

Pro-Creation: A Biblical View of Contraception

Written for Ronnie Rogers / Roundtable in Ethics

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by Steven Goodspeed

What is God's will regarding the use of birth control? Is there a definitive statement in scripture? In a discussion of Christian views on contraception, there is a need to understand human sexuality from the biblical viewpoint. Christians are not only commanded to avoid adultery but to pursue purity which is a higher standard than the mere absence of actual premarital sex or adultery (Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:13-16). Premarital sex and adultery are clearly forbidden in the scripture whether contraception is used or not (Ex. 20:14; Matt. 5:28; Gal. 5:19). Also, it is necessary always to keep in mind that the Bible says "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:1) and teaches us that children are a gift from God (Gen. 4:1; 33:5), a heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5), a blessing from God (Luke 1:42) and a crown to the aged (Prov. 17:6). To be anti-children is to be non-Biblical and anti-God. This stands in contrast to much of our own culture which tends to view children as somewhat of a burden and possibly an impediment to career progression and an abundant economic life. The more radical secularists will even tell us that having children is irresponsible due to world-wide population growth and scarcity of resources. Clearly, however, God has revealed to us that He is pro-creation.

It is also the clear teaching of scripture that having children is not the only purpose for sexual relations, nor are we anywhere commanded to have as many children as possible. In fact, when it comes to the sexual union, God also has revealed to us that sex is given for recreation/enjoyment and not just procreation (1 Cor. 7:2-5 and Song of Solomon). The purpose of the sexual union is to join two people in marriage as one flesh (Eph. 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 6:16; 7:3-5) and it is to be pleasurable (Eccl. 9:9; Prov. 5:18-19; Song of Solomon 4:9-5:7, etc.) and is a picture of Christ's love for his Bride the Church (Eph. 5:21-33). Well, what is a Christian couple to do with all of this?

The author is unable to find an explicit endorsement or explicit condemnation of the use of contraception in either Testament.¹ However, there are some important general principles that give us Biblical guidance and help to inform our conscience with biblical standards and can keep us from stumbling and falling into sin, because inherent within the various options for birth control are some potential problems which I will attempt to address. It is my belief that scripture allows for a couple to prayerfully seek to manage the size and spacing of their family and that contraception can be a part of this stewardship. At this time I want to examine the various kinds of contraceptives available and especially any associated problems from our Christian worldview aside from whether or to what degree any form of contraception should be used.

¹ The Onan episode in Genesis 38 is not a general principle prohibiting contraception. First, Onan's act was in disobedience to Old Testament law (Deut. 25:5-6) a law we are not under today and second, God has specifically commanded Onan to bear children with Tamar (Gen. 38:8). Therefore, Onan's sin was to directly violate the Old Testament law and God's specific revealed will for him.

Kinds of Contraception

First, "Thou Shalt Not Kill" is a biblical command. Any kind of contraceptive that operates post-conception/fertilization terminates a conceived human life by preventing its implantation in the womb and is therefore a violation of the scriptural prohibition against murder. This kind of contraception is really not much different than an abortion from the Christian worldview. The kinds of birth control contemplated by the Biblical authors and even the Reformers are very different from the options under consideration by most Christian couples today and they must be carefully considered. Some of these options act post-conception (post-conception and post-fertilization means the instant after the sperm fertilizes the egg which is when life begins) and are therefore to be avoided. Today, we find the oral contraceptive pill ("The Pill"), the intrauterine device (IUD), the condom, the diaphragm, various spermicides, sterilization (including tubal ligation and vasectomy) and natural family planning.

"The Pill" appears to be an effective form of birth control when all factors (actual real-world use, etc.) are considered. However, this is not the only consideration and it is not without some potentially troubling side effects or controversy within the broader evangelical community. Based on a review of the available literature, the Physicians Resource Council (PRC) of Focus on the Family has concluded that birth control pills which contain only the hormone progesterone do not reliably prevent ovulation (the release of the egg from the ovary which allows it to be fertilized thus creating life) and therefore can result in what is sometimes called break-through fertilization. This is also true of Norplant, a device implanted under the skin that slowly releases progesterone. Therefore, the use of Norplant and the progesterone-only pill is problematic for Christians and these should absolutely be avoided. These can act post-conception to create a hostile environment (an "abortifacient² effect") for the already fertilized egg which is a life with potential and not merely a potential life. Creating a hostile environment for already-created life is simply unacceptable because it is unbiblical.

