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THE ETHICS OF CONTRACEPTION: A THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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For most of its history the Christian church has viewed the use of contraceptives in family planning with moral suspicion. The arguments against contraceptives varied, but the church's stance was quite clear, though the issue was never paramount in the church's thought. All of that changed in 1930 with the Anglican Lambeth Conference giving qualified ethical sanction for contraceptive use under certain conditions. Within a matter of several decades most of Protestantism followed the Lambeth trajectory. With the arrival of the Pill in 1960 the shift became complete.

What is most significant about this change is not that it happened, but that there was so little theological reflection in the process. Winds of change regarding family planning in general began to blow in the late 19th century with the revival of Malthusian sentiments regarding world population: "The basic proposition of Malthus that population tends to increase faster than food resources was frequently repeated."[1] By the early 20th century Malthusian leagues had developed in Germany, Spain, Brazil, Belgium, Cuba, Switzerland, Sweden, and Italy. They all began to promote birth control, including potential use of contraceptives, in order to control over-population and its purported social miseries. In 1923 Harvard professor Edward M. East wrote *Mankind at the Crossroad*, arguing that the world would reach an agriculturally unsustainable three billion by the year 2000. He contended that "[t]he world confronts the fulfillment of the Malthusian prediction here and now."[2]

Up until this point the church had a unanimous, albeit infrequent, voice with regards to contraceptives, and other forms of family planning were generally not on the radar screen. In 1908 and then again in 1920 the Lambeth Conference of Bishops in the Anglican Church issued statements condemning contraception. The statement in 1920 read as follows:

> We utter an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception, together with the grave dangers—physical, moral and religious—thereby incurred, and against the evils with which the extension of such use threatens the race. In opposition to the teaching which, under the name of science and religion, encourages married people in the deliberate cultivation of sexual union as an end in itself, we steadfastly uphold what must always be re-

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[1] John T. Noonan Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) 409.

[2] Edward M. East, *Mankind at the Crossroads* (New York: Scribners, 1923) viii.

> garded as the governing considerations of Christian marriage. One is the primary purpose for which marriage exists, namely the continuation of the race through the gift and heritage of children; the other is the paramount importance in married life of deliberate and thoughtful self-control.[3]

In 1925 the Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church (USA) also condemned the use of contraceptives. But in 1930 the Lambeth Conference shifted course and by a vote of 193 to 67 (with 46 not voting) the Anglican bishops adopted a resolution allowing for a morally qualified use of contraceptive birth control.

> Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, the method must be decided on Christian principles. The primary and obvious method is complete abstinence from intercourse (as far as may be necessary) in a life of discipline and self-control lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless in those cases where there is such a clearly-felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles. The Conference records its strong condemnation of the use of any methods of conception control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.[4]

The Bishops gave no theological or ethical criteria for the "morally sound reason" or the "Christian principles" to be utilized. It opened the way for change, and change without substantive rationale or guidance. In the next several decades most of Protestantism, including evangelical Protestants, followed a similar path.[5]

In 1969 a group of evangelical scholars in conjunction with the Christian Medical Society published *Birth Control and the Christian,* drawing on presentations from a symposium on the subject. The symposium enunciated an affirmation that states: "The Bible does not expressly prohibit contraception but it does set forth certain abiding principles such as the sanctity of life, the command to multiply, and the mutual obligation of husband and wife to satisfy each other's sexual needs."[6] But what is noticeably missing in the volume is an in-depth theological rationale for birth control and theological guidance for its usage. Significant portions of the book actually focused on abortion rather than marketed contraceptives.

In May 1960 the FDA approved a new oral contraceptive, simply called the Pill. The Pill was, of course, filled with controversies and ironies. As *Time* magazine pointed out, "It was the first medicine ever designed to be taken regularly by people who were not sick. Its main inventor was a conservative Catholic who was

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[3] Lambeth Conference Archives, 1920, resolution 68 in *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion* (London: S.P.C.K., 1920).

[4] Lambeth Conference Archives, 1930, resolution 15 in *The Lambeth Conference 1930* (London: S.P.C.K., 1930).

