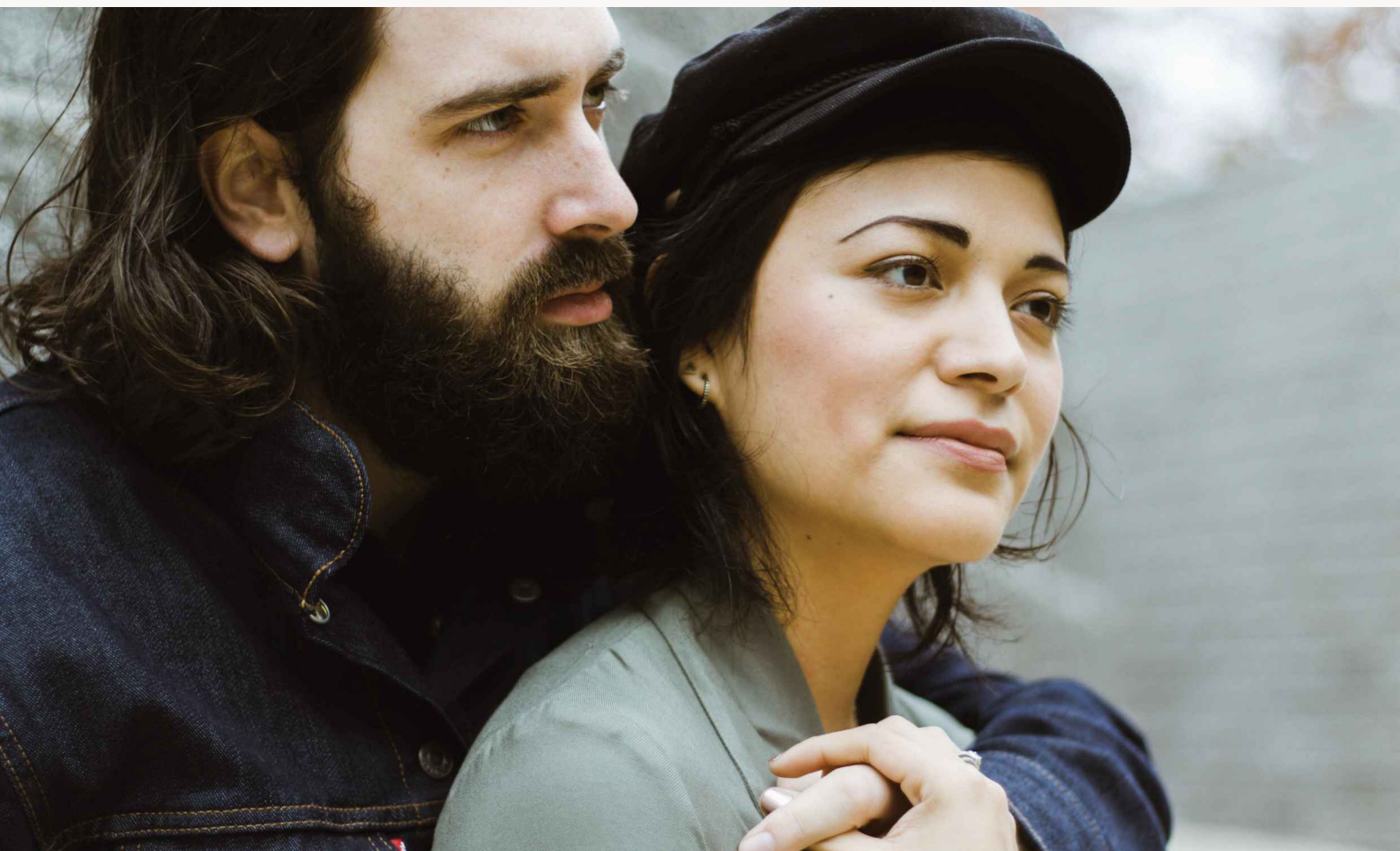


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A New Zealand study from 2021 concluded that over 8% of men and over 12% of women experienced infertility.<sup>1</sup> This was either in relation to conceiving a child or carrying a child to full term. Healthnavigator reports that one in four women suffer from miscarriages, and that it occurs in 1 or 2 of every 10 pregnancies.<sup>2</sup> What does this mean? It means that roughly a quarter of the people you know carry a deep-rooted pain ... a pain that often is hidden from everyone except the closest of family and friends.

Nevertheless, if you have not dealt with

this yourself, you may not have realised just how common this pain is. And to be fair, there are reasons why you weren't aware. Not only do infertile couples generally keep their pain private, but their friends also don't want to pry – because they know that if what they *suspect* is true is *actually* true, then asking about it could tear open a wound better left closed.

As if this wasn't difficult enough already, Christian couples who struggle with infertility have an even harder battle. Why? Because the Christian church *loves* babies. This is, of course, based on what the Bible teaches

about the responsibilities and joys of parenting, the celebration of the covenant community in infant baptism, the larger than average size of Christian families, and so on. And so, sometimes, the place where we might experience the greatest peace and love (the gathering of the saints in the presence of their heavenly Father) feels more like salt than solace.

In this way, church can be such a painful reminder of what God has denied us, that it's hard to see through the fog to what he has blessed us with.

So where do we go from here? There is so much to say, but if you have been suffering in this way, allow me to make three brief observations:

### **You're not alone in your suffering**

This is certainly true in that there are many others who struggle (and *have* struggled) with infertility. Many of the couples older than you have been through the same kind of pain. You may not know it because either they now have children, or they are old enough that you just assume their children have left home ... but you are certainly not alone in this way. There are many who would be an empathetic support for you if you were willing to lean on them for help. And there is much truth to the saying: A burden shared is a burden halved. God calls us to weep with each other, not just to rejoice with each other.

But there's another way that you are not alone that you might not have considered. The pain you feel is more similar to other pains than you might have realised. The effect of sin on the body is felt by most of us ... a health denied ... mobility restricted ... a loved one lost. There are many who had high hopes in their marriages for happiness and peace and yet, despite their best efforts, they experience the exact opposite. I raise this not to undermine the particularities of your current hurt, but to remind you that you have more people who understand pain than just those who struggle with infertility. And if they are mature believers, they may well be a good support to you in your distress (even as you can be in theirs!).

### **God loves you**

When the hurt comes, it often causes our vision to narrow down to that single pain. We shrink around it, and any movement sends jolts through our soul. Emotional pain actually works in a very similar way to physical pain. I had a minor surgery recently and the doctor told me that I had

to keep icing the injury for an extended period of time. He also prescribed medication which was intended not only to lessen the pain, but acted as an anti-inflammatory. I was told that swelling can actually cause more bruising than the original wound did.

This same risk applies to our response to emotional pain. We can shrink around our hurt to such a degree that we become blind to the bigger picture. And it is all too easy for the Devil to suggest that God has forgotten us ... and that he doesn't love us. But brother and sister, this couldn't be further from the truth.

God tells us that he loves his children even as he leads them through hardship: He does so to make them more like his Son (Romans 8:28-29); by such attention, he proves their legitimacy as his beloved children (Heb 12:8); he works that they might be partakers of His holiness and bear a peaceable fruit of righteousness (12:10, 11). And even as he turns all these things for their good, he is with them in the midst of the pain. It is not a small thing that Jesus wept outside of the tomb of Lazarus (11:35)!

"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8); "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1-2); "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth" (Psa 145:18-19); "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Now you might read these verses and think that they miss the point of addressing the specific pain of infertility. But that isn't the case ... in one way, they are the anti-inflammatory application of the truth to help you to stop the hurt from taking over. And in another way, biblical truths such as this deal with your much deeper hurt and doubt: does God actually love me? The Devil wants you to have doubt here ... but the Scriptures lift your eyes above the pain to Jesus, who went to the cross that you might become part of his family.