The most commonly prescribed birth control pills are combined contraceptives containing both estrogen and progesterone. These medications (and Depo-Provera injections) seem to work primarily through suppression of ovulation (preventing fertilization). They also cause the opening of the uterus to thicken and therefore be less likely to be penetrated by the sperm. If this is true, then combined contraceptives containing both estrogen and progesterone utilize an acceptable mode of action for contraception because these are pre-fertilization. *However, there is controversy whether changes also occur that increase the likelihood of losing a fertilized egg if ovulation and conception occur.* Pro-life physicians who have studied the issue have come to different conclusions and after two years of extended study and prayer, the PRC has not been able to reach a consensus as to the likelihood or even possibility that these medications might result in loss of human life after fertilization. The majority opinion is that these combined contraceptive pills do not have an abortifacient effect. The minority opinion is that when conception occurs on the pill there is enough of a possibility of an abortifacient effect to warrant informing women (and I assume their husbands) about it. Serious and prayerful consideration

² An abortifacient is a substance that induces abortion. The ancient Greek colony of Cyrene at one time had an economy based almost entirely on the production and export of silphium, a powerful abortifacient in the parsley family. Silphium figured so prominently in the wealth of Cyrene that the plant appeared on the obverse and reverse of coins minted there.

should be given to other options. Intra-Uterine Devices (IUDs) on the other hand appear to act almost exclusively to prevent a fertilized egg from attaching to the uterus and therefore should definitely be avoided.³ The so-called emergency contraceptive pills (RU-486, etc.) are almost exclusively abortifacient in so far as they are designed to act up to 72 hours after fertilization and these are also entirely unacceptable from the Christian worldview.

Condoms for males and Diaphragms for females (which are fitted over the uterine-cervix to function as a barrier to sperm) act pre-fertilization and are not a problem from that standpoint. However, each of these must be properly fitted and always used in order to achieve their theoretically high success rate in preventing fertilization. These are both acceptable in so far as they act pre-fertilization. The practical drawbacks have to be considered carefully by each couple.

Spermicides are chemical(s) that act to destroy sperm and are therefore not problematic from the pro-life viewpoint generally. However, they are more controversial than condoms and diaphragms and some other methods because they are chemical agents that have, in some animal studies, been shown to increase the risk of birth defects and in any case some animal experiments have shown the chemicals are rapidly absorbed through the vaginal wall into the blood stream. Some doctors recommend abstaining from the use of any chemical spermicide for even up to two-months before conceiving. There is also a soft polyurethane sponge that contains nonoxynol-9 that does not require fitting by a physician but does have the drawback of the chemical mode of action. Some condoms have also been treated with nonoxynol-9 and this increases their relative rate of effectiveness.

Surgical sterilization is another increasingly popular form of contraception that is all but 100% effective and of course operates pre-fertilization and is therefore not problematic from that standpoint. Male vasectomies do require up to 6 months sometimes for the residual sperm to be expelled or absorbed and there is potential for fertilization up until this time. In the case of vasectomy, until fairly recently few people questioned the long-term safety of vasectomy. Due to some concerns about a link between vasectomies and hardening of the arteries in monkeys in the 1970s, researchers then speculated that sperm antibodies (which form in one-half to one-third of men post-vasectomy when the immune system contacts live sperm) could be responsible for this and other health risks including prostate cancer. However, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the nation's largest supporter of research on birth control methods, has concluded a multimillion dollar program of vasectomy research and there have been several other long-term and much more comprehensive study of the so-called sperm antibody issue.

The latest news about long-term safety is good. Almost 40,000 men took part in four studies and none showed an increased risk of hardening of the arteries or other forms of cardiovascular disease and one study found that, for unknown reasons, men who have had vasectomies are healthier in some ways than those who have not. In fact, even before the monkey studies, scientists at UCLA compared over 100 diseases (especially autoimmune diseases) in over 10,000 men and then added the cardiovascular study after the monkey studies were reported and the

³ Please see the Focus on the Family "Position Statement on Birth Control Pills and Other Hormonal Contraception" in the Appendix.

results were that men with vasectomies have no more health problems than other men. Other studies involved over 7,000 men who had hardening of the arteries and no link with vasectomies was shown, another involved 5,000 men with an average time since vasectomy of 15 years (and many over 25 years) and there was no greater risk of heart disease and the latest is a 6,000 man study out of Boston University that showed no higher risk of heart attack. In all, the NCIHD and other organizations have sponsored more than a dozen large studies on vasectomy involving more than 100,000 men and none show a greater risk of any serious illness in men with vasectomies. However, because approximately 2 in 1000 men come to regret the procedure later, any couple should carefully consider the aspect of permanence and expense and uncertainty of reversal when considering this option.⁴