[5] One interesting exception to the trend was found in the Christian Reformed Church in which their 1936 synod adopted a statement calling on church members to fulfill one of the purposes of marriage, procreation. It also warned against the "growing evil of selfish birth restriction" and "indiscriminate dissemination of contraceptive information." See Christian Reformed Church: Beliefs—Birth Control, online at www.crcna.org/pages/positions_birth_contro.dfm (accessed February 24, 2012).

[6] Walter Spitzer and Carlyle Saylor, eds., *Birth Control and the Christian: A Protestant Symposium on the Control of Human Reproduction* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1969) xxiv–xxv.

looking for a treatment for infertility and instead found a guarantee of it."[7] John Rock, the Roman Catholic inventor of the Pill, believed that the church would not need to change its historic position, for "[t]he Pill just fell outside its definition of contraception." He argued that with this new method there was "no barrier preventing the union of sperm and egg; all the Pill did … was mimic naturally occurring hormones to extend the safe period, so that sex was safe all month long."[8] Despite large numbers of Roman Catholic theologians and Cardinals favoring the argument,[9] Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical *Humanae Vitae,* and the traditional teaching against contraception was retained in the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants by and large bought the argument but without much substantive biblical or theological reflection.[10]

This paper seeks to provide a theological rationale that has too often been missing in Protestantism in general, including evangelicalism. But it seeks to provide a theological rationale that sustains the church's historic position that sex is an inherently procreative act. But before getting to the theological arguments providing a rationale we must first journey into the arguments utilized to oppose contraception throughout most of the church's history.

I. THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONTRACEPTION

While all of Christendom historically opposed contraceptive family planning, the primary arguments have been within the Roman Catholic tradition. It needs to be understood that the issue has not been family planning per se, but rather the use of certain methods to achieve family planning—namely contraceptive devices that artificially prevent pregnancies. The arguments against such have generally been along three lines: biblical arguments, guilt by association and the nature of sex argument, which has by far been the dominant one.

1. *Biblical arguments.* Historically in the church there have been two primary biblical texts utilized to morally reject the use of contraceptive devices: Gen 1:28 and Gen 38:8–10. In the context of the creation of man and woman in God's image there is the procreative mandate, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen 1:28). Some have taken the mandate to be universal in nature so that the human race is given the task of procreation. Others have understood the mandate to be particular in nature, so that the task is incumbent upon every married couple, implying that nothing can be utilized to prevent conception. However one interprets the mandate, two things

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[7] Nancy Gibbs, "Love, Sex, Freedom and the Paradox of the Pill," *Time* (May 3, 2010) 40.

[8] Ibid. 43.

[9] In the 1960s Pope John XXIII and then Pope Paul VI established consultative commissions to study the pill and contraception, and a majority, including a number of cardinals, encouraged the Pope to approve some forms of contraception. See William Shannon, "The Papal Commission on Birth Control," in his *The Lively Debate: Response to Humanae Vitae* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970).

[10] There certainly were exceptions to the lack of theological reflection, most notably Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009) and Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964).

should be observed. First, there is no direct teaching here with regard to contraception, and even a particular interpretation does not necessarily preclude contraceptives. Second, the text can and should be taken to imply that sexual intimacy between a man and a woman is by nature procreative. But the procreative nature of sex, as I will argue later, does not necessarily preclude the use of artificial methods of family planning.

In the Genesis 38 text we find a story in which there is divine judgment for failing to carry out a procreative responsibility:

> Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight; so he put him to death also (Gen. 38:8–10).

Often referring to this act as Onanism, the Roman Catholic Church has traditionally utilized the text to argue against both masturbation and *coitus interuptus*, the failure to allow the sperm and egg to come together in the act of sexual intercourse. The severity of Onanism was argued on the grounds of the divine judgment in the story. In a recent work Bryan Hodge, an evangelical Protestant, argues that "although the levirate marriage law is clearly referred to, the larger context shows why Onan was put to death: because God viewed his action as a rebellious, nonproductive use of the sexual act."[11]

Most biblical scholars, however, agree that the sin was neither masturbation nor *coitus interuptus*, but rather the failure of Onan to practice the Levirate Law, which in Hebrew culture meant that when a man died the next of kin was to marry his wife in order to procure offspring in the lineage of the deceased brother. Thus, the text has no real bearing on contraception, since in the context there is a very specific responsibility for a very specific condition.