### **Hope for the future**

I am sure you have had a lot of advice regarding your struggle. My wife and I experienced this too. From various perspectives on IVF and the use of certain drugs, to anecdotes such as "my cousin

When the hurt comes, it often causes our vision to narrow down to that single pain. We shrink around it, and any movement sends jolts through our soul. Emotional pain actually works in a very similar way to physical pain.

If you are struggling with infertility, two things are always true. We hope in a powerful God, and we trust in a God who cares for us as his beloved children . . . and as God can close a womb, so too can he open it. It may well be that he would have you wait . . . .

got pregnant after looking after her friend's kids", to "boil this root I imported from Africa and drink the tea" (we tried it ... it didn't work). People also tried to encourage us with stories of others who struggled with infertility but had children after many years. But for every example they have, we could come up with other couples who were still *without* children 30+ years later.

So where does that leave you? Well, if you are struggling with infertility, two things are always true. We hope in a powerful God, and we trust in a God who cares for us as his beloved children ... and as God can close a womb, so too can he open it. It may well be that he would have you wait ... my wife and I had to wait almost 11 years. The infertility experts in the medical profession couldn't explain why we were unable to get pregnant. And yet God's timing was better than ours. He is worth hoping in because he, unlike the doctors and the advice-givers, is all-powerful ... and he can (and does!) even perform the miraculous.

But you know as well as I do, that there are no guarantees that he will *actually* open your womb. And so you need to consider the other relevant matter here: as painful as it may be, *if* God has chosen you for a different service, whether in the short term or over your lifetime, the works he has planned for you to walk in are still good (Eph 2:10). This work may well be in the discipling of *other* young people in your *spiritual* family (Titus 2:3-4), or it may be a particularly intense form of hospitality for needy people in your community who are unable to care for themselves. There are many forms this service might take, but the bottom line is that you are just as much a critical part of the body of Christ as anyone else he has joined to it (1 Cor 12:12-30). Do not

withdraw from it! They need you as much as you need them ... that together you might be built up into Christ your head.

### Closing thoughts

A single article is hardly sufficient to speak in any depth to a suffering that strikes at the heart of our existence ... for not only is a full half of our mandate tied up in the raising image-bearers of God, but he has intentionally designed a woman's body to be able to bear and feed a child. It's entirely understandable that when God denies children, it has the potential to cause great hurt.

This means that I am always concerned that articles such as this one might simply open a wound and then leave you to deal with your pain again in private. Please, if you feel the need to speak to someone, talk to one of the shepherds your Lord has given you to minister to you in your grief ... or reach out to me if you need someone with a bit more distance. And may the true shepherd of your soul, the one who does all things well (Mark 7:37) give you his peace as you wait on him.

### References

- 1 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33644852/>
- 2 <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/i/infertility/>

*Mr Joshua Flinn writes from a personal perspective on infertility. He is the minister of the Reformed Church of New Plymouth which is a church plant of the Reformed Church of Palmerston North.*



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- Address: PO Box 89, Launceston 7250, Tasmania, Australia.

For more information, contact the Principal, Mr Daniel Coote

- E-mail: [cooted@jcs.tas.edu.au](mailto:cooted@jcs.tas.edu.au)



HANS SNOEK

# Infertility, increasing in the West, what is the Christian response?

**NB:**  
This article  
contains medical  
and anatomical  
language.

The common, heart-rending problem of not being able to have children is increasing and modern medicine, while capable of phenomenal things, does not solve infertility for everyone.

Moreover, modern medicine is not predicated on Christian principles.

So as Christians faced with the issues of childlessness we must turn to Scripture and prayer to illuminate the path we should take.

Please bear in mind that fertility is a complex area and what follows is of necessity simplified, shortened and does not constitute medical advice. The intention is to provide a starting point for thinking medically about infertility.

I have been a family physician for almost 40 years and have delivered hundreds of babies as a GP obstetrician in the early decades of my career as well

as dealt with many couples struggling with fertility problems.

Infertility or sub-fertility has various definitions and can include the total inability of a couple to get pregnant at all ('primary infertility'), the inability of a couple to conceive when one or another has had previous children ('secondary infertility'), or the inability of a couple to carry pregnancies to viability.

Referring to infertility as a couple issue rather than as an individual problem to be solved is probably more appropriate than trying to assign "blame" or responsibility for difficulties in fertility to one partner.

There are various estimations about the prevalence of infertility, ranging from 20-30% of all couples.

There is an indication that infertility is increasing in the west, from perhaps 10% of couples in the



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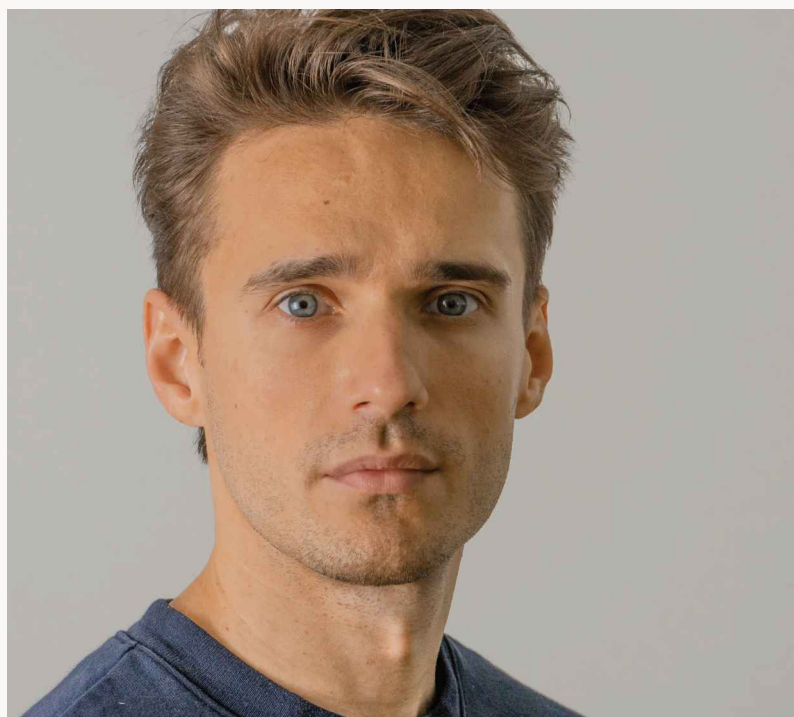


Photo by Julian Wan on Unsplash

earlier twentieth century to the current 20-30 % levels now.

Various explanations for the increased prevalence of infertility have been suggested and the truth is probably a combination of the following factors.

Sperm counts in men have fallen from an average of 100 million per ml to 50 million per ml over the last century. Whether this actually reduces fertility is somewhat moot. Increased oestrogens in the diet (perhaps from soy products) have been blamed and attention has also turned to various plastic products and the wearing of tight clothing. (Optimal spermatogenesis requires that the testicles are slightly cooler than basal body temperature.)

There has been an increase in pelvic inflammatory disease in women (which can block the fallopian tubes), some of which



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relates to sexually transmitted infections, long-term hormonal contraception may continue to inhibit ovulation after treatment cessation and there seems to have been an increase in endometriosis which can also hamper fertility.

(Endometriosis is a condition in which the tissue lining the womb spreads to other areas of the body, particularly inside the pelvis, causing pain and inflammation as it responds to menstrual hormone cycles.) Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome also appears to have increased over the last century and this condition is thought to be the leading cause of non-ovulation in the western world today. The older ages at which couples embark on trying to have children is also significant since human fertility is probably maximal in our teens.

## Causes

Medically there are many causes of infertility. Given the awesome complexity of our reproductive systems, pregnancy is a miracle every time it occurs in our fallen world, and it is perhaps surprising that 'only' 20% of couple struggle to produce babies.