Tubal ligation involves several various techniques which operate to render a female sterile and operates pre-fertilization and is there not problematic from that standpoint. This procedure is generally regarded as safe by the medical community. However, tubal ligation does not appear to have been as well studied as the male vasectomy procedure and there appear to be lingering issues, including Post-Tubal Ligation Syndrome first described by Dr. Vickie Hufnagel (see www.drhufnagel.com and www.tubal.org) that associates tubal ligation with a host of disorders. It is unclear to the author the weight that should be ascribed to any such studies, but caution warrants informing of the possibility so any reader can perform their own research and reach their own conclusions as to the relative safety of the procedure, its effectiveness as a contraceptive notwithstanding. The author would strongly suggest consideration of a vasectomy rather than tubal ligation based on all we know at the present time.

Natural Family Planning is especially promoted by leaders in Roman Catholic circles a so-called natural alternative to artificial methods of contraception which are prohibited by the Catholic Church's teaching. These range from an older "rhythm method" based on observations of past menstrual cycles to newer techniques like the "basal body temperature method" and the "symptom-thermal method." These methods track small but measurable temperature increases caused by the release of progesterone. A temperature rise sustained for three days means the egg (which only lives for 12-24 hours) is no longer viable. This is acceptable from the Christian worldview in so far as it is a pre-fertilization attempt to prevent conception.

The Catholic View on Contraception

The Catholic position has been almost exclusively opposed to any contraception based on its view that emphasizes children as the primary purpose of the sexual union. Pope Pius XI issued a 1930 encyclical opposing birth control in response to the Anglican Communion's Seventh Lambeth Conference approving contraceptive use in limited circumstances. However, the encyclical did acknowledge for the first time that married couples have a right to engage in intercourse even when pregnancy is not a possible result. This is a relief to those who believed that intercourse during pregnancy (when further conception is not possible) or after menopause (ditto) is a sin. What a tragic misapprehension of the biblical teaching that sex is also for

⁴ See "Facts About Vasectomy" by Maureen B. Gardner, Office of Research Reporting, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the Appendix from which much of the information concerning recent studies about vasectomy safety was referenced.

pleasure, picturing Christ's union with his bride the Church, and not just for children. The Roman Catholic Church's modern position was first expressed in *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical by Pope Paul VI. Artificial contraception is held to be grave sin but methods of natural family planning are morally permissible in some circumstances. In 1997, the Vatican's pontifical Council for the Family stated:

The church has always taught the intrinsic evil of contraception, that is, of every marital act intentionally rendered unfruitful. This teaching is to be held as definitive and irreformable.

Many Catholics have voiced disagreement with the Church's stance on contraception, but nevertheless it is the Catholic Church's official stance.

Protestant Views on Contraception

Author and FamilyLife Today radio host Dennis Rainey suggests four categories as useful in understanding current Protestant views concerning birth control.

"Children in abundance" group also called the Quiverfull group believes birth control is a contravention of God's purpose for marriage and that even natural family planning methods are sin. The Quiverfull movement and its authors include: Mary Pride, Rick and Jan Hess, Charles D. Provan, Nancy Leigh DeMoss, Rachel Giove Scott and others. Quiverfull adherents believe Divine Providence alone should control how many and how often children are conceived and born.

"Children in managed abundance" group are open to however many children they may conceive during their fertile years yet believe only natural family planning is acceptable. Presbyterian seminary professor Daniel Doriani and Denny Kenaston of Charity Christian Fellowship advocate for this position.

"Children in moderation" group are very pro-child but feel free to use birth control to prudently plan their families. Those within this group see divine providence and biblically required responsibility as working complementarily and therefore feel freedom to use non-natural birth control in making personal choices in consultation with God about the number and spacing of children. This appears to be the dominant Protestant position and includes many evangelicals such as Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as well as the present author.

"No children" group believes they are within their biblical rights to define their lives around non-natal concerns. There is even a Cyber-Church of Jesus Christ Childfree that argues their position. It is the author's opinion that this position is clearly opposed to the biblical statement to "Be fruitful and multiple" and opposed to the clear teaching of scripture that children are positive and that God is pro-creation.⁵ The author agrees with R. Albert Mohler, Jr. who states:

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_views_on_contraception - heavily sourced for views on Protestant and Catholic positions.

