

Methods of Birth Control in the Light of Scripture

By Wayne M. Borgwardt

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Prefatory Remarks

Questions regarding the various methods of birth control appear occasionally in the news, along with the basic question regarding the advisability of birth control itself. Some time back news releases commented on the side effects of the pill. A book published this past summer reflects the ongoing strife within the Roman Catholic Church in this matter. In retrospect the coming of the pill more than a decade ago has altered the outward standards of American morality—for the worse, probably, rather than for the better. Thus as Christians concernedly view the American scene and as they contemplate far-reaching decisions in their own private lives, the subject of birth control forces itself upon them. Hence, the appropriateness and the timeliness, of the topic.

Delimitation of Subject

The title suggests the limited scope of the presentation: “Methods of Birth Control in the Light of Scripture. When the Program Committee was queried concerning the precise scope of the topic, the essayist was informed that this presentation was not to deal basically with the morality of birth control itself. Rather, that question is assumed to have been answered in the affirmative. Instead, it was suggested, the focus should be on the follow-up question: As birth control is practiced, which methods are in accord with Scriptural principles? For those who wish to inquire into that first question—regarding birth control itself—reference can be made to the Han Kirsten article in the January, 1968, issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* and to the *Shepherd Under Christ*.

Assumptions

Nonetheless, it is in order to summarize the assumptions which undergird the presentation.

First, it is assumed that the purposes for which God originally instituted marriage and for which He provided sexual relations between man and woman are essentially two: loving union and procreation. With the fall into sin, a third purpose was added, which really protects the other two: marriage serves as a curb against unchastity for the good of both individuals and society. Over-emphasis on one of the purposes at the expense of the others causes distortions and has implications for birth control; consequently, this assumption will be referred to later in the presentation.

Secondly, it is assumed, depending on circumstances, that contraception is not displeasing to God. Some circumstances, of course, are more valid than others. The health of the spouse—both physical and mental—is a valid consideration. So also is the necessity to provide sufficient attention and care for the children God has already given into the family. In contrast, the appeal to lack of financial resources is suspect as a God-pleasing reason for the vast majority in our land. Our country presently is blessed with a standard of living which is far beyond the dreams of our forebears and beyond the grasp of people in most other countries in the world. In their approach to family planning, Christians in our land should be a testimony to the rest of society in an age of materialism. Similarly, denying oneself children for the sake of “self-fulfillment” suggests selfishness and an avoidance of the blessings and obligations the Lord has intended through a family.

With those assumptions in the background we return to the central question: which of the methods of family limitation are acceptable to God? Scripture does not directly answer that question, not even in connection with Onan, the one familiar case of birth control recorded in the Bible. This fact would potentially

result in the shortest essay in Fox River Valley Conference history, were it not that general scriptural principles do need to be applied. It is true, as some have suggested, that the preferred method of birth control is largely an adiaphoron. Put it is well to note briefly how several Scriptural principles can be applied to the more common methods presently available.

Sterilization

The most common and simplest form of sterilization is the vasectomy for the male. Tubal ligation for the woman is also possible, but the operation is more complicated. The main consideration in both cases is that the operation is irreversible. When such a procedure is not medically indicated, it assumes that future circumstances will not change. Most persons cannot claim such assurance for themselves. Consequently this approach is an assertion that procreation can never again be a sound possibility. Furthermore, such an operation which is not medically indicated is a mutilation of the body and unjustified when other methods are available. In addition, severe side-effects for the male are possible.

Abstinence

Abstinence is most effective, but it is not practical for any extended period of time. The Apostle Paul directly speaks about this matter in I Corinthians 7.3,5:

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband, . . . Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (NIV)

Lengthy abstinence thus can well undermine the one-flesh relationship at the heart of marriage.

Preventing Sperm Meeting Egg

Various artificial means are employed to prevent sperm from reaching the egg, among them the condom, the diaphragm and the cervical cap. To the extent that physical harm is not involved in these methods—and that danger is minimal—there is no moral objection to this method.

