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Can Christians Use Birth Control?



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The effective separation of sex from procreation may be one of the most important defining marks of our age—and one of the most ominous. This awareness is spreading among American evangelicals, and it threatens to set loose a firestorm.



Most evangelical Protestants greeted the advent of modern birth control technologies with applause and relief. Lacking any substantial theology of marriage, sex, or the family, evangelicals welcomed the development of “The Pill” much as the world celebrated the discovery of penicillin — as one more milestone in the inevitable march of human progress, and the conquest of nature.

At the same time, evangelicals overcame their traditional reticence in matters of sexuality, and produced a growth industry in books, seminars, and even sermon series celebrating sexual ecstasy as one of God’s blessings to married Christians. Once reluctant to admit the very existence of sexuality, evangelicals emerged from the 1960s ready to dish out the latest sexual advice without blushing. As one of the best-selling evangelical sex manuals proclaims, marital sex is *Intended for Pleasure*. Many evangelicals seem to have forgotten that it was intended for something else as well.

For many evangelical Christians, birth control has been an issue of concern only for Catholics. When Pope Paul VI released his famous encyclical outlawing artificial birth control, *Humanae Vitae*, most evangelicals responded with disregard — perhaps thankful

that evangelicals had no pope who could hand down a similar edict. Evangelical couples became devoted users of birth control technologies ranging from the Pill to barrier methods and Intrauterine Devices [IUDs]. That is all changing, and a new generation of evangelical couples is asking new questions.

A growing number of evangelicals are rethinking the issue of birth control—and facing the hard questions posed by reproductive technologies. Several developments contributed to this reconsideration, but the most important of these is the abortion revolution. The early evangelical response to legalized abortion was woefully inadequate. Some of the largest evangelical denominations at first accepted at least some version of abortion on demand.

The evangelical conscience was awakened in the late 1970s, when the murderous reality of abortion could not be denied. A massive realignment of evangelical conviction was evident by the 1980 presidential election, when abortion functioned as the fuse for a political explosion. Conservative Protestants emerged as major players in the pro-life movement, standing side-by-side with Catholics in the defense of the unborn.

The reality of abortion forced a reconsideration of other issues in turn. Affirming that human life must be recognized and protected from the moment of conception, evangelicals increasingly recognized Intrauterine Devices [IUDs] as abortifacients, and rejected any birth control with any abortifacient design or result. This conviction is now casting a cloud over the Pill as well.

Thus, in an ironic turn, American evangelicals are rethinking birth control even as a majority of the nation's Roman Catholics indicate a rejection of their Church's teaching. How should evangelicals think about the birth control question?

First, we must start with a rejection of the contraceptive mentality that sees pregnancy and children as impositions to be avoided rather than as gifts to be received, loved, and nurtured. This contraceptive mentality is an insidious attack upon God's glory in creation, and the Creator's gift of procreation to the married couple.

Second, we must affirm that God gave us the gift of sex for several specific purposes, and one of those purposes is procreation. Marriage represents a perfect network of divine gifts, including sexual pleasure, emotional bonding, mutual support, procreation, and parenthood. We are not to sever these "goods" of marriage and choose only those we may desire for ourselves. Every marriage must be open to the gift of children. Even where the ability to conceive and bear children may be absent, the will to receive children must be present. To demand sexual pleasure without openness to children is to violate a sacred trust.

Third, we should look closely at the Catholic moral argument as found in *Humanae*

Vitae. Evangelicals will find themselves in surprising agreement with much of the encyclical's argument. As the Pope warned, widespread use of the Pill has led to "serious consequences" including marital infidelity and rampant sexual immorality. In reality, the Pill allowed a near-total abandonment of Christian sexual morality in the larger culture. Once the sex act was severed from the likelihood of childbearing, the traditional structure of sexual morality collapsed.

At the same time, even as evangelical Christians are helpfully informed by the natural law, our mode of moral reasoning must be deeply biblical, and the Bible must be the ruling authority. For most evangelicals, the major break with Catholic teaching comes at the insistence that "it is necessary that each conjugal act remain ordained in itself to the procreating of human life." That is, that every act of marital intercourse must be fully and equally open to the gift of children. This claims too much, and places inordinate importance on individual acts of sexual intercourse, rather than the larger integrity of the conjugal bond.

The focus on "each and every act" of sexual intercourse within a faithful marriage that is open to the gift of children goes beyond the biblical demand. Since the encyclical does not reject all family planning, this focus requires the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" methods of birth control. To the evangelical mind, this is a rather strange and fabricated distinction. Looking at the Catholic position helps, but evangelicals must also think for themselves, reasoning from the Scriptures in a careful consideration.

Fourth, Christian couples are not ordered by Scripture to maximize the largest number of children that could be conceived. Given our general state of health in advanced societies, a couple who marries in their early twenties and has a healthy and regular sex life could well produce over fifteen offspring before the wife passes her early forties. Such families should be rightly honored, but this level of reproduction is certainly not mandated by the Bible.

Fifth, with all this in view, 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 for using contraceptives must be clear in the couple's mind, and fully consistent with the couple's Christian commitments.

Sixth, Christian couples must ensure that the methods chosen are really contraceptive in effect, and not abortifacient. Not all birth control is contraception, for some technologies and methods do not prevent the sperm from fertilizing the egg, but instead prevent the fertilized egg from successfully implanting itself in the lining of the womb. Such methods involve nothing less than an early abortion. This is true of all IUDs and some hormonal technologies. A raging debate now surrounds the question of whether at least some forms of the Pill may also work through abortifacient effect, rather than preventing ovulation. Christian couples must exercise due care in choosing a form of birth control that is

unquestionably contraceptive, rather than abortifacient.

The birth control revolution has literally changed the world. Today's couples rarely ponder the fact that the availability of effective contraceptives is a very recent phenomenon in world history. This revolution has set loose a firestorm of sexual promiscuity and much human misery. At the same time, it has also offered thoughtful and careful couples an opportunity to enjoy the joys and fulfillments of the marital act without remaining at all times equally open to pregnancy.

Therefore, Christians may make careful and discriminating use of proper technologies, but must never buy into the contraceptive mentality. We can never see children as problems to be avoided, but always as gifts to be welcomed and received.

For evangelicals, much work remains to be done. We must build and nurture a new tradition of moral theology, drawn from Holy Scripture and enriched by the theological heritage of the church. Until we do, many evangelical couples will not even know where to begin the process of thinking about birth control in a fully Christian frame. It is high time evangelicals answered this call.

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