Couples are not given the option of chosen childlessness in the biblical revelation.

The majority opinion of Protestants is that use or non-use of birth control is a matter of conscience for individual Christians (Rom. 14). Consider John MacArthur who states:

Nothing in Scripture prohibits married couples from practicing birth control, either for a limited time to delay childbearing, or permanently when they have borne children and determine their family is complete...In our viewpoint, birth control is biblically permissible. At the same time, couples should not practice birth control if it violates their consciences (Rom. 14:23) not because birth control is inherently sinful, but because it is always wrong to violate the conscience. The answer to a wrongly informed conscience is not to violate it, but rather to correct and rightly inform one's conscience with biblical truth.⁶

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., the ninth president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY also writes:

Evangelical couples may, at times, choose to use contraceptives in order to plan their families and enjoy the pleasures of the marital bed. The couple must consider all these issues with care, and must be truly open to the gift of children. The moral justification must be clear in the couple's mind, and fully consistent with the couple's Christian commitments.⁷

The author believes that birth control is a decision with room both for married couples to prayerfully make a decision and to examine their own conscience (Rom. 14) and for God's sovereignty in this decision. It simply has not pleased God to give His children a bright-line rule to follow. However, it has pleased God in His sovereignty to give us responsibility and freedom to prayerfully seek His will in areas where His revelation is not as clear and distinct as a trumpet call (1 Cor. 14 on tongues). God's moral will is revealed and clear for us and the issue of contraception seems to admit of some personal freedom of conscience for Christian couples. After all, a wife is a gift from the Lord, too (Prov. 18:22), but that does not mean it is wrong to remain single (1 Cor. 7:8).⁸

Sex Education

Sex education and the dispensing of contraception to unmarried teenagers and college students by federally funded clinics or private efforts have made contraception a matter of public policy debate. Generally speaking, the state of secular sex education is tragic. The general cultural consensus might be best represented by Sharon Stone who recently remarked to the teens of our nation that they should participate in oral sex rather than intercourse. This is the so-called "safe sex" message that prevails in our culture. She probably does not understand that any sexually

⁶ John F. MacArthur (2005). What does the Bible teach about birth control? (html). *Issues and Answers*. Grace to You.

⁷ Mohler, R. Albert (2004). Can Christians use birth control? (Retrieved 10-1-2006).

⁸ Please see "Does the Bible permit birth control?" by John Piper in the Appendix and at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/AskPastorJohn/ByTopic/45/1440_Does_the_Bible_permit_birth_control/

transmitted disease (STD) a kid can get from intercourse, he/she can get from oral sex. Sex education criteria generally follow the guidelines of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. SIECUS is a nonprofit advocacy group that exists to “assist children in understanding a positive view of sexuality, provide them with information and skills about taking care of their sexual health and help them acquire skills to make decisions now and in the future.” Here are some of their guidelines:

For children ages 5-8 (kindergarten through second grade):

- Touching and rubbing ones own genitals to feel good is called masturbation.
- Some men and women are homosexual, which means they will be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the same sex.

For children ages 9-12 (third grade through sixth grade):

- Masturbation is often the first way a person experiences sexual pleasure.
- Being sexual with another person often involved more than sexual intercourse.
- Abortion is legal in the United States up to a certain point.
- Homosexual love relationships can be as fulfilling as heterosexual relationships.

For children ages 12-15 (seventh grade through tenth grade):

- Masturbation, either alone or with a partner, is one way people can enjoy and express their sexuality without risking pregnancy or STDs/HIV.
- Being sexual with another person usually involves different sexual behaviors.
- Having a legal abortion rarely interferes with a woman’s ability to become pregnant or give birth in the future.
- Some sexual behaviors shared by partners include kissing, touching, caressing, massaging, and oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse.
- Nonprescription methods of contraception include male and female condoms, foam, gels, and suppositories.
- Young people can buy nonprescription contraceptives in a pharmacy, grocery store, market, or convenience store.
- In most states, young people can get prescriptions for contraceptions without their parents’ permission.

For children ages 15-18 (tenth through twelfth grade):

- Some sexual behaviors shared by partners include kissing, touching, talking, caressing, massaging, sharing erotic literature or art, bathing or showering together, and oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse.
- Some people use erotic photographs, movies, or literature to enhance sexual fantasies when alone or with a partner.

