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The Pill Turns 50 — TIME Considers the Contraceptive Revolution

TIME magazine's current cover story puts the issue of the Pill and birth control front and center in our cultural conversation. It should be an important part of our Christian conversation as well.

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Anniversaries and commemorations come and go as history unfolds, but few dates are as significant as May 9, 1960. On that day the Food and Drug Administration approved the sale and use of Enovid — the first mass pharmaceutical form of what is now simply known as “The Pill.” Quite simply, the world has never been the same since.

The 50th anniversary of the Pill will surely draw a great deal of media and cultural attention. *TIME* magazine devoted its May 3, 2010 cover story to the meaning of the Pill after a half-century. Executive Editor Nancy Gibbs wrote the main story, entitled “Love, Sex, Freedom and the Paradox of the Pill.” The magazine’s cover trumpeted the significance of The Pill with three short sentences: “So small. So powerful. And so misunderstood.” Misunderstood? Managing Editor Richard Stengel seemed to get the basic story just about right: “It was a medical breakthrough many years in the making, the most convenient and reliable form of birth control ever invented — but it quickly became much more. Arriving at a moment of social and political upheaval, the Pill became a handy proxy for wider trends: the rejection of tradition, the challenge to institutions, the redefinition of women’s roles.”



Nancy Gibbs tells the story of the Pill’s emergence with skill, putting the story into its cultural and social context. The story of the development of an oral contraceptive is as fascinating as one might expect, with a cast of characters that make the story all the more interesting. Margaret Sanger, the founder of what became Planned Parenthood, an early enthusiast for birth control, feminism, abortion, and eugenics had long dreamed of a “magic pill.” Enter Katharine Dexter McCormick, heiress to the International Harvester fortune, who was quite willing to fund the needed medical research. Add to the mix Gregory Pincus, an academic researcher who synthesized the hormone progesterone from wild yams and physician John Rock, whose research was actually directed toward helping women to get pregnant — not to avoid pregnancy altogether. By the late 1950s it was clear that Pincus and Rock had developed an effective oral birth control pill. In 1959 G.D. Searle & Co. would apply to the FDA for approval. That approval came just after John F. Kennedy, the nation’s first Roman Catholic president, entered the White House. The little pill would transform the world.

Gibbs is particularly adept at pointing to the Pill’s significance. It “rearranged the furniture of human relations in ways that we’ve argued about ever since.” It was “the first medicine ever designed to be taken regularly by people who were not sick.” The Pill became “the means by which women untied their aprons, scooped up their ambitions and marched eagerly into the new age.”

The era of the Pill’s emergence was unquestionably already a time of major social transformation, but the arrival of hormonal birth control became an engine for much of that transformation. Specifically, the Pill was the chemical agent for making the sexual revolution possible. Though originally prescribed only for married women (even through Planned

Parenthood clinics), the Pill soon spread throughout the population of women. Gibbs reports that only 400,000 women took the oral contraceptive in 1961. By 1965, the number was almost 4 million.

The Pill made sex outside of marriage far easier to conceal, lowering the social cost of extramarital and premarital sex. In 1966 *U.S. News & World Report* would worry openly that the Pill might lead to sexual anarchy.

Nancy Gibbs puts a particular emphasis on the role of the Pill in enabling modern feminism. She cites National Organization for Women president Terry O'Neill: "There is a straight line between the Pill and the changes in family structure we now see." Women could now enter the workplace without fear of a career interrupted by pregnancy. Employers "lost a primary excuse for closing their ranks to women."

Within a decade of the Pill's emergence, the Roman Catholic church would declare its use forbidden for Catholics. Among evangelicals, there was much less moral concern for many years.

Nancy Gibbs interviewed me for her essay, and she included some of my comments under a section marked "Backlash." She wrote:

Opposition to the Pill among conservative Catholics was consistent from the beginning, but it was only after it had been in widespread use for years that some conservative Protestants began rethinking their views on contraception in general and the Pill in particular. "I think the contraceptive revolution caught Evangelicals by surprise," observes Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "We bought into a mentality of human control. We welcomed the polio vaccine and penicillin and just received the Pill as one more great medical advance."

Evangelicals seemed to think that the development of the Pill was just part and parcel of the technological, scientific, and medical revolutions that marked the history of the twentieth century, particularly the period after World War II. There was very little evangelical conversation about the Pill, at least in terms of how the contraceptive revolution should be considered in light of Christian conviction.

She added:

But beginning in the 1990s, many conservative Christians revisited the question of what God intends in marriage and pondered the true nature of the gift of sexuality. The heart of the concern, in this view, is that using contraception can weaken the marital bond by separating sex from procreation. The ideal of marriage as a "one-flesh union" places the act of intercourse, with the possibility of creating new life, at the center of the relationship. "Go back a hundred years," Mohler says. "The biblical idea you'd have adults who'd intend to have very active sex lives without any respect to the likelihood of children didn't exist. And it's now unexceptional."

That is a point often missed by evangelical Christians even today. The idea that sex would be severed from childbearing is a very modern concept — and a concept made meaningful only by the development of the Pill and its successor birth control technologies. The severing of this relationship represents a quantum change in human life and relationships, not to mention morality.

Nancy Gibbs is fair and accurate in her use of my words and arguments. I do indeed believe that the development of the Pill "has done more to reorder human life than any event since Adam and Eve ate the apple." Why? Because sex, sexuality, and reproduction are so central to human life, to marriage, and to the future of humanity.

The Pill turned pregnancy — and thus children — into elective choices, rather than natural gifts of the marital union. But then again, the marital union was itself weakened by the Pill, because the avoidance of pregnancy facilitated adultery and other forms of non-marital sex. In some hands, the Pill became a human pesticide.

Christians must not join the contraceptive revolution as mere consumers of the Pill or other birth control methodologies. Finally, many evangelicals are joining the discussion about birth control and its meaning. Evangelicals arrived late to the issue of abortion, and we have arrived late to the issue of birth control, but we are here now.

TIME and Nancy Gibbs have performed a service by putting this issue before the American public with this cover story. As far back as 1967, *TIME* saw



something of the significance of the Pill: “It costs 11¢ to manufacture; a month’s supply now sells for \$2.00 retail. It is little more trouble to take on schedule than a daily vitamin. Yet in a mere six years it has changed and liberated the sex and family life of a large and still growing segment of the U.S. population: eventually, it promises to do the same for much of the world.”



Yes, the Pill had arrived and the world would never be the same again. Even now, we are unable to take into account the full significance of the Pill and its use. But nothing of this significance should escape the thoughtful concern of faithful Christians. *TIME* magazine’s current cover story puts the issue of the Pill and birth control front and center in our cultural conversation. It should be an important part of our Christian conversation as well.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com.

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Nancy Gibbs, “[Love, Sex, Freedom and the Paradox of the Pill](#),” *TIME* magazine, May 3, 2010.

Richard Stengel, “[Revolution in a Pill](#),” *TIME* magazine, May 3, 2010.

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R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “[Can Christians Use Birth Control?](#),” March 30, 2004.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. and others, “[Contraception: A Symposium](#),” *First Things*, December 1998. (A symposium on the 30th anniversary of the release of *Humanae Vitae* by the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.)

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