

Ben Best, cohost

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Ben Best, cohost

In a recent issue of Cairn University's magazine, Cairn Professor and Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Dr. Victoria Aquilone, reviewed the book *The Two Parent Privilege* by economist Melissa S. Kearney. She writes, "While the author does not exactly approach the cultural dynamics of family formation from a biblical worldview, her book investigates the proliferation of non-marital parenting arrangements as well as highlights the range of negative impacts of the decline of marriage in the West, especially the impact on children." In this episode, Dr. Aquilone joins Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss how Kearney's research both confirms God's design for the order of marriage and childbearing and raises important issues worthy of Christians' considerations. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

A regular listener to *Defragmenting* asks how we record the conversations because, as she said, it sounds like you're in the same room with them. Most of the conversations we have are with people at a distance. So if it sounds like we're seated across from each other, that's to the credit of remarkable technology. And the expert skill of the folks at Studio D who do an outstanding job of taking care of the audio engineering and editing for us. I'm thankful for the ability to talk with people across miles, but my preference is to actually be in the same room with whomever I'm speaking to. And that is the case for this episode, as I'm seated across the table from one of my colleagues here at Cairn University, Dr. Victoria, aka Tori Aquilone, who is an associate professor in our School of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the incoming dean of that school. For the spring 2026 issue of Cairn University Magazine, Tori reviewed a book by economist Melissa Kearney titled *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*. The name of Tori's article is "Two Parents: A Privilege by Design", and you can find it online at [faithtruthmedia.com](http://faithtruthmedia.com). After I read it, I asked Tori if she'd be willing to join me to talk about it, and she kindly accepted. So Tori, welcome to the podcast. And thanks for making time to talk.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Of course, Keith. Thanks for having me.

Dr. Keith Plummer

For listeners who aren't familiar with the book, could you start off by just giving us a brief overview of what it is that Melissa Kearney is addressing and what it is that she is trying to do with the book?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Sure. So Kearney observes that over the last 40 years or so, there's been a decline in two-parent households. And part of the book is investigating what kind of parenting arrangements do exist in lieu of the two-parent household, and what are the impacts to children being raised in these two-parent households. And she also tries to answer the question, why is this happening? Why has it happened over the last 40 years in particular? What factors, particularly economic ones, drive the continued decline? And then, of course, if there is a significant impact on children, which she finds there is a significant negative impact on children, what are some policy interventions that could be applied to potentially increase children's achievements and outcomes even if they are born into not a two-parent household.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So as an economist, she's looking largely at economical factors. And it seems from the subtitle of the book, *How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*, that she is concerned both with the societal impact of the decline in birth rate and marriage. But a big part of her book with it you focused on was, um, what are the advantages or disadvantages to children. I listened to two interviews with her, and it was interesting. She described herself as being a pronatalist. She's pro-child. And did that come out in the, in the book?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

I think it did. Yeah, I do think it did. I think that she wants children to succeed. I think she's seeing, particularly in the US, it's actually not entirely across the West that these numbers are consistent. It seems to be worse in the US than other Western nations. But yeah, the impact to children economically, it has a reinforcing effect that then children born into economically deficient households then go on often to produce more economically deficient households, that there's a, a lack of mobility, it seems, that is tied to the household arrangement.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You, in your review of the book, cited a number of statistics that she cites, and I just want to read through some of them just to give an idea to people who are listening about some of them. If you want to pick out any of these, we can delve deeper into it. But more than 1 in 5 children living in the US today live in a home with an unpartnered mother, by which is meant a mother who is neither married nor cohabitating. And a majority of those households don't include another adult. So it's just the mom and the child or the children. Since the 1980s, rates of single motherhood increased dramatically among all but the highest educated women, which is something that I want to spend some time on in a moment. Boys, it was interesting because she's looking also at what the impact of this is particularly on young men and boys. Boys are more than twice as likely to be suspended from school than girls, which can impact their ability to complete high school. And young women are 8% more likely to obtain a college degree than young men. What is the significance of that concerning What Does She Say? How does the decline in marriage play into this, particularly with that disparity between young men and young women.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