2. *Guilt by association arguments.* A second line of arguments utilized by the church (both Protestant and Catholic) can be labeled "guilt by association." Throughout much of history contraception was associated with abortion and prostitution. Abortion was frequently the primary means of thwarting the birth of a child and thus was equated with contraception.[12] Some Christians, without clear biological knowledge, wrongly assumed that all contraceptives were abortive in nature. As late as 1996 in my first visit to Russia to teach in a seminary, I found that this was the heart of the rejection of contraception by many Protestants in that country.

Contraception was also frequently associated with prostitution, for prostitutes were the primary individuals seeking some method of preventing pregnancy. In 1873 the Comstock Law was passed by the United States government making it a

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[11] Bryan Hodge, *The Christian Case Against Contraception* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010) 70.

[12] For a historic overview of contraception which describes the historic linkage see John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

crime to use the postal service to mail items that could be utilized for abortion or contraception. The two were not only associated with each other, but were believed to corrupt public morality, by abetting activities such as prostitution. It was not until 1965 that the United States Supreme Court in Griswold vs. Connecticut overturned similar state laws, arguing that the right to marital privacy included the right to contraceptives.

The guilt by association arguments were right historically, in that there was a historic relationship between contraceptives, abortion, and prostitution. But guilt by association is never a definitive moral argument. When contraception is not abortive and is not utilized primarily by prostitutes, the argument is no longer compelling.

3. *The nature of sex argument.* The most widespread and in-depth argument against artificial contraception has focused on the nature of sex, namely that the sexual act is inherently procreative, thus precluding any act that prevents procreation in sexual intercourse. The ban on artificial contraception in the Roman Catholic Church is rooted in the teaching of Augustine and Aquinas, not regarding contraception, but the ends of marital sex. Both clearly stressed that the only truly legitimate end of sex is procreation. It was out of this framework that the church initially established its rejection of contraception. In recent years the church has spoken of two primary ends: the procreative and the unitive, whereby the union of the husband and wife is deepened and solidified. But the original rationale for rejecting contraception was the procreative priority of the sexual act. The fact that the church has included the unitive dimension actually undermines the original grounding for rejecting contraception and may be part of the reason that in practice the ban is so widely rejected by Roman Catholics.

The story really begins with St. Augustine who wrote against the Manicheans and their opposition to marriage, sex, and procreation. The Manicheans had a two-tiered ethic allowing marriage for the Auditors, the multitude of followers, but not the spiritually elite, the Elect as they were called. But for the Auditors, though they engaged in sex, they were to avoid procreation. Augustine writes to refute the Manichean rejection of procreation, contending that sex without procreation becomes a means "to satiate lust."

> Marriage … joins male and female for the procreation of children. Whoever says that to procreate children is a worse sin than to copulate thereby prohibits marriage; and he makes the woman no more a wife but a harlot, who, when she has been given certain gifts, is joined to man to satisfy his lust. If there is a wife there is matrimony. But there is no matrimony where motherhood is prevented; for then there is no wife.[13]

Ironically, the contraceptive method employed by the Manicheans was the use of the sterile period as understood by Greek medicine. Thus, John Noonan points out, "In the history of thought of theologians on contraception, it is no doubt, pi-

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[13] Augustine, *On The Morals of the Manichaeans* (trans. R. Stothert, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 4; ed. Philip Schaff; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 86–87.

quant that the first pronouncement on contraception by the most influential theologian teaching on such matters should be such a vigorous attack on the one method of avoiding procreation accepted by twentieth-century Catholic theologians as morally lawful."[14]

In the Medieval period in a different context St. Thomas Aquinas would affirm the primacy of procreation in sex, but actually did not deal with contraception per se. It is also interesting to note that in 1880, as secular cries for contraception were emerging throughout the Western world, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical on marriage but failed to address the issue. But after the Anglican Church opened the way for contraception in 1930, Pope Pius XI strongly reacted in his encyclical *Casti Connubii*. This would be followed by a number of other official statements of the church condemning contraception: *Gaudium et Spes* in 1965 from a Vatican II consultation; *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 from Pope John Paul; and a number of writings from Pope John Paul II, including a collection of essays entitled *Theology of the Body*.