In order for a pregnancy to even begin there must be production and release of a fertile egg from an ovary, this egg must be 'collected' by one of the Fallopian tubes, the egg must be moved down the Fallopian tube and it must then encounter adequate numbers of viable, motile spermatozoa, one of which must fertilize the egg, the fertilized egg must implant successfully into the thickening lining of the womb and the cyst from which the egg came must produce sufficient hormones to sustain the implanted fertilized egg until the developing placental tissue can produce enough sustaining hormones on its own.

Up to 1 in five implanted fertilized eggs are lost in 'First Trimester Miscarriage', usually owing to a lethal genetic anomaly at conception. A lot of these early miscarriages occur so early that a woman may not even know she has been pregnant.

There are several medical conditions such as thyroid disorders, poorly controlled diabetes and extremes of weight that can inhibit fertility in both men and women.

## Causes of male infertility:

Having a low sperm count (less than 15 million per ml), poor sperm motility (an ejaculate volume of less than 1.5 ml), total absence of sperm, (azoospermia), erectile dysfunction, having an abnormal lower urinary tract such as marked hypospadias (in which the ejaculate emerges from the base of the penis rather than the end) are all possible barriers to conception.

## Causes of reduced female fertility:

Anovulation, Poly Cystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), blocked fallopian tubes from Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, (PID), sometimes related to Chlamydia infection, or from severe pelvic infection from appendicitis, or from the intense inflammation from endometriosis.

## Couple Issues

Sometimes all the tests seem normal but viable pregnancies are not resulting from adequate sexual intercourse. Lots of theories, such as hostile cervical mucus, a uterine lining inimical to implantation and altered vaginal pH have been suggested

but no simple treatment can be found.

### **Infertility in Scripture**

Reading the Old Testament, one could form the simplistic view that fertility is equivalent to being blessed and infertility the equivalent of being cursed, by God.

I believe this is a distortion of what the Scriptures teach.

The point of all the genealogies in the Old Testament is to demonstrate that God raises a people for Himself, and he does so as He chooses through means that He determines. And note that the sons given to the infertile couples listed after a long wait were not necessarily blessings to their parents!

The major point of all the genealogies is that eventually there would be a SON born to undo the curse of the first Adam and this SON would be born from the line of Adam via the patriarchs and the matriarchs and via the anointed King of Israel, David.

And this SON would not only be a blessing to His parents but to the whole world.

Note well, after that SON, after Jesus, scripture records no more genealogies.

Paul even went so far as to praise the unmarried and childless state as a virtue for some, allowing a focus on work in the kingdom.

So there would not seem to be any New Testament warrant to consider infertility a curse.

### **Possible responses to infertility by a Christian couple**

First, we need to try to determine what God's will for our lives might be, no easy task!

We need to prayerfully study God's word and try to discern whether our wants are aligned with God's will and whether our wants are in fact our wants and not perhaps an uncritical adoption of the world's expectations on us.

As a couple we need to be united in our seeking for a response to apparent infertility.

As a couple we must explore our options and decide, if we are going to embark on investigations and treatments, whether we have an agreed "end point".

How technical do we believe we should get?

At what point will we stop?

What of the financial burdens?

Certainly, the process of investigation and treatment of infertility places a lot of stress on a couple and standing back and

"counting the cost" is important, before we start.

It is crucial to have as much factual information about the suspected causes of your infertility and all the details of suggested remedies.

### **Treatments for infertility can be quite straight forward.**

If the husband has a very low sperm count it may relate to testicular varicose veins and the sperm count may improve after removal of these veins.

Blocked fallopian tubes can be cleared, treatment of endometriosis and PCOS may restore fertility, optimizing diet and weight may also be helpful.

The difficult personal and ethical discussions really arise once the higher technology aspects of fertility treatments are considered.



Image by Pexels

Artificial insemination with husband's semen may help with low sperm counts and low sperm motility.

Artificial insemination with donor semen may be considered when the husband has zero spermatozoa despite optimal treatments.

Ovulation stimulation with Clomiphene and or hormone injections may help in women who are not ovulating.

### **The higher technology interventions are those related to In Vitro Fertilization.**

This is essentially the injection of a fertilized egg into the womb, hopefully at a stage of the ovulation cycle that will result in implantation.

The egg and the sperm are brought together "In Vitro", (literally "in the glass"), and, once fertilization has occurred, the



Do we as Christians believe that we have rights to reproductive technology or do we see those technologies as privileges which we may pursue if we are convinced, from prayer, Bible study and wise counsel that this is the will of God for our lives?

fertilized egg is transferred into the womb.

The precise details of how IVF is going to be done is what needs to be prayerfully considered before starting on this physically, emotionally and spiritually stressful path.

The usual IVF technique is to stimulate ovulation in the woman and then to harvest multiple eggs, if possible.

Then these eggs are fertilized and one will be implanted, the rest frozen for possible future use.

The eggs may be from the woman or from another egg donor, the semen from the husband or from another donor.

IVF may result in a child that is the couples or in a child with no genetic link to the couple.

The couple needs to consider what is going to happen to the fertilized eggs thus created. Are unused fertilized eggs going to be discarded? Offered to other infertile couples?

### **So how are we going to respond?**

Are we going to embark on investigations and treatments?

If they do not work, do we consider adoption?

If we do not believe adoption is God's will for us, do we accept childlessness as God's will for us and seek avenues of service that fit with that state?

(It must be stated that adoption is not at all straightforward in New Zealand, with the widespread availability of effective contraception and free abortions on demand, the numbers of children being put up for adoption is small. There are only about 100 adoptions in New Zealand per year and there are many hundreds of couples on the wait list.).

How do we "count the cost? Do we look at the cost of discipleship?

Luke 14: 25-33 are words of Our Lord that are very challenging to all Christians and very challenging to couples pondering their options regarding infertility.

### **The Cost of Discipleship**

<sup>25</sup> Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup> "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

<sup>27</sup> Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. <sup>28</sup> For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? <sup>29</sup> Otherwise, when he has laid a

foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, <sup>30</sup> saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' <sup>31</sup> Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup> And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. <sup>33</sup> So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

### **Determining God's will**

How do we know what God wants for us?

Jeremiah 29:11:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Do we believe God? At what point do we "let go and let God?"

Romans 12:1-2

12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

### **Reproductive rights ...**

"Reproductive rights consist of three broad categories of rights: (1) rights to reproductive self-determination, (2) rights to sexual and reproductive health services, information, and education, and (3) rights to equality and nondiscrimination."

(J.N. Erdman, R.J. Cook, in International Encyclopedia of Public Health, 2008)

Do we as Christians believe that we have rights to reproductive technology or do we see those technologies as privileges which we may pursue if we are convinced, from prayer, Bible study and wise counsel that this is the will of God for our lives?

I pray for wisdom, insight and spiritual discernment to all wrestling with fertility problems, as the more science can offer the more complex ethics and morality become.

Mr Hans Snoek is a member of the Reformed Church in Wellington and a medical doctor in general practice.

D. G. VANDERPYL

### May 1993

A regular feature article in *The New Zealand Herald* late last year carried an interesting observation from its writer, who normally does not seem to be overly impressed by those with Christian beliefs. A Nigerian family had just arrived in New Zealand. The father, a Pentecostal pastor, had arrived a year earlier to further his theological studies at a local Bible College. In the first days and weeks these people from Africa were more than overawed and impressed by what they saw and noticed from their angle of observation.