Rendering Sperm Ineffective

Various spermicidal foams and jellies can be placed into the vagina, sometimes in conjunction with other methods, such as a diaphragm. In effect, as the terminology suggests, sperm are destroyed. The important moral consideration is that conception has not taken place; therefore, human life as such is not involved.

Rendering Egg Development or Implantation Ineffective

The birth control pill contains two substances which cause the female body to act as though pregnancy has occurred. The ovaries are suppressed, preventing ovulation. Sperm migration to the uterus is retarded, and the uterine lining is changed, preventing implantation of egg. If moral concerns are not indicated for the process itself, they may be for the immediate side-effects and the long-range consequences. Evidence is not conclusive, but use of this pill may well cause rise in blood pressure, depression, and other health-related problems. A progesterone pill has been developed with few side-effects, but apparently it is less effective.

Potential Abortifacients

Several methods of birth control are strongly suspected of involving abortion rather than contraception. It is assumed that human life has begun at the time of conception, the joining of egg and sperm. Apparently the “morning-after pill” could well be an abortifacient. Exactly how this pill works is not certain, but the likelihood of the pill causing destruction of the fertilized egg is great. Furthermore, severe side-effects and potential harm to offspring are similarly great. Similar judgments must be applied to the intra uterine device. This device, frequently plastic and sometimes containing fine copper wires, is placed into the uterus. It, too, could well achieve its result by preventing the fertilized egg from becoming implanted in the uterine wall. It also stimulates white cells which destroy the fertilized egg. Like the morning- after-pill it may result in acute physical disruptions and constitutes a significant health hazard.

Coitus Interruptus and Amplexus Reservatus

Coitus Interruptus and Amplexus Reservatus, both also termed withdrawal, terminates the sexual act before the male climax. If ejaculation thus occurs outside the vagina, it is termed Coitus Interruptus; if that does not occur, it is termed Amplexus Reservatus. This method is also called onanism after the incident involving Oman in Genesis 38. Since the Lord judged the man worthy of death, the text frequently has been used as a Scriptural prohibition of this method in particular; some have even concluded that the judgment applies to all methods of birth control. But a number of factors cause serious doubt whether the passage can properly be applied in this manner. Jerome’s translation distorted the text. Furthermore, other aspects of Onan’s character are in evidence as displeasing to God, such as the brazen defiance of his father and refusal to raise up offspring to his brother. Thus the mention of coitus interruptus is an example of his depravity. Furthermore, coitus interruptus, as well as other methods of birth control, are not specifically included in the prohibitions of the Mosaic Law, which treats sexual sins at some length. But other factors may well indicate avoidance of this method. Sexual intercourse, including the climax of the act itself, is part of the most intimate and personal expression of oneness between husband and wife. Deliberately avoiding part of it detracts from the complete expression of oneness.

Rhythm Method and Roman Catholic Theology

Consideration of the rhythm method of necessity leads one to a review of Roman Catholic doctrine regarding birth control in general, since this is the method of birth control suggested as acceptable by the Roman Catholic Church. This, in turn, not only takes one into the distortions of doctrine observed in the high Middle Ages, but also into historical developments reaching all the way back to Apostolic times. Such a review aids in understanding the birth control controversy and stands as a warning in several ways.

An incipient Gnosticism seems present in the historical context of the Apostle Paul’s writings. This is especially true in I Timothy, where Paul warns against those engaging in “endless genealogies” and forbidding marriage. This same influence can be seen in the problems which prompted the Corinthians to ask Paul’s advise about marriage, which resulted in the Apostle’s clear statement (I Cor. 7) on the role of marriage as a protection for chastity. Gnosticism as it later developed, together with Manicheism, held to a dualist view of existence, which considered the material world evil and at odds with the divine principle of good. Since procreation involved the material world, both marriage and procreation were denegated. In some cases this resulted in sexual asceticism; in other cases it resulted in ritualistic temple prostitution, which employed contraceptives. In either case procreation was avoided and marriage undermined. In the middle ages essentially the same problem arose with the Cathars and the courtly love tradition of the troubadours, The orthodox church of the early centuries as well as the church of the middle ages emphasized

God's establishment of the marriage bond and particularly affirmed His command to be fruitful. With this came an emphasis in the church on the procreative purpose of marriage at the expense of the companionship aspect.