It seems that there is a relationship not just between the economic viability of a household, because I think she's— early on in the book, it seems as if almost everything is going to be chalked up to economics. And then there's a shift towards the middle of the book where you realize, well, even in two-parent households that are less economically stable the fact that there are two parents still has significant positive impacts that do then have economic, you know, inflection. So with boys in particular, it seems that there is something— well, I'll back up for one second. The majority of the single-parent households are single mother only households, so that's an important contextual piece where it's— I think that's the first stat you read. It's not necessarily, uh, divorce is not the cause of this issue that, that Kearney is addressing. Um, cohabitating without being married is not commonly what we're seeing in terms of marriage rates. What's really happening is there are women and men who are having a child without being married and without cohabitating. So that cohabitation piece, even having the father in the home without having the quote-unquote piece of paper of marriage, uh, would benefit boys significantly.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

And she even had this portion where she talked about the difference between young boys and young girls and what happens when their father is no longer in the home. If the father was in the home for a period of time and then no longer in the home, it impacts boys more significantly at a certain age range than it does for girls. So it seems that, um, I don't know that Kearney made a very emphatic point about what fathers bring to the table, more just that when fathers are not in the picture, there seems to be a more significant impact to boys, particularly with relation to behavioral issues. And she does not blame single mothers for this. It's not a deficiency on the part of a single mother. It's more, uh, just the reality of what is lacking when a father figure is not there. Very interestingly, she had a couple of, you know, more specific discussions that didn't make it into the article. One being she evaluated sort of a social experiment where dads from the local neighborhood went into the schools of that neighborhood and having the fathers present, even just in the neighborhood, having the fathers present in the schools made a difference for the overall behavior of the young boys in that environment. So there's something about the presence of a father that cannot be matched.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Does she say anything in that regard? And kind of what you just mentioned may touch on this, but it sounds as though even having the presence of male mentor figures would be important with, with so many young men coming from the absence of that. Does she say anything about what that might

mean for what more male teachers might mean?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Hmm. I don't think she addresses specifically male childhood educators, but the implication is certainly there. She does talk a little bit about mentorship for young men. And it certainly can help move the needle, but it doesn't necessarily replace what a father in a home can really offer. And then when you combine that with the economic piece, which is not, you know, with, with a having a father in a home, it's not just economics, it's also what that father brings, you know, even emotionally, spiritually, we could say from our perspective, but when you combine those two things with the economic and the fatherly presence, it's a pretty significant deficit for young boys who don't have that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's talk about this because you talked about the spiritual piece and that we should tell people that Kearney is not writing this as a Christian, but she is, as you bring out in your review, she is clearly bringing forth a lot of evidence that would confirm what from a Christian standpoint we would say is the the telos, the design of God. Were you able to detect at all what kind of philosophy of life she had with respect to— she's not trying to make a moral case. She's not even arguing that there is a purposeful design. But she's saying, here are advantages. Were you able to see in anything that she said what kind of worldview she was operating from?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Yeah, so I noticed in the book, Kearney seems to think that publishing this book is a risk, and that as she has tried to engage even sort of her academic community on these matters, that it's met with a sort of maybe not really wanting to address it. Or a sense of, well, that's really about values, that's, that's not necessarily about economics. And I think for Kearney, in a good way, she is an economist and has identified that there is an economic dimension to marriage and to household formation, and there are going to be economic impacts to it. I think that with her academic community, she's had to focus on that and say, listen, yes, there are values wrapped up in something like this, but if we just look at this sort of disciplinary intersection of data, we can't deny that if we as economists are going to be making policy recommendations for how to improve the outcomes for children in our country, we have to address this kind of thing. And so I think she actually wants to demystify it a little bit. And if we just think about it as an economic institution, I think that probably is a little bit of a survival mechanism for her in her academic community, and that makes total sense.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