The writer of this article decided to meet with them for an interview; he must have run out of topics for the next week's contribution to our national daily. He was in for a big surprise. Let me quote from his article:

*The conversation with the family Iwunze had gone pretty much as expected, but wait a bit. Pastor Luke, who has power of spirit and missionary zeal, is saying something. And none of my preconceptions have prepared me for this. He says, "New Zealand needs to get back to God," and he holds all-night prayer sessions for us with a circle of friends.*

Full circle, you might say, for this is missionary talk. **We are being evangelised!** *"For we started the all-night prayers," he says, "all Africans. There is another Nigerian family at the college. Now we have at least eight joining in, and sometimes up to twelve. Five or six New Zealanders come. We thank God for this nation. We pray for peace, the government and the church. It is our desire to see the glory of God here. We sing. We read the Bible. We kneel. We carry on till 5am, once a fortnight."*

What worries Pastor Luke is that an erosion of Christian values may threaten our very state of blessedness. He sees this as one of the countries that sends the Christian message out into the world. Yet only 7 per cent of New Zealanders go to church. Pastor Luke says: *I believe strongly that the Christian life is not lived in obscurity but in the light so everyone can see. In service and in conduct, a diminution of interest is a sign of illness, that all is not well. That is why we are concerned.*

In his country people come to the

church from a state of ignorance; from worshipping trees and idols. Here it should be easier for people to come to the truth. He adds the unfashionably passe sentiment that *if anyone should know God, in should be the white man.*

The all-night prayer group focussed on the South Island lake-level crisis of last July. *We saw the dropping water level as the diminishing of people's relationship with God; as spiritual as well as material. It was the Lord bringing the nation to an awareness of its state. We looked for a sign, and it came when the lake level began to rise. I believe God has a purpose in bringing me and my family here. It's for His glory, and we want*

*to see that in this nation. For people are suffering in other places, but God has done so much for New Zealand.*

Pastor Iwunze seems to be giving us some of our own back, and it should not do us any harm at all.

What more can I add to this? Should I spoil it with some other news from our churches? Actually, there is very little to tell you. The old year has gone and the new has not yet left any particular marks worth noting. I did find a small poem sometime ago and, though I am not looking for a space filler, it is very worthwhile reading. Here it is:

## The Ten Commandments of Church Etiquette

Thou shalt not come to service late,  
nor for the Amen refuse to wait.  
Thy noisy tongue thou shalt restrain  
when speaks the organ's soft refrain.  
And when the hymns are sounded out,  
Thou shalt join in, not look about.  
The end-most seat thou shalt leave free,  
for more to share the pew with thee.  
Forget not thou the offering plate,  
nor let the usher stand and wait.  
Thou shalt not make the pew a place  
To vainly decorate thy face.  
Thou shalt the Sabbath not misuse,  
nor come to church to take a snooze.  
Thou shalt give heed to worship well  
and not on thine own business dwell.  
'Tis well in church thy friends to meet,  
but let thy ardour be discreet.  
Be friendly at the church's door,  
so shall the stranger love God more.



## CROSSROADS PRISON MINISTRIES NZ NEWSLETTER MARCH 2023

In a world of growing uncertainties, challenges, and conflict where do we turn? "I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2) The Lord is our strength and refuge, our Rock, our Anchor in the storms of life. We endeavour to encourage

our students to keep their focus on the Lord in the midst of their difficult surroundings. We recently received the following letter from one of our students who is 28 years old. "Dear Crossroads Prison Ministries, I was having quite a tough day emotionally today and got to a point where I was depressed, lost, confused, forgotten, paralysed on my bed in prison (I am on the top bunk) and I just couldn't do anything. This is the weakest and lowest I have felt in a while but I managed out of the little I had, to ask God to send something and just help as I felt defeated. I was struggling to stop the odd tear and finally got the effort to go have a shower (in my cell) and so could cry and express my need for help and my need for God. While I was in the shower, literally one minute or so after I asked God for help and for some consolation in my depressed and rather despairing state, one of the officers was making a noise outside our door and I hear "Mail" and an envelope fell on the floor. My cell mate picked it up and said "it is for you mate!" I found out the envelope was from you guys and my heart got a little stronger. I opened it and read your lovely message which was personal as well as your prayers. It made my day and brought tears of joy to my eyes. It gave me a glimmer of hope and uplifted my mood. It was like a little reminder that God was trying to tell me "Don't give up, I'm here, I love you." So thank you Crossroads NZ! It literally made my day. I was not expecting it and I really appreciated

the faith filled letter and your prayers. I have not had an episode like this since I was sentenced. So thank you for the hope, faith and love you have helped fill my heart with hope again when I most needed it. I feel like it was a little miracle. It may not seem much to you but I felt like you saved a life today. So thank you! I will tell my counsellor about this when I see him next week. May God bless you all at Crossroads Ministries."

I give thanks to the Lord that He uses the ministry of Crossroads to bring hope and comfort to the men and women in prison as they dwell in His Word.

In January we received many responses of thanks for the Christmas cards we sent. Just to share a few. "Thank you Crossroads for the Christmas card also thank you for helping me get closer to our Father." "Thank you for your heartfelt Christmas blessing. Something as simple as a card lifts a man's countenance." "Thank you Crossroads team for the beautiful Christmas card and the comments. My prayers are with you that this year will bring more and more students to study the Word of God – the Bible. God bless and once again thank you."

As at 31st December 2022 the prison population in NZ was 8120 – 508 of these were female prisoners. Those sentenced were 4610 and those in remand were 3452. We received the following responses from Chaplains. "Thanks for the Student Update. That's great for us to see more men enrolling and engaging with the wonderful material at Crossroads. Keep up the great work. God bless." "Thanks for the update and for all you and Crossroads offer to our people." "On behalf of our Chaplaincy Team we want to thank you all at Crossroads for the studies that you provide to help the prisoners in all prisons. Crossroads has done great things for the men and women in prison in their walk with the Lord. Keep up the good work."

In 2022 I met with the Crossroads volunteers in the Hawkes Bay area. We discussed various aspects of the work of Crossroads in the prisons in NZ. It was a time of mutual encouragement with constructive feedback.

I also travelled to the Wellington region where I trained more volunteers to review lessons. It was rewarding to be able to meet with **all** our volunteers in this region over several meetings. It was also a blessing to meet with some of our faithful supporters. I am also thankful that in their busy schedule the Chaplains made themselves available to meet.

In November I was in Gisborne once

## Waiting in Faith

When Abraham arrived in Canaan, it was by no means a great nation. But he dwelt there, living in tents. God may have prepared a mansion for him in heaven, but in Canaan all he had was a tent. The only parcel of Canaan he ever actually owned was his burial plot.

Most importantly, Abraham waited. This is perhaps the hardest test of faith. Unrealized expectations make for bitterness and despair in many people's lives. But Abraham waited in faith, just as God later required of the prophet Habakkuk, when He said: "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (Hab. 2:2-3).

Abraham waited in faith and died in faith. With the rest of the Old Testament saints, it was said: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us" (Heb. 11:39-40).

*Ligonier Devotional Archive*



again to train more volunteers. It was so encouraging to see their enthusiasm to be a part of this ministry.

I give thanks to the Lord for all those who support this ministry. To those who faithfully uphold the work of Crossroads in prayer before the Lord. To those who support us financially allowing us to operate the ministry on a daily basis. To those who review the lessons seeking to guide and encourage the students through their letters and prayers. I am so very grateful to you all for this support enabling you to be a part of restoring the lives of people in prison as they study the Word of God. I would like to share some feedback and thankfulness from the students with all of you.

"I have kept my lessons, roadmaps and letters. Lessons and roadmaps provide me with reference information and the letters are most insightful and connecting in regards to learning, guiding and encouraging. I feel the connection from fellow believers. Thank you. All glory to God."

"I am in a wheelchair as I have no nerves from the waist down. I have many other

problems from this. Life from day to day has been a struggle but reading the Bible, believing and having faith in the Lord our God has helped me through."

"Thank you for the encouraging remarks in my last lesson. Keep up the good work team. You are a force to be reckoned with – with God on your side who dares to challenge!!!!"