The main contentions in these documents are fairly consistent from one to the next. Pope Pius XI in 1930 set the argument in the context of nature: "Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious."[15] In 1965 the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* said that "marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children." It recognized that marriage "is not instituted solely for procreation; rather, its very nature as an unbreakable compact between persons … demands that the mutual love of the spouses be embodied in a rightly ordered manner, that it grow and ripen."[16]

In 1968 Pope John Paul in *Humanae Vitae* set forth the Church's teaching in light of a right order of priorities: God, the couple, their families and human society. "From this it follows that they are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, as if it were wholly up to them to decide … the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator."[17] The nature of marriage is clear: "God has wisely ordered laws of nature and the incidence of fertility in such a way that successive births are already naturally spaced through the inherent operation of these laws. The Church, nevertheless … teaches that each and every marital act must of neces-

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[14] Noonan, *Contraception* 120.

[15] Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (December 30, 1930) 55, online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii _en.html (accessed February 20, 2012).

[16] Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965) 50, online at www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. (accessed February 25, 2012).

[17] Pope John Paul, *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968) 10, online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae _en.html (accessed February 20, 2012).

sity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life."[18] If there are good reasons for spacing children, "Married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile."[19] But all forms of contraception must be rejected.

Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the previous encyclicals, though he gave a much fuller context and teaching for understanding human sexuality and opposition to contraception. He also gave more attention to the dual purposes of sex: the unitive and the procreative, and their inseparable connection as the basis for rejecting contraception.[20] The Pontifical Council for the Family summed up the church's stance:

> 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. Contraception is gravely opposed to marital chastity; it is contrary to the good of the transmission of life (the procreative aspect of matrimony), and to the reciprocal self-giving of the spouses (the unitive aspect of matrimony); it harms true love and denies the sovereign role of God in the transmission of human life.[21]

There have been a few Protestant arguments against contraception, but most in some manner echo the Roman Catholic sentiments, employing nature and the intrinsic connection between sex and procreation. One example is Sam and Bethany Torode's book *Open Embrace*, which does not absolutely reject contraception, but commends natural methods on the basis of the natural patterns God has given. They note that there may be good reasons for delaying conception, "but God has taken care of that already. So deeply has he wrought his purposes into us that a woman's body not only bears fruit, but has seasons … providing not only for bringing babies forth, but for spacing them. There is no need to thwart the design, to artificially block fertility during a natural fertile time. One only has to wait for a few days. If that is too difficult for us, something is wrong."[22] Later they add, "Regardless of our intent, deliberately withholding or subverting our fertility during sex sends a message: 'I am not giving myself completely to my spouse' …. When we should be saying 'I do,' contraception says 'I do not.'"[23]

Sam Hodge in *The Christian Case Against Contraception* argues emphatically that contraception is a sin on historical, biblical, systematic, and practical grounds. Interestingly, however, he differentiates his views from the Roman Catholic tradition,

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[18] Ibid. 11.

[19] Ibid. 16.

[20] For various documents on these themes see Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, online at www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP2TBIND.HTM (accessed February 25, 2012). See especially essays 114–119.

[21] The Pontifical Council for the Family, *Vademecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life* (February 18, 1987) 2–4, online at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_12021997_vademecum_en.html (accessed February 27, 2012).

[22] Sam and Bethany Torode, *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) xvi.

[23] Ibid. 30.

arguing that the tradition "forks off into a different direction from the earlier Church's view of the sexual act."[24] This recent Protestant work, however, attempts to make biblical texts say far more than is exegetically warranted, and fails to read historic figures against the backdrop of their own historical context and understandings of contraception.