That being said, she does say freely she has children, she values children, she believes that children are the future. And if we are going to help them be the next leaders of our country, be the next citizens and whatnot, that we have to attend more to what they need growing up. And so I think there's almost a sense in which Kearney explicitly avoids a value discussion so that she can stay objective. So I'll, I'll say that, and then I'll extrapolate without ever having spoken with her, or, you know, not wanting to make assumptions about her. I sense a little bit of maybe a materialist, Marxist, you know, liberal approach. And I think she would say that that's the community she exists in, certainly. Uh, to what degree she necessarily subscribes to that is hard to tell, but, uh, the economic factors that she is evaluating are highly material in nature in terms of income, in terms of educational attainment, right? And these are material realities that contribute to material success, material achievement, or material dearth and want. So it's hard to tell if that's just a feature of her academic discipline or if it's her own kind of worldview coming through a little bit.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

But I think that she realizes that what she is saying goes against a little bit what the overarching assumption might be in her field, and she's willing to take it on. And I think that's, that's valuable. You know, she would say that if we as economists can say that, for example, a college education is going to make people more successful economically. Is it a value statement to say that? Is it a value statement to encourage policies that make it more likely for people to get college educations? I think she actually calls out a little bit her own academic community in trying to not have values conversations when the reality is we're always having values conversations.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, there's something commendable in her willingness to put herself in that position because I would imagine that there are people who are going to dismiss or try to dismiss what she's saying by saying she's just moralizing or that there is some underlying agenda that she has to argue for some kind of design. But she tries her best to just say, "Hey, I'm looking at what the data show." with respect to what is in the best interest of the success of, of children.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

And I think part of it is that the goal of the book isn't necessarily to answer the question, why is marriage valuable? It's a little bit more the goal— what outcomes result from two-parent, two biological parent households. So also, just to her credit, you know, there is a specific goal to the book that does edge out some of those purpose-oriented discussions. But my sense is that if I were to press on that a little bit, in terms of what I gleaned from the book, I don't know that she would say, well, marriage is an age-old institution established by a divine benevolent creator for the purpose of the cultural mandate, right? I, I think if we had to take, you know, maybe Cairn University's approach to what the purpose of marriage is, I don't think it would overlay. I, I wonder how she would answer a question related to the value of marriage if I, if I had to just extrapolate from other Marxist-oriented thinkers that I've encountered, it would seem that they might say marriage is an institution that developed to maintain another economic reality. Marriage developed to maintain some, some kind of status in the past, and it's it just arises from material circumstances itself and is therefore something that could be replaced with a different institution that could potentially work just as well.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

I think Kearney's work goes against that. I don't think it's a replaceable institution, and that might invite us to consider its, its origins more.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's, that's interesting. She is concerned that the declining birth rate and what is necessary in terms of what's called a replacement rate for a population, that this is going to have and has already had detrimental effects for American society. And she's calling a warning there. And then there were a number of things that you pointed out that she brings out that I thought were really fascinating. For example, the teen pregnancy rate has declined, but birth rates for women over the age of 30 has increased. And you, you mentioned what it is that she thinks has contributed to the decrease in teen pregnancies. What is that? Not that she identifies just one thing, but one of the factors that she identifies, I never would have— I wouldn't have fathomed.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Yeah. So, so a couple things in terms of mothers over the age of 30. There are several things that could attribute, you know, that, uh, or several that could be attributed to many things. Some things that Kearney talks about, some things that I would just speculate about as a person who became a mother over 30, right? You know, so even just personal experience. But I think there is an educational component where, uh, women are more educated than they were 40 years ago. And even in terms of economic scenario that we live and work in, often you do need an advanced graduate degree to do certain jobs. So I do think that some of it is that women are putting off childbearing intentionally until they're done with their education. Um, other women may not necessarily want to put off childbearing but cannot find a suitable partner. She has an entire chapter about marriageable men or not marriageable men, right? Um, so I think there are a number of factors going into that. So at the same time that there are women over 30 are more likely to become mothers than previously, and a number of factors related to that, then, you know, teen pregnancy is on a steep decline.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