- Some sexual fantasies involve mysterious or forbidden things.⁹

If you are a Christian with children in the public school I hope you are alarmed, forewarned and forearmed to do all you can to counteract this invasion of innocence and sexualization of children. Whenever any aspect of humanity is separated from biblical revelation you can be sure that moral chaos and decline will inevitably result. Sexual union was designed by God and given for married couples to procreate and produce children and to enjoy marital pleasures even as a picture of Christ's union and love for his bride the Church. Let's examine some national data:

Sexual Activity

- One in five Americans over age twelve tests positive for genital herpes.
- Herpes type 2 infections increased 500 % during the 1980s.
- 11.9% of females will experience forced intercourse.
- 40.9% of girls fourteen to seventeen years old experience unwanted sex, primarily because they fear that their boyfriends will get angry.
- If a teen girl has had four sexual partners, and her boyfriend has had four sexual partners, and the two have sex, she is exposed to fifteen sexual partners.
- If the above number increases to eight partners each (not uncommon in college), they are each exposed to 255 partners.
- 46.7% of students will be sexually active before high school ends.
- There are five to six million cases of human papillomavirus (HPV) infections annually.
- HPV is spread through sexual contact (not just intercourse). Some HPV strains causes cancer, some don't. HPV is responsible for 99% of cervical cancer cases in women.
- If a girl takes oral contraceptives for more than five years she is four times more likely to develop cervical cancer. This is most likely due to an increased number of partners and poor condom use.
- As many as 90% of people infected with herpes type 2 do not know they are infected.
- Forty-five million people in American are infected with herpes type 2, and one million become infected each year.

Depression

- 35.5% of all high school girls have had sad, hopeless feelings for longer than two weeks. Many physicians call this clinical depression. 12.4% of African American females, 18.6% of Caucasian females and 20.7% of Hispanic females have made suicide plans in the past year.
- Engaging in sex puts girls at higher risk for depression.
- 11.5 percent of females attempted suicide last year.

Older Girls

⁹ "Guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education," The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2004, found at: <http://www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf>, 51-66.

- Parent connectedness is the number-one factor in preventing girls from engaging in premarital sex and indulging in drugs and alcohol.
- Daughters who perceive that their fathers care a lot about them, who feel connected to their fathers, have significantly fewer suicide attempts and fewer instances of body dissatisfaction, depression, low self-esteem, substance use and unhealthy weight.
- A daughter's self-esteem is best predicted by her father's physical affection.
- Girls defer sexual activity if their parents disapprove of it, and they are less likely to be sexually active if their parents disapprove of birth control.¹⁰

If we do not teach of children, boys and girls, why it is so very important to delay sexual activity until their marriage day and pursue purity and holiness in accordance with God's revealed will for us in the Bible, we are putting them in harm's way and dishonoring our savior. An increasing number of STDs at increasingly younger ages are reaching our children and the notion of a condom as an effective prevention is preposterous. HPV especially is a virus that does not require penetration for successful transmission nor does herpes nor does genital warts nor does Chlamydia and a host of other nasty and potentially life-threatening STDs. Moreover, depression is another sexually transmitted disease. "Researchers have known for a long time that teenage sexual activity and depression are linked, but the question was which came first – the sex or the depression. Depressed kids are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, and sex is a high-risk behavior. Last year, however, an excellent study was published on teens, sex, and mood. The researchers found that 'engaging in sex and drug behaviors places adolescents, and especially girls, at risk for future depression.' Also, they concluded that 'because girls might have greater interpersonal sensitivity contributing to higher levels of interpersonal stress during adolescence, sexual activity likely contributes to experiencing stress.' The findings were so clear that the authors said that girls who are engaging in sexual activity should be screened for depression."¹¹

Popular culture sells sex to our teens and uses sex to sell its products. Clearly, the schools are not going to help and the evidence is already in: Contraception is no solution and conception is not the only problem. We must teach the biblical basis for sexuality, marriage and self-respect, modesty and purity. Talk to your children about their clothes and about male-female relationships, teach self-respect early and stay involved in their lives no matter what and let their dates know they are accountable to you and you will be waiting for them if they do 'go out'. Here's where we are headed with current trends of sex education and a denial of biblical revelation:

- If present levels of sexual activity among kids continue, by the year 2025, 39% of all men and 49% of all women will test positive for genital herpes.
- Three to four million teens in the United States contract a new STD every year. That is almost 10,000 kids a day.
- Nationwide, gonorrhea rates are highest among girls ages fifteen to eighteen.