Similarly there is a movement among some fundamentalist and evangelical groups called the Quiver Full Movement that believes the Bible teaches against all forms of birth control and that large families are necessary for evangelizing and impacting the world. The movement on its website states: "We exalt Jesus Christ as Lord, and acknowledge His headship in all areas of our lives, including fertility. We exist to serve those believers who **trust the Lord** for family size, and to answer the questions of those **seeking truth** in this critical area of marriage."[25] The movement was sparked by a former feminist, Mary Pride and her book, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality* in which she argues that Christians should depend entirely upon God for the size of their families.[26]

II. A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR CONTRACEPTION

There is much I commend in the historic teaching that sex is intrinsically procreative. But I believe that it is possible to give a defense of family planning using contraceptive devices if those devices are not intrinsically immoral. This defense hinges on two primary biblical and theological considerations, namely our understanding of human stewardship in relationship to divine providence (especially as it relates to nature), and our understanding of the meaning and purposes of sex. These are the two theological constructs that are most significant in the debate, for by the very nature of contraception we are brought face to face with these two issues. It is no accident that the arguments against contraception give a particular rendition of divine providence in relationship to nature, and a particular rendition of the nature and *telos* of sexual intercourse. My arguments in defense of an ethical use of contraception hinge then on a modified portrayal of these two theological constructs.

1. *Divine providence, nature, and human stewardship.* Contraception can be utilized in light of the stewardship role that God has granted to human beings. In Genesis 1 the procreative mandate is given in the context of the larger cultural mandate to care for and steward God's good creation. That is, the procreative mandate is given in a context that actually calls for the intervention into nature and working with nature. Immediately after God's blessing and mandate to "[b]e fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28), God gives the man and the

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[24] Hodge, *Christian Case Against Contraception* 28.

[25] Online at www.Quiverfull.com/index.php (accessed March 17, 2012).

[26] Mary Pride, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality* (Wheaton: Good News, 1985). Among others writers in this movement are Charles Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control* (Monongahala, PA: Zimmer, 1989); Rich and Jan Hess, *A Full Quiver: Family Planning and the Lordship of Christ* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990); and Rachel Scott, *Birthing God's Mighty Warriors* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2004).

woman the responsibility to "rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky" (Gen 1:28b). God goes on to say, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit" (Gen 1:29). In Genesis 2 the cultural mandate is further elaborated, as humans are granted the task of working and taking care of the Garden (v. 15) and naming the animals (vv. 19–20). In all of this there is a clear understanding of human stewardship in relationship to nature, and the cultural and procreation mandates are linked in the text. The two mandates are also linked in the commandments to Noah, following the fall, rampant wickedness and divine judgment upon the world (Gen 9:1–7).

Philip Hughes described this intervention into the natural world this way:

> Man is sovereign among creatures. His sovereignty, however, is not absolute but derived. He is sovereign under God, the supreme Sovereign of all. Hence the divine mandate … to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion" over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28). This kingly function of man is seen in the organization and government of society which we call civilization, in the taming and domestication of animals for uses advantageous to man, in the cultivation of the soil, in the molding and transformation of materials into utensils and tools and machines, in the harnessing of the elemental forces and energies of nature.[27]

As Hughes notes, this human dominion over nature can and has been turned into unethical and tyrannical abuses of domination in nature and the world. Indeed, much human sin is taking God's good gifts of creation and misusing them with our fallen propensities.

Similarly, Meredith Kline in his analysis of the *imago Dei* argues that humans are to imitate what God does, namely rule and glorify. Humanity is given the cultural mandate to "work and keep" (Gen 2:15) the garden, whereby they cultivate the earth in service to the building of human culture for the glory of God. Kline notes that humans were "commissioned to enter into and carry forward the work of God, furthering God's ultimate purpose of glorifying himself by developing the kingdom city as a reflector of the divine glory …. God's work was creative, sustaining, governing; so too, on a creaturely level was man's." As Kline sees it God's original work in creating nature "found analogues in Man's constructive and inventive activities, in his artistic creativity, and in his procreative functioning."[28]

What needs to be noted in the opening two chapters of the Bible is first that God has granted to and indeed commanded humans to intervene into the natural processes of this world, the cultural mandate. And second, we note that the procreative mandate to "be fruitful and increase in number" is set in the context of and linked to this larger cultural mandate. This would at least hold open the possibility of an ethical form of contraception.

