

The Church That Stopped Having Children: Why Western Christianity Is Dying from Within—*Brendon Naicker*

Abstract

This article explores the sharp decline in fertility within Western Christianity and argues that the crisis stems not primarily from external cultural pressures but from a profound theological capitulation within the Church itself. Using recent UK demographic data—record-low fertility rates, rising maternal age, soaring abortion numbers, and deep economic anxieties—the study shows how Western Christians have quietly exchanged the biblical vision of children as blessings for a secular worldview built on autonomy, lifestyle optimisation, and self-fulfilment.

In contrast, the article highlights how other religious communities, especially within Islam, retain a robust pro-natalist ethic rooted in theological affirmations of life and generational continuity, serving as a revealing mirror rather than a cultural rival. The paper concludes that the survival and renewal of Christianity in the West will require recovering a theology of fruitfulness, covenantal generativity, and sacrificial parenthood—reclaiming the biblical imagination of life as divine gift in an age that increasingly fears the very blessings God delights to give.

Introduction

For most of Christian history, believers never doubted that children were blessings. The Psalmist’s declaration—“Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward”¹—was taken not metaphorically but literally, forming the backbone of Christian assumptions about family, vocation, and community.

Yet in the contemporary West, many Christians no longer believe this. Or, more precisely, they do not live as though it were true. Increasingly, Christians—much like their secular neighbours—treat children as disruptions, costs, or burdens to be managed rather than gifts to be received. This is not simply a sociological curiosity. It is a theological crisis. And the demographic data of the United Kingdom serves as a revealing mirror for that crisis.

¹ Psalm 127:3–5 (ESV).

The Demographic Picture: Fertility Collapse Despite Rising Births

At first glance, 2024 brought surprising news: the UK recorded 594,677 live births, a slight increase over the previous year.² Yet closer inspection reveals that the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) fell to 1.41 children per woman, the lowest ever recorded and well below the replacement rate of 2.1.³

Demographers attribute this paradox—more births, fewer children per woman—to two realities: the UK’s population has grown overall, and the average age of parents continues to rise.⁴ In 2024, first-time mothers were around 29–30 years old, and births among women under 30 continued to decline.⁵

Notably, the ONS warns that the long-term decline in fertility has “profound implications” for the UK’s future labour market, health system, and age structure.⁶ In short: people are not having children. Those who do, often have just one. And this pattern holds for Christians as well.

The Cultural Catechesis of Anti-Natalism

Western fertility decline does not occur in a moral vacuum. It reflects a catechesis—a formation—in which children are understood not as God’s gifts but as liabilities to personal autonomy.

Contraceptive culture and delayed adulthood

Contraception itself is not the problem; it is the culture that grows around it. As sociologist Lyman Stone observes, widespread contraceptive access tends to shift society into an *anti-natal posture*, where the default assumption is avoiding pregnancy rather than embracing life.⁷

Christians increasingly mirror these norms: delaying marriage, delaying childbearing, and orienting adulthood around education, career, lifestyle, and self-fulfilment.

² Office for National Statistics, *Births in England and Wales: 2024*.

³ ONS, *Birth Summary Tables 2024*.

⁴ ONS, *Live Births Time Series, 1970–2024*.

⁵ ONS, *Mother’s Age at Birth Statistical Release 2024*.

⁶ ONS, *Population Pyramid Insights (2024)*.

⁷ Lyman Stone, “Why Are Birth Rates Falling?” *Institute for Family Studies*, 2022.

Abortion as the backstop of lifestyle autonomy

In 2022, the UK recorded 251,377 abortions—the highest number since 1967.⁸ Shockingly, 29.7% of all conceptions ended in abortion.⁹

These numbers are not simply “secular society’s problem.” They reflect a shared cultural imagination: contraception prevents the unwanted; abortion eliminates the unplanned. Even when Christians reject abortion, they often still absorb the assumption that children disrupt life unless carefully timed.

Economic fear: the £250,000 child

Financial anxiety amplifies the sense that children are burdens. A 2025 cost analysis estimated that raising a child in the UK now requires approximately £249,000.¹⁰

Commentators quickly framed this as a deterrent to family growth—language now deeply internalised by young Christians. Yet Scripture speaks the opposite: children are wealth, not drain; blessing, not burden.

The Theological Shift: From Covenant Fruitfulness to Personal Fulfilment

Christian theology historically framed childbearing as central to God’s purposes for humanity:

- Humanity is commanded to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28).¹¹
- Covenant blessings frequently include fertility (Deut 28:4).¹²
- Children are repeatedly portrayed as God’s gifts (Ps 113:9; Gen 33:5).
- The people of God were always generational, passing the faith “diligently... to your children” (Deut 6:6–7).

