

CHILDFREE VERSUS GOD'S MANDATE: A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON PROCREATION AND THE FAMILY

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Received : 20 August 2025

Revised : 10 September 2025

Accepted : 11 October 2025

Published : 19 October 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54443/ijset.v4i11.1241>

Link Publish : <https://www.ijset.org/index.php/ijset/index>

Abstract

This paper first examines the phenomenon of childfree as a modern lifestyle choice that challenges traditional theological views on God's mandate to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). This phenomenon emerged as a reflection of changing values in global society that increasingly emphasize individual autonomy, gender equality, and responsibility for social and ecological crises. In this context, childfree views are often considered contrary to God's will, while on the other hand, they can be understood as a form of ethical awareness of life, the environment, and human relationships. This study explores the theological meaning of procreation in the Christian faith not only as a biological act, but also as human participation in God's creative work, manifested through love, responsibility, and service within the family community. God's mandate to multiply is reinterpreted not merely as a literal command, but as a call to nurture life and build relationships that reflect God's love. The childfree lifestyle choice needs to be viewed through a dialogue between the biblical text and the modern human context, so that the church can present a relevant, inclusive, and liberating understanding. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a theological and contextual literature review to analyze the relationship between childfree, God's mandate, and family theology from a contextual perspective.

Keywords: *childfree, God's mandate, contextual theology, procreation, Christian family.*

I. Introduction

In the context of modern life, the decision to have children or choose to be childfree (without children) has become an increasingly prominent social phenomenon. The childfree lifestyle, which is the conscious decision not to have children, is often seen as a manifestation of individual freedom and a personal life choice. On the one hand, modern society emphasizes the individual's right to determine their own path in life, including procreation. On the other hand, a Christian theological perspective affirms the divine mandate for humans to "be fruitful and fill the earth," as stated in Genesis 1:28.¹ The conflict between personal choice in the childfree context and God's mandate for procreation raises questions about the role of humans in God's plan, moral responsibility, and the understanding of the family as a sacred institution.

In the Indonesian context, particularly where the family is still viewed as a crucial social and spiritual unit, the pressure on individuals to fulfill the mandate of procreation is immense. The choice to be childfree is not only considered a personal decision but is also often questioned from social, cultural, and religious perspectives.² This is where contextual theology comes into play to interpret biblical texts, moral principles, and God's mandates sensitively to the social, economic, and cultural conditions facing individuals or couples today. Theologically, God's mandate for procreation is not merely a biological command, but also encompasses spiritual and ethical dimensions. Family and childbearing are seen as part of human participation in God's creative work, as well as a means of upholding social justice and the values of holiness. However, with the rise of the childfree phenomenon, many questions have arisen regarding the meaning of this mandate: Is the decision not to have children contrary to God's will? How does the Christian community understand individual freedom in the face of this divine mandate? And so on.

¹Sharyn Graham Davies, *Gender Diversity in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2022), 88.

²Mohammad Rindu Jenuri, "The Childfree Phenomenon in the Modern Era: A Phenomenological Study of Gen Z and Islamic Perspectives on Childfree in Indonesia," *Social and Cultural Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (December: 2022), 81-89.

Furthermore, psychological and economic aspects are important considerations in choosing to be childfree. Many modern couples delay or refuse to have children due to economic stability, careers, quality of life, or a desire to focus on self-development. These reasons cannot be ignored, but they also cannot be justified, because faith does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, faith needs to respond relevantly to the real challenges faced by individuals and families. On the other hand, contextual theology also opens up space for critical reflection on traditions and social practices that sometimes oppress individuals. In societies that emphasize procreation as an obligation, individuals who choose to be childfree often face stigma, social discrimination, and moral pressure.³ The contextual theological perspective offers a wise middle way, namely emphasizing the importance of respecting God's mandate while understanding human freedom and rational considerations.⁴ This is crucial so that theological teachings do not become merely burdensome dogma but also serve as relevant guidance for contemporary life. By understanding the phenomenon of childfree through a contextual theological perspective, it is hoped that a more holistic understanding of the meaning of procreation, family responsibility, and human participation in God's plan will emerge.