Some believe that humans are totally in control of the universe and nature, including their own physical bodies. For these people contraception is not even a moral issue, because they are in control. Others believe that God is totally in direct

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[27] Philip E. Hughes, "Theological Principles in the Control of Human Life," in Spitzer and Saylor, *Birth Control and the Christian* 99.

[28] Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 74–75.

control of all dimensions of the world and human life, and we thus play a very minimal role in determining the course of events in history or everyday life. This view is particularly buttressed by a belief that nature alone, set by God, determines what is legitimate and transpires in life. In this perspective contraception can be seen as incompatible with God's control over the nature of things.

But there is another, and I believe more adequate and biblical way of understanding the role of human beings within God's world. Humans are called to a stewardship role in relation to nature. The sovereign God of the universe is ultimately and finally in control of history and human life (Rom 8:28). But as Genesis makes clear God has granted to humans the role of stewards or caretakers of the created world. This is echoed by the Psalmist:

> What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for the? You have made them a little lower than the heavenly being and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of you hands; you put everything under their feet; all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. (Ps 8: 4–8)

Scripture, therefore, teaches that we are not at the mercy of nature, which is at once a good gift of God but also a fallen reality. As stewards we are decision makers, called to make wise decisions for the glory of God and the good of the world. Humans can and do revert to idolatrous and unethical ways of carrying out God's mandate, but we can legitimately enter into the course of nature, not to change God's ultimate designs, but to steward those designs. Moreover, because of the fallenness of our world, including nature, we sometimes seek to alter nature by alleviating suffering and pain as a sign of and participation in God's ultimate triumph over evil and suffering.

Within this framework of stewardship we can accept contraception, not in order to negate the procreative character of sex, but to steward the gifts and resources that God grants to us. We can utilize non-natural means of contraception to work with nature just as we steward many dimensions of natural life through technology and human knowledge. Karl Barth noted that when men and women cannot at the moment carry out the responsibility of generation and conception, they have four possibilities: complete sexual restraint, sexual intercourse in the naturally safe periods, *coitus interruptus*, and the use of contraceptives. But, says Barth, "It must be said of all four … that in relation to the course of nature as such they [all] have the character of human arrangement and control. To be consistent, those who on principle decline such a possibility must refuse all these possible courses of action."[29]

There are to be sure dimensions of God's creation that are normative and should not be changed by humans in their stewarding of nature.[30] For example, the

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[29] Barth, *CD* III/4, 263.

[30] I have outlined these perspectives more fully in a forthcoming paper, "Biotechnologies and Human Nature: What We Ought not Change in Who We Are."

male-female distinction is a fundamental reality in nature that is clearly normative and not to be dissolved (Gen 1:28; 2:23–25). The integrity or uniqueness of the human species is a given in nature, despite the fact that all living things share DNA consisting of the same four chemical building blocks, called nucleotides. This uniqueness is evidenced in the fact that creation in God's image belongs only to humans, not to the rest of creation (Gen 1:27–28). Procreation through the one-flesh union of husband and wife is a natural given that is to be preserved. But there is no biblical indication or clear rationale for precluding contraceptives on natural grounds, if one maintains the procreative context of sexual relations.

Stewarding nature through contraceptives should not utilize unethical means that harm or destroy human life, whether that of a fetus or the mother. Moreover, this stewardship should never transpire out of an ethos of total control or a "right over my own body." This is inconsistent with the nature of life, divine providence, and human stewardship. Stewardship is not an attempt at human autonomy or self-centeredness, but a response to the sovereignty of God who lovingly invites us to share in the care of his creation. Out of a framework of human stewardship, in which we care for human life and the natural world, contraceptives can be used in order to plan our families to better serve them, Christ's kingdom, and the world to which God calls us.