But modern Western Christians inhabit a different script. They have adopted what Charles Taylor calls the ethic of expressive individualism,¹³ where meaning is crafted by the autonomous self. Parenthood becomes optional, negotiable, and subordinate to personal choice.

⁸ Department of Health and Social Care, *Abortion Statistics for England and Wales 2022*.

⁹ ONS, *Conception Statistics: 2022*.

¹⁰ *The Times*, “The Cost of Raising a Child in 2025,” 14 January 2025.

¹¹ Genesis 1:28.

¹² Deuteronomy 28:4.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

The result is what theologian Oliver O’Donovan describes as an “unmooring of generational responsibility,”¹⁴ in which Christians accept the modern assumption that adulthood is primarily about maximising autonomy rather than receiving and nurturing life.

Islam as a Revealing Contrast

While Christian fertility has collapsed in the West, other religious communities provide a contrasting moral vision—most notably within the Muslim community.

Islamic pro-natal worldview

Islamic theology consistently affirms the goodness of children. The Qur’an speaks of God giving “children and grandchildren” as a sign of blessing (16:72)¹⁵ and calls children the “adornment of this world” (18:46).¹⁶

Sociologists note that, in Europe, Muslims maintain higher fertility rates because religious norms strongly encourage family life, early marriage, and openness to children.¹⁷

Muslim fertility in the UK

Research shows:

- UK Muslims have a TFR of approximately 2.3–2.6 children per woman, higher than the national average.¹⁸
- The Muslim population is significantly younger, with a median age around 27 (compared to 41 nationally).¹⁹
- “Muhammad” (with variant spellings) remains the most common boys’ name in England and Wales.²⁰

Muslims are not “taking over Britain.” Demographers are clear on this point.²¹ But they do reveal a spiritual truth: other communities still believe that children are blessings—and their demographic vitality reflects that belief. Christianity once believed the same.

¹⁴ Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

¹⁵ Qur’an 16:72.

¹⁶ Qur’an 18:46.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, *Europe’s Growing Muslim Population* (2017).

¹⁸ Pew Research; also supported by ONS demographic analysis (2021).

¹⁹ ONS, *Religion by Age, Census 2021*.

²⁰ ONS, *Baby Names in England and Wales: 2023*.

²¹ Jonathan Portes, “Muslims Are Not Replacing Us,” *The Guardian*, 2022.

The Real Reason the Church is Shrinking

Churches in the West frequently attribute decline to secularisation, hostile culture, political upheaval, or theological liberalism. These factors matter. But the primary reason for decline is simpler:

Christians are not having children. Or they are having too few to replace themselves.

Sociologist Eric Kaufmann put it starkly: “Secularism is growing not because secular people have more children, but because religious people have fewer.”²²

In effect, Christians have embraced voluntary demographic self-extinction. Churches age. Congregations shrink. Successive generations diminish.

- This is not martyrdom.
- This is not persecution.
- This is self-inflicted.

Toward Renewal: Recovering the Theology of Blessing

The Church must recover its own story—its own anthropology. Renewal requires not merely better liturgy or apologetics, but a re-consecration of the Christian imagination.

Reclaim the Scriptural vision

Christian leaders must once again preach openly:

- Children are blessings.
- Family is a divine vocation.
- Fruitfulness is participation in God’s creative life.
- Parenthood is sacrifice patterned after Christ.

Confront the idol of autonomy

Christians must name autonomy for what it is: a false god that promises freedom but delivers barrenness—spiritually and literally.

²² Eric Kaufmann, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* (Profile Books, 2010).

Build communities that support families

If churches want children, they must make room for them:

- Childcare support
- Intergenerational communities
- Economic assistance
- Housing solutions
- Hospitality and shared life

Teach young Christians to welcome life

Youth ministry must counter the cultural script that says adulthood = freedom from responsibility. The heart of Christian identity is not “choice” but gift.

Conclusion: A Call to Courageous Fruitfulness

The fertility crisis of the West is, at its deepest level, a crisis of faith. When Christians no longer view life as gift, but as burden; when they trust economics more than providence; when they treat the womb as a threat to autonomy—they abandon a central truth of the gospel: God delights to give life. And if the Church will again delight in what God delights in—children, families, sacrifice, generational faithfulness—then she may yet rise, not by political strength or cultural power, but by receiving with joy the blessings God longs to give.

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