And, you know, common sense might say, well, there's been an increase in, you know, sex ed in schools, and maybe the, you know, the crying baby doll that they send home is really starting to work. Um, but she talks about— I, I had to include in the article the, uh, that she would say that the airing of *MTV's 16 and Pregnant* may have actually had a causal effect in the decline of teen pregnancy. And she spends a significant amount of time in the book really showing how this could be causal, um,

which is a concern of hers generally over the course of the book, to ensure that her research and her data is sound to make a causal kind of argument, which I appreciated. And so in terms of what may be going on with MTV's *16 and Pregnant*, one of the things they looked at was actually, uh, Google searches related to the airing of it. Um, this also is in the era of, if I'm remembering correctly, smartphones, um, and whatnot. And so it seems like the reality TV that showed people what it was like to be a parent if you're a 16-year-old young woman and you have a romanticized idea of being a mom, you could find yourself in that position and realize it's not all that romantic.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

And so that reality TV show showed that to people. It's very interesting.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah,

Dr. Tori Aquilone

it makes you wonder what other ways might we be able to utilize reality TV to our advantage or disadvantage, even if, if we want more people to get married and have children and stay in a biological household, what's the reality TV show that we should air to encourage that?

Dr. Keith Plummer

The difficulty there might be— well, no, it might not be a difficulty, but like with *16 and Pregnant*, there is kind of this voyeuristic thing where you're seeing the downside of this. I wonder how successful a reality program would be that was showing the wholesome aspect of a biological, two-parent biological home. I don't know. But it does say something to the fact that there is some, there is some reality to teens seeing the real consequences of having children at that age. I don't know if she gets in this at all, but someone else who has done a lot of research in terms of teens and pregnancy rates and so forth is Jean Twenge. And where she talks about— and you mentioned the smartphone element— just the rate of teens' sexual activity seems to have declined as well. And part of that being that a lot of teens are just in isolation and not— does she deal with that aspect of how technology may have contributed to that as well?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

I don't recall that, and I actually just double-checked, and the *16 and Pregnant* aired in 2009, so a little bit before the ubiquity of smartphones. I think, I think iPhones— I had my first iPhone, I think, in 2010, so not too far from that, but certainly not the 2020s version of that. But I, I do think that it's widely known that teens of the most recent generations are having a very different social experience than the ones before it. Um, I will add though, in terms of this, you know, *16 and Pregnant* and the reality TV, I think if I can extrapolate, again, this isn't necessarily something Kearney addresses, but there is a lot of chatter on the internet and so forth about the sacrifice that it is to have children. And I think that there, there is more of a reality check that people do when they have finished high school, they want to go to college, and they're enjoying their 20s. And I think that it's possible that when, you know, if a, if a young couple is married, they're turning 30, then it's almost as if, well, if we want to have kids, the clock's running out, so let's get started.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

As opposed to you get married, you have kids. That's just sort of the order of operations. And I think part of it is that people are facing the reality of the, the type of sacrifice it is to have children— lost sleep, you know, potentially lost income, and so forth. And I, I do think that people are running into the economic realities of the cost of raising a child in the US right now. It is higher than it's ever been, even in terms of percentage of income-wise, where a lot of people feel like the numbers are just impossible to— especially to achieve something that, that Kearney is seeing as most beneficial for children. To be able to achieve. Um, for, for families who want to have a stay-at-home mom, the economic impact of that is in one direction, where then the breadwinner has to make a certain amount of money, and that woman loses out on even paying into retirement and so forth, loses out on job training and whatnot. But then working moms have a different set of challenges related to daycare costs and so forth. So I think that's a piece that if Kearney were to do an updated edition, I'd love to hear more about that.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

What is the cost of raising a child, and how does that— particularly when it comes to the marriageable men, uh, she talks about how men without an education, a college education, are considered to be less eligible bachelors, partially because of the income deficits that result from, you know, the lack of education. And so what then do those income deficits actually look like for a family trying to make do?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's pause here for a message or two. And then when we come back, what I'd like to do is follow up with this, this place of education in this whole situation and some of the takeaways and considerations that you identify in your article that you think Christians should consider.