¹⁰ Meeker, Meg, M.D. (2006). *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters – 10 Secrets Every Father Should Know*. Regnery Publishing (Washington, D.C.), 19-25.

¹¹ Ibid., 111 (From Denise D. Hallfors, et al, "Which Comes First In Adolescence: Sex and Drugs or Depression?" American Journal of Preventive Medicine 29 (2005): 3.

- Of the top 10 most frequently reported diseases in the United States in 1995, STDs accounted for 87% of all cases reported.
- Nearly one in four sexually active teens is living with an STD at this moment.
- Although teens make up only 10% of the population, they contract 25% of the STDs.¹²

World Population

Concern over so-called world over-population has caused many government and multinational organizations to drive for government-funded birth-control programs. Population growth is variously called a “cancer” and must be “cut out”, etc. However, an economic case can now be made for the necessity of population growth to drive economic development and consumption. In almost every respect, the common held presuppositions of the “Zero Population Growth” movement have proven false and are certainly not driven by biblical revelation. It is helpful to note that countries in western Europe, Italy for example, are suffering from negative population growth and high unemployment and it is a cause for both national and Catholic concern in very recent months. This is a complex subject, but there are really only three policies that can be implemented: (1) encourage childbearing (marriage and cohabitation) among younger couples; (2) increase immigration of working-age people; and (3) reform social policy more generally, in order to ameliorate the negative consequences of these trends.¹³ It might help us to relax and get some perspective if we noted that of the 6 billion people in the world, they could all fit in an area the size of England with more than 20 square meters (about 4,225 sq. ft.) each.¹⁴

The reality in the United States until very recently was a “graying of America” with a “baby bust” though we have since September 11, 2001 seen somewhat of a mini-baby boom. Caution for all of the alarms about world population growth is generally warranted. We could examine both sides of the economic debate and still not be faithful to the witness of scripture which is pro-creation and pro-growth. The anti-growth (economic and population) crowd is fundamentally opposed to the biblical mandate generally. Be fruitful and multiply and God will be well-pleased and is well-able to sustain His creation even as we exercise our God-given responsibility for the size and spacing of our families and our God-given stewardship of His creation.

¹² Ibid. 105-106.

¹³ http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG206.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v23/i3/people.asp>



POSITION STATEMENT:

BIRTH CONTROL PILLS AND OTHER HORMONAL CONTRACEPTION

From the outset, Dr. Dobson would emphasize as foundational his strict concurrence with the biblical teaching that every child is a blessing from God. The entire ministry of Focus on the Family has been grounded upon this truth. While affirming that human life begins with fertilization (the union of sperm and egg), his interpretation of Scripture leads him to believe that the prevention of fertilization is not morally wrong. However, he would oppose any method of birth control that acts after fertilization and terminates a conceived human life by preventing its implantation in the womb. For example, the intrauterine device, or IUD, as it is commonly called, is thought to interfere with implantation of the fertilized egg, and, therefore, may terminate human life in its very early stages.

Birth control pills (also known as oral contraceptives, OCPs, or "the pill") have become a focus of controversy because of concerns that they may occasionally terminate human life after fertilization. Hormonal contraception is a very complex matter, not only because it involves multiple biological effects, but also because many different types and formulations of pills and medications are currently available. Dr. Dobson has been careful not to arrive at any conclusions regarding this highly technical subject without first consulting with respected colleagues in the medical field. You may be aware that a panel of doctors representing a broad range of specialties serves on Focus on the Family's Physicians Resource Council (PRC), which advises the ministry regarding medical concerns.

Based on a review of the available literature, the PRC has concluded that birth control pills which contain only the hormone progesterone do not reliably prevent ovulation (the release of the egg from the ovary). This is also true of Norplant, a device implanted under the skin which slowly releases progesterone. With these methods, the pregnancies which do occur have a greater chance of being ectopic--that is, outside the uterus. This may be evidence that these contraceptives act in some cases to disrupt the normal implantation of an early pregnancy and not merely to prevent conception. Thus, the use of Norplant and the progesterone-only pill is problematic for those of us who believe that human life begins at conception.

The most commonly prescribed birth control pills, called "combined" oral contraceptives, contain both estrogen and progesterone. These medications, as well as Depo-Provera injections, seem to work primarily through suppression of ovulation. They also cause the mucus at the opening of the uterus to be thickened and, therefore, less likely to be penetrated by sperm. If combined oral contraceptives and Depo-Provera work only through these mechanisms, they are functioning as true contraceptives because they prevent the sperm and egg from uniting. However, there is controversy as to whether they also bring about changes (primarily within the uterus) that could increase the likelihood of losing a fertilized egg if ovulation and conception should occur.