"I believe in the God of the Bible. I was in open rebellion to God His Word, His people. My 'Christian' life had become a sham. God had every right to abandon and destroy me. Instead he reached down and offered me forgiveness. Each day He is with me. He has done away with my past and given me hope for the future. No other 'god' will do this. False gods demand everything from me. God **gave** everything to save me. This is why I follow God."

Towards the end of 2022 we received this email from the mother of one of our students. "Hi there, my son is currently in prison and is really enjoying the Course that he is doing through your ministry. He told me on the phone how much the support

in the form of letters and study material lift him from his despair. We (the family) want to let you know how much we appreciate all that you do. Thanks again from us all. Kind regards."

Please continue to pray for the Crossroads students to keep their focus on the Lord in the midst of hostile and often violent surroundings. Pray for more prisoners to come to know the Lord. Pray for encouragement for the Chaplains as they seek to minister to prisoners in difficult circumstances."

I would like to thank everyone who sent txts, emails and made phone calls expressing their concern after Cyclone Gabrielle struck. It was overwhelming. Thank you so much for your love and support. I give thanks to the Lord there was no flooding in the office.

If you would like further information you can contact us at [cbi.nz@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cbi.nz@xtra.co.nz) or write to Crossroads Prison Ministries, PO Box 11005, HASTINGS 4156.

## Focus on faith

### LETTERS OF JOHN NEWTON

# Pains, infirmities, loss of sleep, the failure of sight and hearing!

"Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone."

*Psalm 71:9*

I am drawing nearer and nearer to the season which the Psalmist either expected or felt. Many reasons teach the aged believer the need of this prayer. As his graces are still imperfect – so his powers are feelingly upon the decline. It was but little he could do at his best – and now less and less!

He feels other *props* and *comforts* dropping off apace. When he was young, he had warm spirits and pleasing prospects; but now, what a change of the *friends* in which he once delighted! In some he has found *inconstancy* – they have forsaken and forgotten him; and others have been successively taken away by *death*. They have fallen like the leaves in autumn – and now he stands almost a naked trunk. If any yet remain, he is expecting to lose them likewise – unless he is first taken from them.

Old age abates, and gradually destroys the relish of such earthly comforts as might be otherwise enjoyed. **Pains, infirmities, loss of sleep, the failure of sight and hearing**, and all the senses – are harbingers, like Job's messengers arriving in close succession, to tell him that *death* is upon his progress, and is not far away!

If youth has no *security* against death – then old age has no possibility of escaping the *grim monster*. But though ...

*friends* fail,  
*cisterns* burst,  
*gourds* wither,  
*strength* declines,  
and *death* advances  
– if God does not forsake me, then all is well.

"Even to your old age and gray hairs – I am He who will sustain you I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you!"

*Isaiah 46:4*

# Citizens of God's Kingdom

SHERIF GENDY

A King must have a people over whom to reign, and it is no different for the King of God's kingdom, the Lord Jesus Christ. As the kingdom's King, Christ reigns over men and women whom God has called from every nation and tribe and language and people to be citizens of His kingdom. The climactic manifestation of God's kingdom people that we see in Revelation 7:9–10 finds its root in God's redemptive acts in the Old Testament. Throughout the history of redemption, God called His people in order to reign over them in a way that reveals His holy character and accomplishes His good purposes.

In Genesis 1:26–28, God created human beings as His royal images to serve His kingdom's purposes and rule as His vice-regents on earth. As bearers of the divine image, Adam and Eve were called to expand God's sovereign rule beyond the boundaries of Eden by subduing the earth and multiplying and filling it with image bearers. However, after the fall of man, God pronounced enmity between the seed of the serpent (citizens of Satan's kingdom of darkness) and the seed of the woman (citizens of God's kingdom of light; Gen. 3:15).

The genealogy of Genesis 5 shows how Seth, Adam's third son, became the father of a faithful line of mankind that led to righteous Noah, who found favor with God (Gen. 6:8). Of Noah's three sons, Shem and his descendants were special in the eyes of the Lord. From Shem's descendants, God chose to bless one man, Abraham, and promised to bless all the families of the earth through him (12:1–3). God declared that through Abraham's seed the people of His kingdom would be as countless as the dust of the earth, the sand of the sea, and the stars of the sky (13:16; 15:5; 22:17). This promise of the kingdom's numerous citizens was later reiterated to Isaac (26:4) and to Jacob (28:14; 32:12), who continued

this chosen and righteous line. Through this promise, God took it on Himself to fulfill the original kingdom mandate given to Adam and Eve in the garden. Jacob's twelve sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Out of all the world nations, the tribes of Israel were God's special people, the people of His kingdom (Deut. 10:15). Under the leadership of Moses, God delivered the tribes of Israel from slavery in Egypt and formed them into a nation and kingdom of priests, distinguished as God's treasured possession from all other peoples of the world (Ex. 19:4–6). Israel became a united kingdom during the time of David, and Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord (1 Chron. 29:23), reigning over the people of God's kingdom. Alluding to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, the psalmist spoke of the glorious Davidic king, saying, "May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed!" (Ps. 72:17). In other words, the people of God's kingdom will be blessed under the rule of David's dynasty, eventually resulting in the glory of God filling the whole earth (v. 19).

The divine promise of Israel's numerical increase shows how God's purpose was to expand His kingdom to include all the families of the earth. God desired that His kingdom's citizens come from every corner of the world. These citizens enjoy equal status as members of God's kingdom regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, cultural background, geographical location, social class, or socioeconomic status. However, these peoples become citizens of God's kingdom only through the blessing of Abraham's seed and David's dynasty. They do not become the people of God's kingdom on their own initiative or ambition. Under the old covenant, the promise of Israel's numerical increase as God's special kingdom people was tied up with the Lord's demand for exclusivity and obedience to the law of Moses. Israel's decrease in number was a covenant curse for disobedience to the Lord's commandments (Lev. 26:22; Deut. 28:62–63). On the other hand, Israel's covenant faithfulness was rewarded with the covenant blessing of population increase (Lev. 26:9; Deut. 30:5, 9).

After Solomon's death, Israel's united kingdom was divided, and the two newly

formed kingdoms of Israel and Judah often fought each other (e.g., 1 Kings 15). When the people of Israel ignored God's ways and worshiped pagan idols, God appointed the prophets and sent them to announce His impending judgment. This divine judgment for covenant infidelity climaxed in exile, where Israel was no longer identified as God's kingdom people; instead, Israel became God's *Lo-ammi* ("Not My People") for a time, like the gentile nations (Hos. 1:9).

Nonetheless, there was always hope for the future. Indeed, the Lord's covenant faithfulness will prevail, and He will not utterly obliterate His kingdom people or eradicate His mercies and compassions (Lev. 26:44; Deut. 4:31), for He is a holy God who does not act in a way typical to emotionally vindictive human beings (Hos. 11:8–9). In other words, the future of God's kingdom people is ultimately determined by His covenant love rather than by the people's fidelity.

Therefore, the prophets proclaimed an eschatological (end-times, final) national unification of Israel and Judah under a future Davidic king (Jer. 23:3–8; 30:9; 33:7–26; Ezek. 37:15–28; Hos. 1:11). Under the reign of this Davidic king, the number of the children of Israel would immeasurably increase, and the nation would be instituted again as children of the living God (Hos. 1:10). Through Israel's eschatological abundance of progeny, the promise given to the patriarchs would be fulfilled. The restoration of the Davidic royal dynasty, not merely on political grounds but more significantly on the level of moral covenant faithfulness through a perfectly righteous king, would lend stability to the eschatological unification, inviting the nations through Israel's witness to become citizens of God's kingdom (Isa. 2:2–3; 11:10; 43:8–10; Amos 9:11–15).