Ben Best, cohost

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm back and I'm speaking with Dr. Victoria, aka Tori Aquilone, about a book review that she wrote for Cairn University magazine reviewing the book *The Two Parent Privilege* by Melissa Kearney. And when we left off, we were talking about the role of education that Kearney says is really, really important in thinking about some of these factors. And you said in your review that perhaps the most striking element of Kearney's work for you was the role that a college education plays, the importance that it plays in thinking about these matters. Why is that? What was it about her evidence related to education that was most striking for you?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

wYeah, I think it was just, you know, part of the joy of reading is being surprised sometimes. And for some reason, this surprised me. I guess I thought that the book was going to be more about family dynamics and, and outcomes, and it is about that. And but as she's trying to trace causality, the role of education seemed more significant than I think I would have assumed, in the sense that education as sort of— if we think of it as a demographic factor, the people who have an education end up in different sort of buckets than the people who don't have an education. And so, um, the fact that children in single mother households are more likely to have an uneducated mother, and then children coming from two-parent households are more likely to have two college-educated parents. There is still a part of me that's wondering to what degree it's correlation and what degree it's causation. I think that Kearney has left a little bit of that open too, um, but it's an undeniable factor that it seems that having a college education will make your children's lives better, even if you're a woman who has a college education and you end up a single mother, your children will be better off than if you didn't have that college education.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

If you are a two parents who want to have children, both of you having a college education will be better for your children than just one of you or neither of you. Uh, I found that surprising. I think partially, maybe partially because it seems there's a lot of discussion in our cultural moment about the value of learning the trades as opposed to getting a further education. Education is incredibly costly these days compared to when my parents, for example, went to college. And I think that there's maybe more to say there that we can, we can pick up. But yeah, it was surprising to see, especially for the mother. She comes back to it a little bit more in the chapter about men, um, and what makes them marriageable or not. Uh, part of it has to do with the export of jobs overseas that really took off in the '80s, particularly manufacturing jobs. And so uneducated men have a lot fewer opportunities for gainful employment in the U.S. than they did 40 years ago. And so income has not meaningfully risen for men. I don't know if I'm gonna get this completely right from, from the book, but generally I think it's true.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Income has not meaningfully risen for men over the past 40 years, particularly those in blue-collar manufacturing jobs. Uh, income for women has meaningfully increased over the last 40 years, and educational opportunities have increased for women. Women are more likely to get a college degree. And so some of these things are somewhat common sense. You could observe them, but, but the numbers were really striking.

Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the things that you wrote in your piece that made me smile because I was thinking it before I got to it, you say this: "It seems to me that the best way for potential parents, men and women alike, to serve their future children is to obtain a 4-year college degree right after graduating high school. Of course, as a professor at a Christian university, it would make sense that I would suggest as much. But Kearney's data offers a compelling reason, a reason beyond simply making money or advancing economically: to serve your children."

Dr. Keith Plummer

And before I got to that paragraph, I thought, well, yeah, I want to believe this because we're in the business of education. But you believe that she is making a case for the benefit to children, and not just economically, of having their parents college-educated. What would you say to the person who hears us talking and says, "Well, yeah, of course you say that." Make the strongest case based on what you have encountered from Kearney, who is not— she's not making a case in defense of university teachers, or—

Dr. Tori Aquilone

I think I would say if we think about economics as a portion of what household formation entail, we can think of economics as something that serves the household. It's not the other way around, especially if we consider the original purpose for marriage as initiated in Genesis and the cultural mandate that we're meant to be carrying out in marriage. If we consider economics as subservient to that, then I do think there's a sense in which when two parents are educated before having children and are able to have more economic viability as a household, it's economic but beyond economics, because then that economic viability serves the household in a different way and therefore serves the children. So that's maybe one angle I would take, but another angle I would take is especially if you're getting an education that is formational, like something we would receive at Cairn University, that is forming you as a future parent. It's not just forming you as a pupil, right, or student or scholar. And in that formative experience that you undergo in a 4-year degree, it's formative whether you're at Cairn or not. Cairn University exists for a particular formational purpose.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