2. *The multiple ends or purposes of sex*. The second main theological rationale for contraceptives in family planning is the multiple ends or purposes of sex. As noted earlier, the Roman Catholic rejection of contraceptives originally stemmed from affirming a single end of marital sex: procreation. In the twentieth-century the church attempted to broaden the ends by including the unitive dimension. But including the unitive dimension actually undermines the original grounds for rejecting contraception, namely its procreative purpose. The church has now attempted to argue that the unitive and procreative must be held together in each specific act, in such a way that nothing can prohibit the fruitfulness of the act. But that is a modification of the earlier rationale.

I agree that the procreative and unitive dimensions must be held together, but I suggest this means that any sexual act must be in the context of procreation and be willing to bear the potential fruit from the act. The multiple purposes of sex indicate that sexual intercourse embodies more than just procreation but without negating procreation. As I have explored in *The Meaning of Sex*,[31] there are four main purposes of this good gift to the human race. A morally legitimate sexual act is in the context of these four purposes. Moreover, any form of reproductive technology should hold these four purposes together. Similarly, contraceptive use is set in the context of these four purposes.

The first purpose of sex is the consummation of a marriage. Genesis 2:24 gives us the closest definition of marriage as a creation ordinance that we have in the Bible, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to

[31] Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

his wife, and they will become one flesh." Three dimensions, which are universal and exist throughout history, are implied here: a change of status, a commitment, and a sexual union.[32] The sexual union is described in one-flesh language and is reiterated throughout Scripture (Mal 2:15, Matt 19:4–6, Mark 10:5–9, I Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31). The one-flesh relationship consummates the other dimensions of marriage and sets this relationship apart from all other relationships. It is the ultimate act of trust and an abandonment of one's total being to the other.

The one-flesh union is frequently described in Scripture as "knowing" the other, indicating the intricate knowledge and bond between the husband and wife in sexual intercourse. Something ontological happens to the man and the woman and they are never the same again through their physical union. After the marriage is consummated, the sexual act is the ongoing sign and celebration of the couple's oneness and union. Recent studies of hormonal releases of the brain seem to be giving physiological understandings of this bonded union, especially through oxytocin, frequently called "the bonding hormone."[33]

The second purpose of sex is procreation. Sexual intercourse is the means by which human life on earth continues and the means by which every human life begins. This follows from the procreative mandate in Gen 1:28, is reinforced by the biblical understanding of children as a divine gift (1 Sam 1:19–20; Pss 127:3; 128:2–4), and is evidenced through nature itself. God designed that humans enter the world through the most intimate, loving relationship possible—the one-flesh dyad in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Both the Genesis text and nature itself teach us that sex is inherently a procreative act. This does not mean that every sexual act will lead to generation or must aim at generation. It does mean that any sexual act must be in the context of procreation with a willingness to assume the potential fruit that comes from the act. Even if the couple is infertile or beyond childbearing age, they are saying we are entering the kind of act in which we would be willing to bear the potential fruit that comes from this act.

The fact that God created the natural female reproduction cycle with only a small window in the month in which conception can occur demonstrates that sex is for more than procreation. Given our stewardship role within nature, the natural cycle suggests that we are not at the mercy of nature alone in stewarding procreation. That God has ordained sex for more than procreation means the possibility of working within the natural world to steward it, rather than allowing nature itself to become the only determinant of what happens in the fruitfulness of our sexual acts. But the procreative nature of sex means we must be open to its fruitfulness should that occur. It also means that we can never reject the procreative nature of sex in our thinking or in actions that willfully destroy the fruit of our love.

The difference between this position and the traditional Roman Catholic position is the qualified phrase "the context of procreation." Both agree that sex is

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[32] For a helpful overview of these three dimensions and their meaning see Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007) 43–47.

[33] See, e.g., Susan Barker, "Cuddle Hormone: Research Links Oxytocin and Socio-Sexual Behaviors," online at www.oxytocin.org/cuddle-hormone (accessed March 11, 2012).

inherently procreative. The Roman Catholic view argues that in each sexual act one must be open to generation by doing nothing unnatural that would prevent procreation. The view being espoused here is that one must be open to procreation due to sex's inherently procreative nature, but that openness allows for a stewarding intervention into the natural processes.