II. Etymology and Terminology

2.1. Etymology and Terminology *Childfree*

The term *childfree* refers to individuals or couples who consciously choose not to have children.⁵ Its etymology comes from the English words *child*, meaning "child," and *free*, meaning "free" or "independent." Literally, *childfree* means "free from children" or "childless," but its meaning in a social context is more complex, reflecting a deliberate and deliberate decision, not simply a biological inability to have children. The term began to appear more widely in social and cultural literature in the late 20th century, along with the growing awareness of individuals about personal freedom and the right to determine their lifestyle.⁶ Terminologically, *childfree* differs from the term *childless*. *Childless* typically refers to the absence of children, whether due to biological inability, the loss of a child, or other circumstances beyond the individual's control. In contrast, *childfree* emphasizes the dimension of conscious and deliberate choice, making motivation a key factor in distinguishing the two terms. *Childfree* choices can be based on various considerations, such as career focus, economic stability, health, quality of life, or commitment to environmental and social goals. The *childfree* phenomenon also demonstrates social and cultural transformations related to the meaning of family. In the traditions of many societies, including Christian and Batak cultures, having children is considered a moral and spiritual obligation, as well as part of God's mandate to establish a family and multiply offspring. The choice to be *childfree* challenges this traditional view, becoming an important topic in theological, sociological, and ethical discourse.

2.2. Etymology and Terminology of Procreation

Sayprocreation comes from the Latin *procreare*, which means "to create" or "to produce offspring".⁷ In a biological context, this term refers to the human reproductive process, namely the ability of an individual or couple to produce children through sexual intercourse. However, the meaning of procreation is not limited to the biological aspect alone. Terminologically, procreation also encompasses social, moral, and theological dimensions, due to its role in maintaining the lineage, establishing a family, and upholding spiritual and ethical values within society. In its terminology, procreation is often understood as part of human rights and responsibilities within the family framework. From a medical and biological perspective, procreation involves the physiological aspects of reproduction, fertility, and reproductive health. Meanwhile, from a sociological perspective, procreation is related to the roles of individuals and couples within the family structure, the continuity of society, and social and economic responsibilities. From a Christian theological perspective, procreation has a broader dimension, namely as the embodiment of God's mandate to humans.⁸ Genesis 1:28 affirms that humans are commanded to "be fruitful and fill the earth," which positions procreation not only as a biological act but also as participation in God's plan for His creation. Procreation, in this context, becomes a symbol of moral, spiritual, and social responsibility, as well as a means of upholding the values of holiness and family sustainability. This understanding allows for dialogue between biological demands, individual

³Farrencia Nallanie, "Childfree in Indonesia: Phenomenon or Momentary Viral Trend?", *Journal Syntax Idea*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (June 2024), 2663–2673.

⁴Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 1-2.

⁵Adillah Khaira Amini, "The Childfree Phenomenon in Married Couples (Study of Family Communication of Married Couples Following Gita Savitri's Instagram)," *Kaganga Journal*, Vol. 8, no. 1 (April 2024), 30-39.

⁶*Ecological Spirit: Equilibrium of Humans and All Creation* (Jakarta: PT Kanisius, 2021), 112.

⁷Michal Levin, *Spiritual Intelligence* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2012), 113.

⁸Jeanne Becher, *Women, Religion & Sexuality* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2004), 266.

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rights, and the divine mandate, so that discussions about family and procreation are not only normative but also contextual and relevant to the challenges of modern life.

III. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a contextual theological perspective to analyze the phenomenon of *childfree* and God's mandate in procreation and the family.⁹ This method allows researchers to explore the meaning, motivation, and perceptions of individuals and communities regarding *childfree* choices and the fulfillment of the procreative mandate. Data were collected through library research, which included scriptures, theological literature, academic journals, family sociology books, and digital sources related to the *childfree* phenomenon. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method, namely interpreting biblical texts and supporting literature critically while taking into account the cultural, social, and psychological contexts of modern society. This approach allows for the identification of tensions between *childfree* choices and God's mandate, and how contextual theology can provide relevant and applicable understanding.