It will be formational wherever you go. I do think that there are some elements of what happens in a college education that benefit you as an individual in your formation, and therefore any individuals you covenant with, such as a future spouse and children. You're not just trying to advance economically for the sake of making money. But when your family has stronger economic viability, you can have freedom to make more decisions about what your children are exposed to or not, what, uh, educational, uh, attainment you can provide for your children, um, if you want them to go to a private school or have a particular form of schooling. Having that economic support in the household not just about making more money, but providing more opportunities is significant. And it's not that children who don't have that are, you know, that there's something wrong with them, or that parents who can't provide that, that there's something wrong with them. But especially as the economic landscape becomes even more competitive, when your children have access to opportunities and access to you as a parent, I think that is something Kearney addresses particularly in Two Are Better Than One and the chapter Parenting Is Hard, that when there are two parents, the household has more emotional bandwidth.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

So that was a really interesting way of kind of casting it. And I think as Christians, we could add more spiritual bandwidth, right? There's more— you're able to pour into the children more. Um, so with that, having an education it kind of can seem strange, but it can actually buy back time for you when you're at that childbearing age. It doesn't just give you money, but buying back time in terms of maybe more

flexibility in a work schedule. Maybe you're paid salary instead of hourly if you have a more advanced job. So there are elements, I think, related to the types of jobs you can get and so forth that also may afford more to your children. Did I convince you?

Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm sold. You do point out, though, that in certain circles there is a desire to persuade young women especially to forgo college for the sake of, you know, starting a family, having children. Talk a little bit about that. What do you think? Because there's something of a tension there. Because she— okay, so on one hand, she's saying the birth rate is declining. And it would be in the best interest of the country if the birth rate were to pick up. So What do you say to young women? And I really appreciated the fact that you addressed this with respect to what counsel would you give young women who are feeling this pull and pushing as to what do I do concerning education, family starting? What, what are some of your thoughts there?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

I think particularly in circles where women are encouraged to forego education and begin childbearing early, I think it— I think that conversation runs the risk of women being encouraged to find their identity only in their gender and its ability to reproduce. I think that is a beautiful thing God has given women, but it is not their ultimate purpose or only valuable contribution to society. The ultimate purpose of every human being is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And there are many ways that people can do that. I'm not of the mind that women, especially, you know, Christian women, should say, well, I just I'm not meant to have children. I never want to have children. I'm going to get married, but we're, you know, just going to plan to not have children. I don't think that's in line with the created order, but I do think that there is allowance in Scripture for family planning so that especially if women have medical issues and so forth, I think there's some allowance for that. So I think I don't want to run the risk of You know, maybe a worst-case scenario is a young woman gets married without, you know, she finishes high school, um, but then gets married and has several children.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

There's a lot of ways this can, uh, come back, maybe come back to bite her in a sense, uh, when she's 35 and maybe all the kids are in school and, um, maybe she wants to go back to school then, or maybe she would like to get a job but doesn't have what is needed then. And in the very worst case scenario, uh, what if something happens to her husband and then she's left with really no ability to get viable income for her family? Or God forbid, a husband ends up being abusive and she has no way out. So that on top of, you know, I mentioned even women being able to pay into retirement and Social Security and whatnot in having a more conventional job. Those are some of the risks, I think, both spiritual and material for the encouragement to women, you know, just finish high school and then, you know, get married, serve your husband. Women are more than wives and mothers. They're not less than that, right? But women are more than that. What if you can't have children, and, and your entire identity is wrapped up in this? I think that those are some of the risks that I would— especially if I were in a spiritual counseling situation, I'd really want to unpack for, you know, a woman sitting in front of me.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