Pro-life physicians who have carefully and conscientiously studied this issue have come to different conclusions regarding the interpretation and implications of the relevant scientific data. After two years of extended deliberation and prayer, the PRC has not been able to reach a consensus as to the likelihood, or even the possibility, that these medications might contribute to the loss of human life after fertilization. The majority of the experts to which Dr. Dobson has spoken feel that the pill does not have an abortifacient effect. A minority of the experts feel that when conception occurs on the pill, there is enough of a possibility for an abortifacient effect, however remote, to warrant informing women about it.

Focus on the Family encourages further investigation of the mechanisms of action of the pill and other hormonal contraceptives, and specifically calls upon the medical community to undertake research to prove or disprove the hypothesis that the combined oral contraceptive pill occasionally interrupts human life in its very early stages. You may be certain that we will monitor new developments in this area of research.

Dr. Dobson respects the integrity and pro-life convictions of those who hold differing opinions regarding the mechanism and use of oral contraceptives and asks the pro-life community at large to do likewise. He also recognizes that scientific reasoning is not the only factor that may influence one's viewpoint regarding the use of birth control and advises couples to examine the facts prayerfully as they consider the acceptability of any approach to family planning.

Does the Bible permit birth control?

January 23, 2006

By DG Staff

Desiring God and Bethlehem Baptist Church have no formal position on birth control, but John Piper and most of the pastors on staff believe that non-abortive forms of birth control are permissible. The Bible nowhere forbids birth control, either explicitly or implicitly, and we should not add universal rules that are not in Scripture (cf. Psalm 119:1, 9 on the sufficiency of Scripture). What is important is our attitude in using it. Any attitude which fails to see that children are a good gift from the Lord is wrong: "Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them" (Psalm 127:3-4).

There are, of course, some Christians who would disagree with this position on birth control. Some of the major theological objections that have been made to birth control can be categorized according to the following questions:

- Is birth control consistent with the truth that children are a gift from the Lord?
- Shouldn't we let God determine the size of our family?
- Should natural family planning be preferred to "artificial" contraception?

Is birth control consistent with the truth that children are a gift from the Lord?

It is very important to delight in the reality that "children are a gift of the Lord." But some people go further and argue from this that since children are gifts from God, it is wrong to take steps to regulate the timing and number of children one has.

In response, it can be pointed out that the Scriptures also say that a wife is a gift from the Lord (Proverbs 18:22), but that doesn't mean that it is wrong to stay single (1 Corinthians 7:8). Just because something is a gift from the Lord does not mean that it is wrong to be a steward of when or whether you will come into possession of it. It is wrong to reason that since A is good and a gift from the Lord, then we must pursue as much of A as possible. God has made this a world in which tradeoffs have to be made and we cannot do everything to the fullest extent. For kingdom purposes, it might be wise not to get married. And for kingdom purposes, it might be wise to regulate the size of one's family and to regulate when the new additions to the family will likely arrive. As Wayne Grudem has said, "it is okay to place less emphasis on some good activities in order to focus on other good activities."

When I was teaching a summer course at a seminary in Africa, a student of mine made a perceptive observation along these same lines. He noted first of all that in the creation account the command to multiply is given together with the command to subdue the earth: "And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1:28).'" He then asked how a farmer (he lived in a largely agrarian society) knows how much land he should cultivate. The answer, of course, is that a farmer seeks to cultivate what he believes he can reasonably handle. He doesn't take this command to mean that he needs to make his farm be as large as is naturally possible. Likewise, then, it is right for a couple to seek to have the number of children that they believe they can reasonably nurture in light of the other callings they may also have on their lives. In the same vein, Wayne Grudem points out: "We aren't required to maximize the amount of children we have any more than we are required to subdue the earth all the time—plant, grow, harvest, etc."

In reality, then, although it is true that "blessed is the man whose quiver is full of [children]," we need to realize that God has not given everyone the same size quiver. And so birth control is a gift from God that may be used for the wise regulation of the size of one's family, as well as a means of seeking to have children at the time which seems to be wisest.

Shouldn't we let God determine the size of our family?