The postexilic condition of God's kingdom people was not in any way close to the flourishing and glorious life that the prophets promised Israel and Judah within the restored covenant. Though the people had sporadic moments of obeying the voice of the Lord (e.g., Hag. 1:12), their obedience was temporary and fleeting. On multiple occasions, the people were urged to repent, do justice, and show mercy (e.g., Zech.

1:3–4; 7:9–10). The people’s religious fasting was not done with a sincere heart (7:5). Moreover, the people of God seem to have returned to idol worship (13:2), and corruption was prevailing among the priests (Mal. 1:6–2:9). The people’s disobedience was demonstrated in their profaning the temple (2:10–17) and robbing God of tithes and offerings (3:8–10). In short, God’s kingdom people did not show covenant loyalty and proved unable to keep the Lord’s commands. Indeed, the eager expectation found among postexilic prophets for a restoration beyond the restoration shows how the people of God’s kingdom looked forward to His deliverance as earnestly after the return from exile as they did before.

In the fullness of time, Christ came as the true Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), in whom God fulfills all His promises (2 Cor. 1:20). Therefore, all who are united to Christ have become true descendants of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:29; see also Rom. 4:16). Through the church’s proclamation of the gospel, God gathers His chosen people from the ends of the earth, uniting them as His kingdom citizens.

The ingathering of God’s people from the northern kingdom took place as the good news of salvation went beyond Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria in the book of Acts. Indeed, gentiles and Samaritan halfbreed northerners have become, alongside Jews, “God’s people” and “beloved.” In Romans 9:26, Paul applies Hosea 1:10 to gentile believers in Christ as true Israelites. By quoting Hosea 2:23, Paul explains that to be God’s people is to be a harlot redeemed by God’s love (Rom. 9:25). Alluding to Exodus 19:6, Peter calls God’s kingdom people, both Jews and gentiles, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God’s] own possession” (1 Peter 2:9). Thus, a new people of God, comprising Jews and gentiles, become His kingdom citizens, united together under one head, David’s son, Christ Jesus (Rom. 9:24–26). If God shows mercy to His gentile-like people Israel (the “Not My People” of Hos. 1:9), surely nothing stops Him from showing the same covenant mercy to other actual gentile nations. In other words, all those who have become citizens of God’s kingdom by His grace in Christ were, in fact, “gentiles” in need of mercy (1 Peter 2:10). In effect, the name “My People,” which is reserved in the Old Testament for ethnic Israel, has become now in the latter days applicable to all citizens of God’s kingdom who trust in Christ.

Finally, the new order of eternal celebration in the new heaven and new earth is the ultimate fulfillment of the ingathering of God’s kingdom citizens where God dwells among His people, and they enjoy everlasting perfect communion with God and with one another (2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1–4).

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## Trust to obey

ERIC KAMOGA

Nothing about God’s nature should cause man to doubt Him (Deut. 32:3–4), yet ever since Eve questioned God’s intention in the garden, people have doubted God’s Word and motives. Unbelief assumes or suspects iniquity or inability in God and may be expressed by grumbling at providence, “helping” God fulfill His promises, seeking proof before trusting Him, or asserting a degree of independence from God (Gen. 16:1–6; 18:10–14; Matt. 16:1, 4). Our doubt of the perfect One reveals our imperfection and flawed knowledge of Him.

We cannot trust unless we are certain of the character of the person we trust. Knowing our proneness to doubt, God graciously assures us of His trustworthiness. He accompanied His promises, which should be enough by themselves, with signs (Judg. 6:36–40; Mark 2:8–12; John 10:38; 20:30). He who cannot lie swore an oath to buttress our faith in His unchangeable character (Heb. 6:13–19). By giving up His Son, He supremely demonstrated His just, loving, and trustworthy nature (Rom. 5: 6–10; 8:31–32).

We should focus not on our faith but on God. The hero of Abraham’s faith is God, not Abraham. When told to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham reasoned that since God is perfect, His promise must be fulfilled, so if Isaac must die, God must resurrect him

(Heb. 11:17–19). David’s faith was almost wrecked because the wicked prospered until he appreciated God’s justice (Ps. 73). Knowing God is what strengthens our obedient faith.

Without knowing and trusting God, we cannot fully obey Him by loving Him and our neighbors (1 John 4:7). One may obey solely out of fear, but such obedience is not born out of full knowledge because a true obedience presupposes an intimate knowledge of God on which trust is based (John 15:12–15). Christ could love and obey the Father by dying for us because He trusted the Father with His life. Laying down one’s life without faith and love cannot lead to true obedience (1 Cor. 13:3) because true obedience presupposes faith and love (John 14:15, 21, 23–24; Rom. 1:5; 1 John 3:23). Hence, without a proper knowledge of God, our trust, love, and obedience will fall short (Matt. 26:35, 74).

Because of residual sin that clouds and often perverts our knowledge of God, we doubt God, wrongly believing that something in Him warrants our distrust. At the consummation, when our knowledge of God will be perfect (1 Cor. 13:12), it will be impossible to doubt or to not love and thereby disobey God because our certainty that He is absolutely trustworthy will no longer be mixed with doubts. Our final perfection in trust, love, and obedience is inextricably linked to a perfect knowledge of God. A trust-infused relationship with God grounded on an intimate knowledge of Him is the context of obedience.

Because Christ perfectly trusted and obeyed on our behalf to give us knowledge of God, let us pray that we may grow in knowing and trusting Him, which enables us to walk increasingly in loving obedience.

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<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

There are 50 countries which are monitored by *World Watch Monitor* for being places where Christians around the world are under pressure for their faith.

Freedom of belief, guaranteed by the *UN Declaration of Human Rights*, plays a critical part in the unfolding, complex story of the 21st Century. We exist to tell this part of the story with accuracy and authority. We respect and uphold everyone's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Our focus is on the global Christian Church.

We will bring you summaries from different countries each issue so that you may be focussed on praying for the needs of Christians' everywhere.

### Djibouti

The government of President Ismail Omar Guelleh, in power since 1999, seeks to control all aspects of society by stifling freedom of association, religion and expression. Christians from a Muslim background in particular face persecution from their families and other community members. As in other East African countries, radical Islam is growing and is a major concern for the government.

### Egypt

Over 100 Coptic Christians were killed in 2017 in a wave of deadly attacks by militants belonging to, or inspired by, the Islamic State group, which has vowed to "wipe them out". Egypt's Copts, who account for around 10 per cent of the population, were also targeted in 2013, after they were perceived as supporting the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood government. Scores of churches across the country were attacked and burned.

### Eritrea

Since 1993 the country's regime, under the leadership of President Afewerki, has become synonymous with absolute authoritarianism and is doing everything to maintain its power. Christians have

been arrested, harassed and killed because they are considered agents of the West and therefore a threat. Many Christians have fled. Others have been held in miserable prison conditions for years or kept in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been at particular risk since a 2002 law was passed prohibiting Churches other than the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and also Sunni Islam. Meanwhile the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios has been under house arrest since 2007.

### Ethiopia

Although Ethiopia is a majority-Christian country, complex religious and ethnic tensions, combined with political and civil unrest, mean that pressure on Christians is very high. In the Afar and Somali regions, where ethnicity and Islam are interconnected, Christians can face hostility from family and community. The government is growing more authoritarian and has restricted religious institutions. Fanatical elements of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also try to undermine other denominations.

### Guinea

Christians comprise only a small sliver of the population of Guinea, and despite the advance of militant Islamist movements in West Africa, jihadism is not yet a major source of pressure on Guinean Christians, most of whom are converts from Islam. There have, however, been occasional outbreaks of sectarian violence, such as in July 2013 when a number of churches were destroyed. A Guinean Christian leader said the eruption of violence, following the murder of a suspected thief, had "served as a pretext for Islamist groups to assert their opposition to the Christian presence". Guinea has had a largely unbroken history of authoritarian regimes, which have been accused of torture, extrajudicial killings and other abuses. But the primary threat to Guineans in recent years has been disease. The Ebola crisis broke out in Guinea in 2013 and caused grave economic and social wreckage, in addition to the human toll.