What does it mean for you to serve Jesus? Is the only way for you to do that to become a wife and mother? Is there any room for you to take a couple years, get even an associate's degree, and still be able to, you know, pursue family formation the way you feel that you want for your family.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm. Yeah, you emphasized the liberty of conscience that a young woman should have. And I just want to read a section from your piece. "Women should feel free in their conscience to obtain a college education prior to getting married or having children. And doing so may aid their families in carrying out the cultural mandate according to God's wisdom." That was, that was helpful because I would imagine there are some women who feel that I'm somehow doing something wrong if I do go to school.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Yeah.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Yeah. And I think part of it is there are rising rates of infertility. That are affecting women really earlier and earlier in their, in their age group, but particularly women, you know, over 30, it can be harder to get pregnant. And so I think women feel, well, I, I wasted my time. I should have been trying to get pregnant this whole time. And, and to that I would say, well, you don't know that you would have been able to get pregnant in that time anyway. But, uh, in the event that you can't, you now have this education, which is another way to serve in your community, in society, um, that in the event that you can't have children, you don't want to, um, you, you have to find a different way to serve, now you have this. And so again, if the identity is too wrapped up in being a wife and mother, and then God says, I'm not going to give you a spouse, or I'm not going to give you children, kind of boxing ourselves in. So I do think that there's a liberty of conscience. I think women who— especially, and I think it's especially in terms of Kearney's work, we see that education is not just something that benefits the mother.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Like, this isn't some selfish decision where a woman who goes to a 4-year degree and then gets married and wants to have a family after that, that's not a selfish decision. It could be, right, based on somebody's intentions or motivations. But there, there will be, based on Kearney's work, significant positive impacts to your household and family for a young woman getting that education and, and marrying that man before she has children. That's the order. That's the best way to do it to benefit your children. Um, I think that women who— even, even as the birth rate discussion continues, there are people who genuinely feel a conviction to, you know, uh, be fruitful and multiply in a way that is maybe above and beyond the average in the U.S. right now. If you feel conviction to do that, by all means marry the man, then do that, because then you get all the benefits. Maybe there's not gonna be as many economic benefits with, you know, one parent working and the other parent staying home, but you're still gonna get all of the emotional bandwidth benefits and whatnot of having both parents present for the children.

Dr. Keith Plummer

This goes off in a whole different direction, but as I was listening to you, I was thinking about a segment that I saw recently. I believe it was 60 Minutes about a rising number of women who may not even be married, but who are freezing their eggs so that they can, you know, pursue their education and a profession and then sometime in the future have this. That raises a whole lot of other ethical—

Dr. Tori Aquilone  
Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer

—concerns. But it does. It's tied into some of these things. And as you just said also, The liberty of conscience goes the other way as well, that if a young woman does want to marry young, start a family young, she should likewise feel the liberty of conscience to do that. You close the piece this way. You say, "There is much in our culture that works against God's design for the family and in-house quibbling over when or how many children to have or how much education is appropriate for aspiring parents distracts us from the clear directive of Scripture we can all get behind: get married, then have children." You want to say anything more about that? This idea of order, which you begin the piece with and then you close it with— get married, then have children. Regardless of these other considerations, it seems clear that there is benefit to to that?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's certainly the order we see in Genesis that God forms the marriage, and then the children come after. I think, you know, as you know, Cairn University is committed to the authority of Scripture, and what that means is we want to be committed to being clear about what it says and

what it doesn't say. And so I think that Scripture is clear that that men and women should marry men and women in a, you know, heterosexual dynamic and remain pure sexually prior to that union, that the union is consummated sexually, and then that logically means children are coming after. And so it's one of those things where, sure, we know what Scripture says, and then we kind of get into the reality of 2026, and all of a sudden things seem unclear, you know, and I think just to respect the clarity of Scripture here is to say the primary aspect of all of this we need to maintain is the correct order of operations. Beyond that, if you are convicted to pursue education, if you are convicted to not pursue education, then you know, pursue that in, in counsel with your local pastor, with your spiritual counselors, with scripture.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