IV. Discussion

4.1. Theological Basis of God's Mandate in Procreation

God's mandate regarding procreation is one of the most fundamental foundations of Christian theology for understanding the family. God's command in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it," affirms that procreation is not merely a biological act, but rather the manifestation of the divine will, which is moral, spiritual, and social.¹⁰ From a Christian theological perspective, humans, as God's creations, are mandated to be partners in His creative work, so that every act of procreation is part of human participation in God's cosmic plan. Thus, having children not only fulfills an individual's biological or emotional needs but also continues the lineage, which is theologically considered to be the inheritance of God's life and promise to humanity.¹¹ Morally, the mandate of procreation places individuals under broader ethical responsibilities. Procreation cannot be viewed solely as a personal right or a free choice without regard for its spiritual and social implications. Children are considered a gift and a trust from God, so parents have an obligation to educate, guide, and nurture them in faith and true values. From this perspective, failure or refusal to fulfill the responsibility of procreation, if done without valid reasons, can be understood as a rejection of the divine mandate inherent in humans as responsible creatures. This aligns with traditional theological views that emphasize the family as a divine institution where God's mandate is realized through the continuity of generations and the moral development of the community.¹²

From a spiritual perspective, procreation reflects humanity's connection to God's broader plan. Having children is a concrete manifestation of recognition of God's sovereignty in human life and part of humanity's service to creation. The presence of children in a family serves not only to fulfill biological needs but also as a means for parents to actualize love, patience, and moral responsibility. In this sense, every act of procreation is a tangible expression of faith, demonstrating human participation in the process of creating and nurturing life, blessed by God. Furthermore, the mandate to procreate also has a significant social dimension. Children are not only an individual responsibility, but also part of the broader community.¹³ By giving birth and educating new generations, humans contribute to maintaining the social, moral, and spiritual sustainability of society. This emphasizes that God's mandate regarding procreation has implications that extend beyond the family and touch the interests of the community and society as a whole. Therefore, the responsibility for procreation cannot be separated from the social obligation to nurture children into individuals who contribute positively to the common good. In the context of theology, this mandate of God must also be understood contextually, that is, adapted to the realities of modern human life. While the principle of procreation remains relevant, its application must take into account the social, cultural, and psychological conditions of the individual or couple. For example, in modern society, economic factors, health, and quality of life are important considerations in deciding whether to procreate. Theology emphasizes that understanding God's mandate does not necessarily mean that the obligation to procreate must be carried out mechanically, but rather that it must be seen as a responsibility carried out consciously, responsibly, and thoughtfully. The theological

⁹Lexy J. Moleong, *Qualitative Research Methodology* (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017), 10.

¹⁰Serli Patasik, *Hermeneutics of the OT I: The Aramaean Nomads to the History of the Kingdom of Judah and Israel* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2023), 167.

¹¹Levin, *Spiritual Intelligence*, 113.

¹²Javier Abad, *Marriage: The Path to a Purity of Life* (Surabaya: Murai Publishing, 2015), 99.

¹³Purim Marbun, *The Role of the Church and Family in the Spiritual Development of the Congregation* (Yogyakarta: PBMR, 2022), 30.

foundation of God's mandate for procreation encompasses three main dimensions: biological, spiritual, and social. Biologically, humans are commanded to reproduce; spiritually, children serve as a means of human participation in God's plan; and socially, procreation ensures the moral continuity and sustainability of society. Awareness of these three dimensions is crucial for interpreting modern phenomena such as childfreedom, where an individual's decision not to have children can be analyzed in terms of moral, spiritual, and social responsibilities. Therefore, understanding God's mandate for procreation not only emphasizes the human obligation to procreate but also highlights the ethical and spiritual responsibilities inherent in each individual as part of a community of faith and society.¹⁴ Overall, God's mandate for procreation affirms that having children is an inherent right and obligation, a form of human participation in the work of creation, and a means for humans to uphold moral, spiritual, and social values. This theological foundation provides an important foundation for understanding modern dynamics related to the family, individual freedom, and the phenomenon of childfree. It also serves as a reference for academic, ethical, and pastoral discussions on procreation from a contextual Christian perspective.