Another distortion came with the influence of Stoicism and Neo-Platonism. Stoicism emphasized moderation in all things. Reason was to control human actions; emotions were suspect and to be tightly controlled by right reason. Because of the role of emotions and feelings in the sexual relationship of spouses, marriage was considered an inferior mode of life. Since its establishment by God could not be denied, it was justified on the basis of procreation, and again the companionship aspect of marriage was de-emphasized.

The influence of Augustine in sexual ethics is also important. He shared in the orthodox reaction against Manicheism, inasmuch as he himself was a Manichean before conversion to the orthodox faith. Furthermore, during Manichean period he himself lived with a concubine, which later prompted him to evaluate all sexual desire as primarily evil. In the Augustian scheme, sexual intercourse could only with difficulty be tolerated, and then only on the basis of procreation.

These influences eventually led to the scholastic formulation of Thomas Aquinas, which provides the basis for official Roman Catholic doctrine today regarding contraception. With the classic ideal of nature under the control of right reason, marriage in Roman Catholic circles was then justified almost exclusively on the basis of the preservation of the species. The conclusion was that sexual intercourse must always carry with it the potential of procreation in order to be justified. As a result, contraception was condemned, as was intercourse during pregnancy.

Luther's reaction was to emphasize the wholesomeness of marriage on the basis of Scripture. Typically, he complained that the "canonists" defined marriage in an "exceedingly frigid manner" when they say marriage is the union of male and female "in accordance with the law of nature. Instead, marriage is the inseparable union "not only according to the law of nature but also according to God's will and pleasure." He keenly felt that the Papist had no thought for either the divine blessing on marriage or the consolation of spouses within it. (*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 4, 222). His encouragement of marriage and his own private relationship with Katherine are well known. Nonetheless, a frequent emphasis on the corruption of sexual desire in the fall—also within marriage—is evident in the writings of Luther.

In actuality, the Roman Catholic position on birth control is plainly inconsistent. It allows the rhythm method. The rhythm method requires knowledge of the sterile period in a woman's cycle. Yet Roman doctrine insists that intercourse cannot be justified when procreation is not possible. Furthermore the Roman position ignores the "natural" tendency of the woman to feel the most urgent need of intercourse when she is most fertile. Consequently, the rhythm method, if anything, operates in opposition to "natural law."

Nevertheless the Roman hierarchy has clung to its distortions of the marital relationship, much to the anguish of Roman Catholic parishioners. The 1968 encyclical, by Pope Paul VI, titled *Humanae Vitae*, which essentially reaffirms traditional Roman doctrine, has come as a bombshell to many Roman Catholics. They had come to expect a relaxation of dogma because of Vatican II's recognition of the "unitive" purpose as well as the procreative purpose in marriage. Further-more, the majority position of a papal commission appointed to study the matter had recommended relaxation of the norms shortly prior to the appearance of *Humanae Vitae*.

The resulting reaction has included a recently published study authorized by the Catholic Theological Society of America. Representing as it does the thinking of many Roman Theologians, the study, published this summer under the title *Human Sexuality*, must be respected as a thoughtful reaction of a significant segment of Roman Catholicism in America. This recent study urgently requests further development and liberalization of the Papal position on birth control. Unfortunately, this study does not return to the Scriptures in seeking abiding principles in this area. Instead, suggesting a further on-going revelation, it looks to a synthesis with modern scientific thought in biology and psychology. In effect, it urges a compromise between the Roman Catholic Church's traditional position and modern psychological theories—heavily Freudian—which see sexual implications behind all of life's activity.

A relatively dispassionate Lutheran observer must laud the review of human and historical judgement which have perverted the institution of marriage within the Roman Church, but at the same time must lament

the over-emphasis on the sexual aspect of life. To this writer, the present ferment in Roman Catholic circles reveals the source of Roman theology for what it is, both on the conservative right and the liberal left. Like most Protestant thinking today, such views are not based on the abiding rock of God's Word, but on the shifting sands of tradition and man's benighted reason.