### Honduras

Honduras is not a producer, nor much of a consumer, of illegal drugs. But it is a major highway for them, and where there are illegal drugs, there is crime. Honduras has one of the highest murder rates in the world, two-thirds of them related to the drugs trade. It has consistently high levels of violence. Since the 1980s the country has taken modest steps away from authoritarian military governments. Still, Freedom House says Honduras is plagued by corruption and weak institutions, particularly a weak court system. A government presence is largely absent outside of the cities, leaving room for organised crime.

### India

Since the Hindu nationalist BJP came to power in 2014, radical Hinduism has increased steadily. Several states outlaw proselytism, and there have been efforts to impose such so-called "anti-conversion laws" at a national level. The violence of radical Hindu groups or angry mobs of villagers is often allowed by local, state and national authorities dominated by the BJP. This means the Hindu radicals can act with increasing impunity.

### Indonesia

Indonesia was once known for its moderate and diverse Islam, but extremism is on the rise. Anger over the perceived "blasphemy" of former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (better known as "Ahok"), a Chinese Christian, brought more than 200,000 people to the streets in 2016 and eventually led to his imprisonment. In August 2017 the government announced plans to further tighten blasphemy legislation, though a month earlier it ordered the disbandment of Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir "to protect Indonesia's unity".

### Deadly Attack on Nigerian Church

Terrorists attacked a church service in northwestern Nigeria on Sunday (Jan. 15), shooting and wounding the pastor and kidnapping 25 congregation members. According to the Katsina State Police Command, the assailants stormed into the morning worship service of New Life for All Church in Katsina state's Dantsauri village, Gidan Haruna District, Kankara County. The police identified five females as kidnapped, but local residents and the Senior Special Assistant on Christian Affairs to Gov. Aminu Bello Masari, the Rev. Ishaya Jurau, said that 25 church members were kidnapped and that nine of them soon escaped.

Nigeria led the world in Christians killed for their faith in 2022, with 5,014, according to the 2023 World Watch List. It also led the world in Christians abducted, sexually assaulted or harassed, forcibly married or physically or mentally abused, and it also had the most homes and businesses attacked for faith-based reasons. On the 2023 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian, Nigeria jumped to sixth place, its highest ranking ever. Militants from the Fulani, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and others continue to conduct raids on Christian communities.

- Pray for God's protection over the kidnapped church members, their safe return and the pastor's quick recovery.
- Pray for an end to the violence against Christians in Nigeria.
- Pray for comfort and peace for the families of the victims.

*WEA Ambassador for Religious Freedom*

### Myanmar Military Attacks Church

On 12 January, five people were killed when the Myanmar military, also known as the Tatmadaw, bombed a church in Lay

Wah village, which is located in the Christian-majority Karen State. Among the dead were two church leaders, in addition to a three-year-old boy and his mother. Two days later, on 15 January, the Tatmadaw set fire to a church building in the Christian-majority Chan Thar area of the Sagaing Region, and also torched homes in the area.

These two devastating attacks on Christian-majority areas are a grim reminder of the ongoing conflict between the military and ethnic minorities in Myanmar, as well as the persecution of religious minorities. The Tatmadaw's actions have been condemned by the international community, and there have been calls for the Myanmar government to take action to protect its citizens.

Prayer points

- Pray for the victims of the attacks and for comfort for their families and friends.
- Pray for an end to the conflict in Myanmar and for peaceful solutions to be found.
- Pray for protection for all religious minorities in Myanmar, and for an end to the persecution and violence they face.

*WEA Ambassador for Religious Freedom*

### Blast at Baptism Service in DR Congo Kills 14 Christians

At least 14 worshippers were killed and 63 injured after Islamic militants bombed a Protestant church in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The attack took place during a Sunday baptism service in Kasindi. The militants were believed to be from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist rebel group in Central Africa, and the Islamic State has claimed responsibility.

The ADF split into two factions in 2019, with one merging into the Islamic State Central Africa Province. The majority of DRC's population is Christian and the DRC was ranked 37th on Open Doors' 2023

World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. The attack has caused shock and trauma across the country, as well as fears that more attacks may be carried out in the future.

Prayer points

- Pray for comfort and consolation from God for the families of those who were killed in the attack.
- Pray for healing and good health for those injured in the attack, and for the trauma they are facing.
- Pray for protection and strength for all churches in the DRC, and for an end to religious persecution in the region.

*WEA Ambassador for Religious Freedom*

### Conservative sites blacklisted under guise of fighting misinformation

The following is excerpted from "Investigative Journalist," *The European Conservative*, Feb. 15, 2023: "Disinformation-tracking groups 'are part of a stealth operation blacklisting and trying to defund conservative media,' writes investigative journalist Gabe Kaminsky for the *Washington Examiner*. According to his report published on Thursday, February 9th, these supposedly non-partisan organizations are feeding blacklists of right-wing websites – and other news media – to major ad companies with the aim of 'defunding disfavored speech,' as leaked documentation shows. The story is simple: brands that want to advertise their products online turn to giant ad companies. These ad companies want to avoid advertising on sites with questionable reputations for fear of their clients being canceled, so in turn, they contract 'disinformation trackers' to obtain private information about potentially dangerous websites 'they should purportedly defund.' One of the groups behind this is the Global Disinformation Index (GDI), whose mission is to 'remove the financial incentive' to create 'disinformation.' The organization compiles a secretive 'dynamic exclusion list' of news

outlets it deems to have a high risk of spreading disinformation, a list intended to severely impact the outlets' advertising revenue. Just as a side note, George Soros' Open Society Foundation and the U.S. State Department-backed National Endowment for Democracy are both listed among the founders of GDI. Among the ten outlets on GDI's 'riskiest' list are *The American Conservative*, *The Spectator*, *Real Clear Politics*, *The Federalist*, *The Daily Wire*, and *The New York Post* – all of which skew to the Right. Some ad companies, such as Xandr, have adopted GDI's exclusion list to punish content they deem 'morally reprehensible or patently offensive' or that 'could include false or misleading information.'"

*Way of Life Literature, volume 24, issue 08, February 24, 2023*

## The supposed bad design of the human pharynx

The following is excerpted from *Evolution News & Science Today*, Dec. 14, 2022: "In our book, *Your Designed Body* [Howard Glicksman and Steve Laufmann], we apply a five-part test for evaluating ostensible instances of bad design. This test can help determine whether we're looking at a bad design, or simply a bad argument. Let's consider the example of the human pharynx. Is it poorly engineered? The figure below shows that the pharynx is the common entry for both the respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts. Whatever is ingested can potentially go down the airway and cause obstruction, which can result in death by choking. Some insist that the pharynx is therefore miserably designed, something no wise designer would engineer, but that evolution, with its trial-and-error messiness, very well might [e.g., Nathan Kentws and Abby Hafer]. ... These arguments are riddled with problems. To see why, we need to take a closer look at the human pharynx. In addition to the structures identified in the figure above, fifty different pairs of muscles, connected by six different nerves, are needed to swallow. After food in the mouth has been formed into a small ball (bolus), the tongue voluntarily moves it to the pharynx, which automatically triggers the involuntary swallow reflex. As the bolus enters, the pharynx sends sensory information to the swallow center in the brainstem, which immediately turns off

respiration so that air is not breathed in during swallowing. This prevents the lungs from drawing food into the airway. The brainstem also sends precisely ordered signals telling the various muscles to contract and move the bolus downward into the esophagus, bypassing the airway. This takes about a second. As swallowing begins, several muscles contract to move the bolus into the pharynx, while moving the back of the palate and the upper pharynx close together to close off the path to the nose. Next comes the tricky part. The bolus has been blocked from going up into the nose, and muscular contraction is hurtling it down towards the airway and the esophagus. Three separate actions take place to protect the airway. First, muscles contract to close the larynx, which is the gateway to the lungs. Second, other muscles move the larynx up and forward (which you can feel in the front of your neck while swallowing) to hide it under the floor of the mouth and the base of the tongue while being protected by the epiglottis. Third, this action, combined with other muscular activity, opens the upper esophagus to allow the bolus to enter. The timing and coordination are remarkable. ... While critics seem to miss the amazing design of this system, it should give the reader pause. Somehow, swallowing happens, usually without incident, a thousand times a day. Where did the information come from that specifies the size, shape, position, and range of movement of the pharynx, each of its nearby structures, and the fifty pairs of muscles involved in swallowing? How could such a system come about gradually, by accident?"