4.2. The Childfree Phenomenon in Modern Social and Cultural Contexts

The childfree phenomenon reflects a significant transformation in lifestyles and individual priorities in modern society. The term childfree refers to individuals or couples who consciously choose not to have children, in contrast to the term childless, which generally refers to the absence of children due to biological factors or circumstances beyond their control. The childfree choice is a personal and deliberate decision, reflecting reflection on various aspects of life, from economics and career to quality of life and psychological well-being. In the context of globalization and modernity, this decision is becoming increasingly common as many individuals see that having children is no longer the only way to achieve self-fulfillment or social contribution.¹⁵ From a social perspective, childfree is a phenomenon that challenges traditional norms regarding family and gender roles. In many cultures, including Christian and Batak communities, the family is viewed as a sacred institution that regulates the social, moral, and spiritual structure of society. Having children is considered a moral obligation, a social responsibility, and a fulfillment of God's mandate. Cultural and social pressures against procreation remain strong, so individuals who choose to be childfree often face stigma, criticism, and ethical and spiritual questions.¹⁶ Rejection or neglect of procreative norms is often considered a form of egoism or rejection of divine will, even though this decision is often based on deep rational and ethical considerations.

From a psychological perspective, the decision to be childfree is often linked to considerations of mental well-being and quality of life. Many modern couples delay or refuse to have children because they want to focus on self-development, emotional stability, health, or career achievement. This decision is also influenced by economic pressures, the cost of education, and access to adequate resources to support children's development. Social psychologists emphasize that childfree is not simply a response to personal circumstances but also a reflection of adaptation to complex social challenges, including social mobility, urbanization, and the expectations of modern society that demand individual achievement in various areas of life. Furthermore, the childfree phenomenon also has relevant ecological and social dimensions. Some individuals choose not to have children as a way to contribute to environmental sustainability and reduce the burden on natural resources. This approach suggests that procreative decisions can be influenced by broader ethical awareness and social responsibility, not simply by personal interests or cultural norms. In this context, the childfree choice confirms that modernity opens up space for more complex and multidimensional ethical considerations in decision-making regarding family and procreation.¹⁷ Sociological studies confirm that childfree is a phenomenon that does not emerge spontaneously, but rather is a consequence of social dynamics, education, and globalization. Higher education, access to information, and exposure to ideas of feminism, gender equality, and individual rights have a significant influence on individuals' understanding and life choices. Globalization also broadens society's perspectives on various family models and lifestyles, enabling individuals to make decisions that align with their personal values, even if they conflict with traditional norms. Within the context of Christian theology, the childfree phenomenon challenges traditional interpretations of God's mandate for procreation. While the mandate for procreation remains a normative principle, its application must take into account the complexities of modern life. The childfree phenomenon in modern society is not merely a lifestyle trend, but a

¹⁴Imanuel Teguh Harisantoso, *Theology of the Christian Family* (Yogyakarta: Andi Publisher, 2023), 56.

¹⁵Levin, *Spiritual Intelligence*, 31

¹⁶Levin, *Spiritual Intelligence*, 31.

¹⁷Melanie Notkin, *The Childfree Life: How to Live a Full and Happy Life Without Children* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 45.

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reflection of shifting social, cultural, and psychological paradigms that influence concepts of family, procreation, and gender roles.

4.3. The Dilemma of Childfree Choice and God's Mandate

The choice to live a childfree life, a conscious decision not to have children, presents a significant dilemma within the framework of Christian theology, particularly regarding the fulfillment of God's mandate for procreation. God's command, which affirms humans to "be fruitful and fill the earth," provides the theological basis for the belief that reproduction is part of humanity's role as a creature participating in the work of creation. Traditionally, childlessness has often been considered contrary to divine will and the inherent moral responsibility of humanity. However, social dynamics and the realities of modern life indicate that childfree decisions are often driven by complex considerations, such as economic stability, health, career, as well as concerns about quality of life and social responsibility.¹⁸ This dilemma involves the tension between adherence to divine principles and individual freedom to choose one's own path in life. From a theological perspective, procreation is not only a biological act, but also a spiritual means of upholding moral values, nurturing new generations, and passing on a life blessed by God.¹⁹ Therefore, the decision to delay or refuse to have children can be understood as a potential disregard for the divine mandate, especially if it is not accompanied by ethical reflection and moral responsibility. Children, from a Christian perspective, are not simply biological inheritances, but symbols of human participation in God's plan, a means of transmitting spiritual values, and essential elements of social structures and faith communities.