Sometimes people also reason that if you really want to "trust God" to determine the size of your family, then you should not use birth control. The assumption seems to be that if you "just let things happen naturally," then God is more at work than if you seek to regulate things and be a steward of when they happen. But surely this is wrong! God is just as much in control of whether you have children when you use birth control as when you don't. The hands of the almighty are not tied by birth control! A couple will have children precisely at the time God wants, whether they use birth control or not. Either way, then, God is ultimately in control of the size of one's family.

The "trust God, therefore don't use birth control" thinking is based upon the incorrect assumption that what happens "naturally" reflects "God's best" for our lives, but that what happens through human means does not. Why should we conclude that the way to let *God* decide the size of our family is to get out of the way and just let nature take its course? We certainly don't think that way in other areas of life. We don't reason, for example, that we should never get haircuts so that "God can decide" the length of our hair. Farmers don't just let the wind plant their crops in the fear that actively regulating what is grown on their land somehow interferes with the provision God wants to give them. And a family doesn't just trust God to provide food for by waiting for it to drop from the sky, but instead goes to the store to buy it. God ultimately determines everything that will happen, both in nature and in human decisions, and He brings His will to pass through *means*. Human activity does not therefore interfere with his plans, but is instead itself governed by Him as the means to bring to pass His will. Hence, we should not conclude that what happens apart from our planning is "better" and more reflective of God's desires for us than what happens through our planning. God very often causes us to plan as the *means* towards improving our lives and advancing His kingdom purposes.

Further, God has revealed that it is His will for us to regulate and direct creation for His glory (Genesis 1:28). God has given us the privilege of being able to make significant life decisions because this exercises wisdom

and thus shows the fruit that His word is bearing in our lives. When we rightly use the godly wisdom God has given us, God is glorified. He doesn't want us to simply think we have to take what comes naturally, apart from our efforts, because then our sanctified wisdom is not expressed. In fact, very often it is God's will that we *not* simply let things move along naturally. Going back to the analogy mentioned above, farmers don't simply collect whatever grain happens to grow in their fields, concluding "this is what God wants to provide." Rather, they go out and plant grain, realizing that God wants to provide not only through nature, but also through the means they employ to steward nature.

It does not work, therefore, to conclude that the use of birth control interferes with God's role in granting children. Birth control can be a way of wisely stewarding the timing and size of one's family. One might be able to minister more effectively for the kingdom, for example, by waiting 3 years after marriage to have children in order to enable the husband to go to graduate school. And one might be able to minister more effectively for the kingdom by deciding to have 4 children instead of 15, so that more resources can be given to the cause of missions and more time can be devoted to other areas. If such planning is done for God's glory and in wisdom, and if such planning continues to acknowledge that our plans are not perfect and that birth control does not absolutely ensure anything, it is pleasing to God.

Does birth control express a lack of faith in God?

Without regulating the size of their family, many couples would end up having more children than they can reasonably support financially. In response, some argue that we should simply have faith that God will provide the funds. However, we don't use the "God would provide" reasoning to justify going beyond our means in other areas of life. We wouldn't consider it wise, for example, to pledge twice our annual income to missions organizations in faith that God will supply the extra funds. God expects us to make wise decisions according to what he has given us, and not presume upon him providing from out of the blue. Reasonable financial considerations are a relevant factor: "If anyone does not provide

for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

Should natural family planning be preferred to "artificial" contraception?

Some conclude that "natural family planning" is acceptable but "artificial" means are not. But this seems to overlook something significant: in both cases, you are still seeking to regulate when you have children. And so if one concludes that it is wrong to seek to regulate the timing and size of a family, then it would have to be concluded that natural family planning is just as wrong as "artificial" means. But if one concludes that it is appropriate to steward the timing and size of one's family, then what makes "artificial" means wrong but natural family planning right? Surely it is not because God is "more free" to overrule our plans with natural family planning! Perhaps some have concluded that artificial forms are wrong because they allow one more fully to separate intercourse from the possibility of procreation. But if it is wrong to have intercourse without a significant possibility of procreation, then it would also be wrong to have intercourse during pregnancy or after a woman is past her childbearing years. There is no reason to conclude that natural family planning is appropriate but that "artificial" means are not.

Further Resources

John and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, chapter 7, "Birth Control."

Gregory Koukl, "Birth Control and God's Will," previously available from [Stand to Reason](#).

Scott Klusendorf, "Why Pro-Life Advocates Should Not Link Abortion to Contraception in Public Debates," previously available from [Stand to Reason](#).

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