

Nurturing Others' Children

Carolyn McCulley

Almost immediately upon my Christian conversion, God radically changed some of my core views about abstinence, procreation responsibilities, and "choice." Long a vocal pro-abortion proponent, I never expected to see my feet darken the door of a pro-life clinic. While a pro-abortion unbeliever, I didn't know facilities such as crisis pregnancy centers existed nor that they backed up their beliefs by serving women so sacrificially without cost. Within a few months of becoming a Christian, however, I signed up for counseling training at my local crisis pregnancy center (CPC) and eventually became an "advocate," or mentor, to pregnant women who wanted help.

Whenever I first met one of my new CPC friends, we always had the same conversation:

"So, how many children do you have?" she would typically ask.

"None," I would answer cheerfully.

"Oh." Then a long pause. "Have you ever been pregnant before?"

"No, I haven't," I'd reply.

"Oh." Another long pause. "Then why did I get you as my advocate?!"

It's an understandable question, and I was never discouraged when it was asked. I could only reply that being single I had more time to help than a married woman with children of her own. I was 31 when I began volunteering at the CPC, so I fully expected that it would only be a short time before I'd be a wife and mother myself. Now that many single years have gone by, I've had more time to ponder the impact of childlessness on the definition of biblical femininity.

All to Be Life-bearers

Certainly, the Bible clearly shows that women are called to be life-bearers. From the childbirth curse on Eve through the trials of barrenness in Sarah, Hannah, Rachel, Elizabeth and others, the issues of the womb are given much exposure in Scripture. Even in the account of Ruth—the most developed Biblical role model for single women, in my view—the blessing given on her wedding

day by the elders at the gate was that she would be fruitful. The account ends with the birth of her first son, who was the grandfather of King David. Then there is the challenging Scripture from 1 Timothy 2:15 that women will be saved through child-bearing (the commentaries I've read say that scholars are unclear about Paul's theological point there). But Paul adds, "if they [women] continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." By God's grace, childless or not, we can pursue those qualities at least.

Even with the pain of childbirth, any mother will say that the actual pregnancy and delivery is much easier than the rearing of children to mature adulthood. Children require nurturing care long after the womb. This is where single, childless women can contribute much to the life-bearing process by supporting the parenting work of those around them. (This is an especially important blessing for single mothers, who benefit tremendously from those who invest in their children and help shoulder the load of solo parenting.) Whether as aunts or close friends of the family, single women can invest in the future by intentionally pursuing relationships with the children around them.

If the role of aunt seems unimportant to you, then please read 2 Kings 11:1-3. When the Baal-worshipping, power-hungry, vengeful Queen Athaliah decides to destroy the entire royal family in Judah, she comes within one baby of wiping out King David's royal line. But Jehosheba, sister of the deceased King Ahaziah, "took Joash the son of Ahaziah, and stole him from among the king's sons which were slain," hiding the one-year-old boy and his nurse at the temple of the Lord for six years while the ambitious Queen Athaliah ruled. Joash's mother was Zibiah of Beersheeba (2 Kings 12:1), and Jehosheba was his aunt. Who knows whether you have been put into the lives of your nieces or nephews for such heroism as this, or more simply to follow the command in Psalm 145:4 to be part of one generation that praises God's works to another? Either way, you are investing in the eternal.

Practically Speaking

Over the years, I've been fascinated with the prophetic imagery in Isaiah 54:1, where a barren woman is commanded to burst into song because "more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife." This picture of the future glory of Zion grabs our attention because of the juxtapositions of joy in barrenness and teeming descendants given to those who are childless. The Lord continues by telling the barren woman not to hold back, to enlarge the place of her tent. Obviously, this is a prophetic portrait of faith in the One who is the "Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel," but I believe there is a practical application for childless women—namely, to make room for children.

When I was a new Christian and one of the few single women in my church, one woman wisely counseled me to prayerfully choose a few families to invest in for childcare and to limit my babysitting roster to those children. That struck me at first as a tad self-protective, but later I saw how that developed deeper relationships with those children. I got to know them well, and then could plan for activities and gifts that might bless them. (Maybe I was *too* fun, however! At my going-away party when I moved from that church to my current church, these children's favorite memories of me were about staying up way past their bedtimes to talk, playing in the rain, desserts served before dinner, chocolate games, and the undisciplined like!)

Now that I have three nieces and a nephew, I plan for visits, "dates" out, and overnights. More importantly, I pray for and with them, trying to share the love of God and the Gospel in ways they can understand. I'm sure I have plenty of room to grow in this role, but I don't want to lose the vision for its importance. When I get discouraged by the "limits" of being an aunt or special family friend, I can count on God to provide refreshment through something such as this recent note dictated by my four-year-old niece, Claire: "I love to play with you. Thank you for my new dress-up clothes and new book. Thank you for everything. I'll always love you. I love you until the moon comes up and until the morning and the night!" It makes you want to lengthen those tent cords even more.