In and of itself, the rhythm method is not morally objectionable, providing as it does for periodic abstinence. If such abstinence seems to undermine the marital bond, then the Christian may well look to other methods.

Aesthetic Factors

Aesthetic factors are also involved in methods of birth control. Aesthetically unpleasant experiences caused by one or another of these methods can lead to psychological stress. But these factors are too subtle and individual to be treated with any assurance in this paper. These will need to be left to the discretion of husband and wife as they discuss these matters in mutual love and concern.

Conscience Factors

It is entirely possible that a Christian spouse does not well understand the principles permitting use of some contraceptives. Similarly; a Christian may have difficulty overcoming a sense of guilt in such use. These factors, in turn, involve the matter of Christian liberty. The stronger party will give up his Christian liberty, lest he or she offend the conscience of the weaker party, in accord with the principles discussed by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians.

The Spouse as Self, Not Sex-object

It seems that many in the history of the church have long labored under the misconceptions that sex is necessarily sin to a greater or lesser extent. The background for such misconceptions has been indicated earlier. Sexual desire surely had its place in the pristine world before the fall (cf. the statement from the *Apology* in the Appendix to this paper), and such was good and wholesome. Though tainted in the fall, such sexual desire can be good and wholesome in the life of the new man. This, however, is far removed from the emphasis on sexual gratification evident in our materialistic, hedonistic, sex-crazed society. Even within a marriage a spouse can become a sex object if intercourse is merely a means to gratification. Insofar as contraceptive devices would aid and abet such self-centered gratification, they become part of the evil pattern, even though they may not of themselves be objectionable on other moral grounds. When permissible contraceptive devices are used within the framework of the oneness of marriage as expressed in the Scriptures, and when a redeemed child of God begins to "love his wife as himself," then both the desire and the use of permissible contraceptives are wholesome.

Appendix

An assumption basic to this presentation is that both loving union and procreation are important purposes of marriage and that neither should be over-emphasized at the expense of the other. A series of statements is here provided which, hopefully, will provide both the conviction and some of the accompanying attitudes of those authors in this regard. A related factor is the problem of love and/or lust within marriage—that is, the quality of desire in the loving union.

1. Martin Luther: Lecture on Genesis 25:1-4 (Abraham's marriage to Keturah), American Edition, 4:304-5

And it seems that God wanted to teach and attest that the begetting of children is wonderfully pleasing to Him, in order that we might realize that He upholds and defends His word when He says: “Be fruitful.” He is not hostile to children, as we are. Many of us do not seek to have offspring. But God emphasizes His word to such a extent that He sometimes gives offspring even to those who do not desire it, yes, even hate it. Occasionally, of course, He does not give it to some who earnestly desire it. It is His purpose to test them. And, what is more, He seems to emphasize procreation to such an extent that children are born even to adulterers and fornicators contrary to their wish.

How great, therefore, the wickedness of human nature is! How many girls there are who prevent conception and kill and expel tender fetuses, although procreation is the work of God! Indeed, some spouses who marry and live together have a desire for this kind of life in order that they may become parents. Although original sin is there too, nevertheless procreation is the main cause. These people are really angels in comparison with the others, because they desire to make use of marriage for procreation. But their number is very small, and I simply count them among the angels and not among human beings. For it is a great gift of God if I look for and desire only offspring from a woman, especially if I am aware of the discomforts of marriage, of the vexing and the darts of the devil (Eph. 6:16). Such a man was Abraham, whom I count among the angelic husbands who desire “godly offspring,” as Malachi (2:15) says.

The second class consists of those who marry for the sake of avoiding fornication. They do not turn away from or hate children, but it is their main purpose to live chastely and modestly. These, too, are pious people, but they are not on a par with the former. If God grants children, they are delighted. They love their wives and their offspring, and they diligently perform the duties of their calling.

The third class consists of those who marry old ladies for the sake of wealth or honor. May God give them the cup of suffering, as Bernard says; for they seek only wealth and honor, not the begetting of children! Nevertheless, because of the respect for and the honor of marriage they should not be condemned.