The third main purpose of sex is love. Sex is not the only means by which we say "I love you," but it is a significant dimension. By nature, humans in a covenant love relationship desire to physically express that love. It is clearly affirmed in Scripture such as in the Song of Songs:

> Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love. Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me (2:3–6).

The church has sometimes found the Song of Songs embarrassing because it has too readily embraced an ethic of asceticism in which the body and its sensual dimensions are suspect and denigrated. In such a context, the Song has frequently been turned into an allegory of God's love for his people or Christ's love for the church—neither of which are warranted exegetically nor evidenced through the rest of Scripture.

The fourth purpose of God's good gift of physical intimacy is pleasure. This, too, is evidenced in the Song of Songs and in other biblical texts such as Prov 5:18–19: "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love." Pleasure is not the invention of the devil, and this dimension of sex is further evidenced in nature. God has created our bodies with certain parts that serve no other function than physical pleasure in sexual intercourse: in the male the glans penis and in the female the clitoris. That God made us that way is clear evidence that in sex we were wired for pleasure, though always in the context of the full purposes of sex.

The key here is that all four purposes be held together in the same context, which only marriage between a man and a woman provides. There may be times in a relationship when one of the purposes is not in conscious view by one or both spouses. For example, one person's emotional or physical state may not exude with love or feelings of pleasure. But the physical act is in the context of the four purposes of one-flesh union, procreation, love, and pleasure. There is an objective reality to sex that transcends the feelings and intentions of the spouses, and this objective reality holds the purposes together in the context of the marriage covenant. As the late Paul Ramsey, ethicist at Princeton University once described it, "An act of sexual intercourse is an act of love. It is also an act of procreation. Whether or not an existing relation between the man and the woman is actually nourished and strengthened by their sexual intercourse, the act itself is an act of

love which has this power. Whether or not a child is engendered, the act is in itself procreative."[34]

Some have argued that the multiple purposes of sex means that the procreative dimension can be laid aside at certain points in the marriage. Stan Grenz once argued such when he wrote, "Because sexual intercourse includes these several meanings, it is too much to demand that the unitive and procreative meanings always be kept together, which demand forms the basis of the major religious objection to birth control. Within marriage the sex act retains its meaning even when no possibility of pregnancy is present."[35]

In contrast, we should understand that every sexual act is in the context of procreation, whether or not a particular couple is fertile and able to bear children. The very nature of sex is generative and even in infertility or old age is an act always looking beyond the self and the couple to others. Society thus has an interest in sex. Its very nature points symbolically and realistically (with of course the already noted exceptions) beyond the relationship to the generation of new life. But within this context, the multiple purposes of sex allow for the possibility of stewarding this dimension of physical intimacy. Contraceptives can be allowed because there are multiple purposes of sex, but the multiple purposes of sex can never be isolated from each other.

III. CONCLUSION

In the 20th century the Protestant church underwent a major shift in thinking and practice in the area of contraception. Unfortunately the shift was undertaken without in-depth theological analysis and guidance. What I have attempted to provide is a theological framework in which we can embrace contraception, not to justify our self-centeredness or sexual appetites, but rather to properly carry out our role as human creatures appointed as God's viceroys on this earth. With the framework of stewardship in nature and the multiple purposes of sex, contraception can be employed for the glory of God, as long as the methods employed do not destroy life or harm the mother, child or the relationship.

The issue at stake here is not just what couples do with regards to contraceptive methods. It is also how we think about the issue. Thinking shaped by an understanding of stewardship in relation to nature, and by a commitment to the multiple purposes of sex in which they are held together, allows us to employ contraceptives, not as a means of autonomous control, but as a stewardship for God's glory, the building-up of the church and service to the human race.

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[34] Paul Ramsey, "A Christian Approach to the Question of Sexual Relations Outside of Marriage," *Journal of Religion* 45 (1965) 100.

[35] Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 152.