*Way of Life Literature, volume 24, issue 08, February 24, 2023*

## Only 3% of Americans have Biblical worldview

The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University released their latest study on Biblical worldview in America.

The study identified seven cornerstones of a Biblical worldview. People who hold to all seven beliefs are much more likely to have a Biblical worldview.

Here are the seven cornerstones with the percentage of Americans which hold to each:

- Only 50% of American adults embrace the true nature of God.

- 35% believe Jesus is the only way for salvation.
- 27% recognize humans as sinful.
- 46% accept the Bible as true and reliable.
- A slim 25% believe in absolute truth rooted in the Bible.
- 36% see their purpose as serving God.
- Only 23% define success as obedience to God.
- Sadly, only 3% of U.S. adults embrace all seven principles.

Hebrews 10:23 says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

[theworldview.com](http://theworldview.com)

## Israeli Prime Minister opposes criminalization of Christian evangelism

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke out against a new bill that would criminalize Christian evangelism. Last Wednesday, he tweeted, "We will not advance any law against the Christian community."

The anti-conversion bill would punish violators with at least one year in prison.

Members of the United Torah Judaism Party proposed the legislation to suppress the spread of the Gospel in Israel. In a statement, a spokesman said, "Recently, the attempts of missionary groups, mainly Christians, to solicit conversion of religion have increased ... the many negative repercussions, including psychological damages, warrant the intervention of the legislature."

Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

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# What does it mean to be Winsomely Reformed?

There's been a lot of discussion in the last year (and the last week) of what it means to be winsomely reformed. And, sadly, the loudest voices have been undeniably against the idea of being winsome. It has been critiqued as wishy-washy, a failed cultural strategy, or as an expression of weakness rather than strength.

While this is certainly an important conversation for any evangelical right now, it is particularly relevant for Reformed Theological Seminary because we have historically emphasized the importance of being winsomely Reformed.

Indeed, I can still remember that I was asked about this issue in my original faculty interview, back in 2001. The concern was not just that we hold firmly to historic Reformed theology, but that we do so with a posture of grace, warmth, and respect – especially with those we disagree with. It was clear to me at the time that this value extended back to the earliest days of the seminary.

So, whatever one might say about the desire that we be winsomely Reformed, I don't think it can be chalked up to recent cultural pressures. RTS, at least, was concerned about this back in the 80's and 90's (and before) – long before social media, Trump, and recent divisions in evangelicalism.

So, I thought it might be helpful to lay out what it means to be winsomely Reformed, and why that matters.

## What do we mean by “winsome”?

The English word “winsome” is not a biblical word, per se. That is, it does not appear, for example, in the ESV. But it is typically used as more of a catch-all term designed to summarize the kind of Christian character emphasized in the Bible.

Consider, for example, Paul's exhortation in Col 3:12-14:

*Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another ... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

Similar sentiments are found in other places. Christians, particularly Christian leaders, should not lord it over, but be a servant (Mark 10:43–44); not be a bully, but gentle (1 Tim 3:3; cf. Titus 1:7); not domineering, but setting an example (1 Pet. 3:3); and not quarrelsome, but kind (2 Tim. 2:24).

When Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit he includes similar traits: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

So, the word “winsome” is just a way of summarizing what these verses are describing. In more modern terms, to be winsomely Reformed is to be Reformed but not boorish, curmudgeonly, or quarrelsome.

With a little bit of a definition behind us, we turn to the question of why this all matters. Let me offer a few reflections on why I think winsomeness is important for us to emphasize.

## Because character matters

The first reason is the most obvious. We should be winsome simply because it reflects the kind of character that God asks us to have. Indeed, biblically speaking, it reflects the character of Christ.

So, whether it's 1822 or 2022, whether we are culturally favored or disfavored, whether it's an election year or not, we are to act like Christians.

It should also be said that being winsomely Reformed does not mean that one is weak, fearful, or lacking in conviction.



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October 12, 2022



Photo by Constantin Wenning on Unsplash

To say we should be winsome is not to say *everything* a Christian should be. Christians should also be strong and faithful, even courageous and bold.

But let us not confuse being strong with being belligerent. Nor should we mistake being bold with being caustic. The loudest and most aggressive people are not always the ones with the most confidence in God's word.

Ironically, behaving in such a manner makes us come across like we have a theological version of a Napoleon complex, always trying to make up for some insecurity. Whereas true confidence flows from a deep and quiet trust in God's sovereignty, leaving the outcome to him.

### **Because our character affects the way our message is received**

Ok, let me be clear. Even if we were perfect and sinless, we would not be loved and accepted by our world. Indeed, Christ was perfectly sinless, and yet despised and hated by many. So, no one is arguing that being winsome suddenly causes everyone to convert.

This should do away with the common misconception that being winsome is some sort of *cultural strategy*. Some have critiqued winsomeness because it has failed to "win over" our hostile culture. But, I don't know of anyone who believes this is the purpose of winsomeness. We should be winsome simply because it's the right thing to do – regardless how anyone responds.

But saying good character will not automatically win over our world, is not the same thing as saying our character is *irrelevant* to how people receive our message. If a pastor is known for being a philanderer or embezzler of money, we do not pretend this is irrelevant to how he is heard in the pulpit. Character, and the credibility that goes with it, affects the way our words are received.

And the Bible confirms this reality. Jesus tells us, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see *your good works* and give glory to your father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16). We are called to shine the brightest rather than shout the loudest.

Likewise, Peter tells us that when we defend the faith, "do it with gentleness and respect, so that, when you are slandered those who reviled your *good behavior* in Christ may be put to shame" (1 Pet 3:15-16).

Note that in both these passages, it is our "good works" or "good behavior" that affects those who hear our message. While most may reject our message, there are still some who receive it – and our character affects that reception.

Even Jesus won over some people by his behavior. The centurion at the foot of the cross, after seeing Jesus' actions on the cross, even declared, "Surely this was a righteous man" (Luke 23:47).

### **Because the Reformed World Needs to Grow in This Area**

While every branch of evangelical Chris-

tianity needs to be winsome, I think it is fair to say that Reformed folks certainly need that reminder as much as anyone.

The standing joke is that every time someone converts to Reformed theology, they go through a "cage stage" where we feel obligated to lock them away for a period of time, hoping they will grow out of their newfound zeal which often plows people over in aggressive ways that are, well, less than winsome.

While other theological traditions might have their own "cage stage," there is a history of this behavior in the Reformed world. It might be helpful to read (or re-read) John Frame's article, "Machen's Warrior Children," so as to recognize this pattern over time.

To be clear, I don't think Reformed theology itself is the problem here. On the contrary, Reformed theology, properly understood, should lead to humility and kindness. But, there does seem to be something in Reformed *culture* that needs to be addressed – and calling people to winsomeness is one small step in that direction.

In sum, to be winsome is to be like Jesus. Strong and gentle. Courageous and kind. Bold and loving. Jesus said as much about himself: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:29).