But people must be diligently warned that such examples of the fathers should not be taken as a pattern to be imitated, since there is a great difference between Abraham’s desire and that of an old woman who marries a young man. For although Abraham is under the sin of lust to the same extent as others are, he is nevertheless the master and not the slave of lust. Indeed, there is purity in him and sincere love for offspring. The love for offspring and seed prevails, just as among the heathen as well as among Christians many have for various reasons had an intense longing for children.

2. Martin Luther: Lecture on Genesis 24:1-4 (arrangements for Jacob’s marriage), American Edition, 4:243

[The importance of the Doctrine of Justification in Marriage:]

Sin has been made weak and does not have dominion over us. If you take a wife, you will feel lust; but you will be able to live in a chaste and godly manner with her because you believe in Christ; for then sin has been made weak. On the other hand, if you enter into marriage with intense passion and with the expectation of sundry pleasures, then before hardly one or two weeks have elapsed ... there will arise annoyances between you and your wife and a dislike greater than your love was at first.

3. Martin Luther: Lecture on Genesis 24:1-4, American Edition, 4:244

This is the true definition: Marriage is the divinely instituted and lawful union of a man and a woman in the hope of offspring or at least for the sake of avoiding fornication and sin, to the glory of God. Its ultimate purpose is to obey God and be a remedy for sin; to call upon God; to desire, love, and bring up children to the glory of God; to live with one’s wife in the fear of the Lord, and to bear one’s cross; but if no children result, you should nevertheless live content with your wife and avoid promiscuity.

4. *Apology to Augsburg Confession*, XXII; *Triglotta*, p. 365

One sex in a proper way should desire the other. For we are speaking not of concupiscence, which is sin, but of that appetite which was to have been in nature in its integrity [which would have existed in nature even if it had remained uncorrupted], which they call physical love, And this love of one sex for the other is truly a divine ordinance.

5. *Luther's Large Catechism, Triglotta*, p. 641

For where nature has its course, as it is implanted by God, it is not possible to remain chaste without marriage. For flesh and blood remain flesh and blood and the natural inclination and excitement have their course without let or hindrance, as everybody sees and feels. In order, therefore, that it may be the more easy in some degree to avoid unchastity, God has commanded the estate of matrimony, that everyone may have his proper portion and be satisfied therewith; although God's grace besides is required in order that the heart also may be pure.

6. John Meyer, *Dogmatics (outline)*, p. 76; *Man's Present Abode: The Family*

The main object of the institution of family life is: The proper rearing and training of children.

1. Matrimony as such is an institution for this life only.
2. Family life promotes the happiness of husband and wife.
3. It promotes general decency and order (in a sin-infested world).
4. Mainly it serves the purpose of bringing up children in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

7. Hans Kirsten, "Birth Control as Ethical and Pastoral Problem," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*; 65:1 (January, 1968), p. 32.

We are well aware of the fact that our Lutheran dogmaticians found it possible to give the proximate purpose of marriage (*finis cuius proximus*) as *procreatio sobolis* (procreation of posterity) (Baier, *Comp. Theol. Pos.*, p. III, c XVI, par. 38). According to our conviction, however, this does not deny what we have maintained: marriage's primary purpose (*finis primarius*) is companionship (*consortium*), a total communion in body and soul. And of this communion, children are the special, divinely intended blessing, the divinely intended fruit of marriage according to Psalm 127: "Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward." To what degree, according to I Corinthians 7:2, 9, also *remedium concupiscentiae* (prevention of sinful desires) belongs to the purpose of marriage need not at this point be investigated further. It does, however, become eminently clear that marriage has a function also as an ordinance for life in this sinful world.

8. Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck, *The Sheperd Under Christ*, p. 266.

God, recognizing that "it is not good for the man to be alone," created woman as "a helper suitable for him" (Gn. 2:18-NASB). The closest human bonds were to be those established in the life-long union in which a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh in sexual union....

A secondary purpose of marriage was established at the time of creation when God added a blessing to the sexual union of man and woman.... (God provided for the propagation of the human race through the institution of marriage)

Since the fall of man into sin, marriage serves a third purpose.... If each fulfills his sexual duty, the temptations to adultery and fornication can better be resisted.