There's freedom there. One thing that I will add is Kearney has an entire chapter on marriageable men, and I think if I— even if we just think about the, um, last segment of the conversation about women choosing to go to school, you know, there's not necessarily— it's not an equal discussion for men where, where should, should a man go to college or not? And that is completely understandable given that women are biologically the gender that, you know, carries and delivers the child. I do think, though, that there is a serious, uh, what's the word, charge to men as a result of this work. That I actually think it's more important that men get a college education than even women as a result of this work. Because if the ideal is two biological parents married, then whether or not you're convicted in the direction of a woman staying home with children for the early years or so on, or you're convicted in the direction of being a working mom and getting that education, the household benefits when the father, who is not necessarily going to be confined by the restrictions of childbearing specifically to his body, the more economic viability he has.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

The better the children are going to be, better off they're going to be. And so, um, I think that if that means that a man would rather pursue significant training in the trades so as to be viable economically, then great. If that means a man would, would rather pursue education, I think that's better because of the economic opportunities it opens up for men with the lack of manufacturing jobs that are available. And given that he will in some instances be a quote-unquote breadwinner, I think that especially with sort of the delay or the ongoing adolescence we kind of experience with our school system in terms of going to high school until 18 and then college, I think that sometimes men in particular if the education system doesn't resonate with them, it can result in a little bit of a delayed adolescence for men. And then are they taking their studies seriously? Are they really preparing to be not just someone who has a job, but someone who serves their family with their training and education? Um, yeah, I think that it seems anecdotally, you know, women would say there's not marriageable men. Anecdotally, men would say there's not marriageable women.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

You know, it's kind of par for the course. But I do think that as there is a charge to women to consider the tension of, you know, education and childbearing, um, that, that is a little bit of a new tension in terms of the history of the world. Um, and then have a slightly different charge of, of what they should consider. And how— if you do want to have a family, what are you doing now to serve that family? What are you doing now to prepare yourself both spiritually, emotionally, mentally, educationally, economically, to even be able to give your family freedom to decide what the mother's role is going to be?

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's a good thought. And just for the sake of clarification, you're not saying, or are you, that a young man— let me ask it this way. Might there be some young men for whom trade school would be the better option? Or do you think that it would always be the case that a college education would be the better option?

Dr. Tori Aquilone

I think my lack of clarity is potentially a result of the tension between Kearney's work and then my, like, experience in the world. If we're going off of Carny's work, men should get an education. That is the best way to serve your future family. Um, if I take the nuance of reality, right, and, and how some

people are wired and so forth, there may be some men who can absolutely serve their family economically by being trained in the trades. I think it's about what is your attitude with that? Are you pursuing that training, you know, diligently and sincerely? And then whatever it takes after that to, you know, get this stable, steady job. And there are some, uh, there, there are some jobs in the trades that will pay more than certain, you know, other degrees and so forth. But I think that again, there's sort of chatter in our culture right now that almost all men should just forego education. It's not built for men, that it's, it's a, you know, sort of a feminizing endeavor, and, you know, just go work with your hands. And I don't know that that is really being thoughtful about, um, the nuance and also is not likely considering the realities that Kearney is emphasizing.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

So, yeah, I think it's tricky. You know, the real world has particulars and individuals. But if I were a young man and I read this book and I wasn't sure if I should go to college, I'd say, well, I can always get trained in a trade over a year or apprenticeship. That's not necessarily— but a 4-year college degree, there is a little bit of a time sensitivity to it if you then want to get started with your life. And so let's, let's get it done. That's what I would say.

Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the things that you bring out, which is very appreciated, or it should be, I hope, is that you, you bring out the fact that there are complexities that can't be or shouldn't be overlooked, minimized, reduced. They're, as you were talking about, the reality of life. And the piece was a very thoughtful one. I'm very glad that you wrote it. It is called "Two Parents: A Privilege by Design," and it is in the spring 2026 volume of Cairn University Magazine. Tori, thank you very much for taking the time to talk about it. I encourage people to read it, And again, congratulations on your incoming role as the dean.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Thank you.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And I look forward to more from you and working with you.

Dr. Tori Aquilone

Yeah, thanks so much, Keith.

Ben Best, cohost

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