On the other hand, modern realities provide rational reasons for individuals to choose childfree. Economic factors demanding financial stability, career needs, psychological readiness, and reproductive health considerations are all important factors that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, awareness of social and environmental issues, such as concerns about overpopulation and resource sustainability, also serve as ethical reasons for some to delay or refuse to have children. In this context, the decision to be childfree is not simply a form of defiance against God's mandate, but rather a human effort to act responsibly and realistically in facing the complexities of life. The childfree decision can be seen as a morally and ethically valid choice, without denying the relevance of the principle of procreation in the Christian faith. This approach allows for a critical dialogue between faith, ethics, and individual freedom, and reduces the risk of dogmatic interpretations that suppress personal decisions.²⁰ The dilemma of childfree versus God's mandate reflects the tension between normative theological principles and the demands of contemporary life. A holistic understanding requires an analysis that considers spiritual, social, ethical, and psychological dimensions, ensuring that interpretations of God's mandate remain relevant while respecting individual rational considerations. This phenomenon opens up space for critical reflection and constructive dialogue within Christian communities, bridging the gap between moral responsibility, individual freedom, and the relevance of divine principles in modern life.

V. Conclusion

Phenomenon *childfree* has generated significant debate in the context of Christian theology, particularly regarding the fulfillment of God's mandate for procreation. The divine mandate, as stated in Genesis 1:28, affirms that humans are commanded to "be fruitful and fill the earth," making procreation an inherent moral, spiritual, and social responsibility of humanity. Traditionally, this view has emphasized that having children is integral to human participation in God's creative work, the transmission of moral values, and a contribution to the continuity of society. However, the dynamics of modern life, encompassing economic considerations, quality of life, health, career, and ecological awareness, have created space for individuals to choose to live a childfree life. This choice, when analyzed rationally and ethically, is not necessarily a rejection of God's will, but rather a reflection of the complex realities of contemporary life. The study of contextual theology is crucial for understanding the tension between childfree and God's mandate. This approach emphasizes that theological principles must be interpreted in light of the social, cultural, and psychological conditions of the community. Through a contextual lens, procreation remains relevant as a divine mandate, but its implementation must consider the individual's capacity, readiness, and responsibility. The choice to remain childless can be understood as a responsible and reflective decision, one that maintains the principles of faith as an ethical and spiritual reference. The dilemma between childfree and God's mandate highlights the need

¹⁸Rifki Alaudin, "The Influence of the Childfree Lifestyle Among the Modern Generation of Indonesia," *Nathiqiyyah* 5, no. 2 (2021): 101–115,

¹⁹Hendi Gunawan, *The Blessings* (Jakarta: Metanoia Publishing, 2017), 42.

²⁰Blasius Suprema Yese, Alexius Poto, and Noberta Nadia Waruwu, "The Catholic Church's Assessment of Childless Marriages," *Journal of Christian and Catholic Religion Education* 1, no. 4 (December 2023), 178–195.

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for constructive dialogue between individual freedom and moral responsibility. Churches and faith communities are required to provide a space for critical reflection that is sensitive to individual needs and realities, without prioritizing dogmatic pressures. This approach allows for a balanced understanding between adherence to divine principles and recognition of individual rights and rational considerations in the context of modern life. Overall, the childfree phenomenon can be viewed not merely as a lifestyle trend, but as a manifestation of shifting social, cultural, and psychological paradigms that influence views on family, procreation, and gender roles. Contextual theology studies demonstrate that the principle of procreation remains relevant, but its understanding must be adaptive and sensitive to the complexities of contemporary human life. This approach affirms that Christian faith is capable of navigating the dilemma between God's mandate and individual freedom, enabling discourse on family and procreation to be reflective, critical, and applicable.

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