

Lesson 11

Birth Control

I. Introduction:

In today's day and age, the major opponent of birth control is the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, understanding their perspective may be helpful in framing the debate.

During the period of the early church, Christians wrestled between two extremes with regard to sex. On the one hand, there was a desire to avoid the promiscuity sanctioned by the Antinomians; on the other, Christians rightfully sensed that complete abstinence advocated by the Gnostics was wrong.

St. Augustine sought to mitigate these concerns by teaching that while the fleshly pleasure of sex satisfied desire; this negative byproduct could be justified by the greater good of procreation. Naturally, this train of thought allowed no room for contraception.

Centuries later, St. Thomas Aquinas reaffirmed Augustine's disdain for birth control. While he did not see the physical pleasure of sex as morally reprehensible, he affirmed that procreation was the primary purpose of sex. Thus, every sexual act had to allow for the potential to conceive. Even sexual union with one's pregnant wife was considered sinful. Thus, the only acceptable means of birth control would be complete abstinence (continence).

Little change occurred in the Catholic position until the 20th century. In 1930 Pope Pius XI published an encyclical¹ which agreed with the previous injunctions against birth control. However, this document did allow for sexual union in marriage where procreation was not possible. His reasoning; while the primary purpose of sex is procreation there exists a secondary purpose in the abatement of lust and fostering mutual love.

In 1932 the Ogino-Knaus published a theory which provided the basis for the rhythm method. It taught that women were only capable of conception during certain times of the month. Consequently with a little planning and a brief period of abstinence a couple could avoid conception. After much thought and investigation, the "Rhythm Method" was endorsed by the Catholic Church.²

1. In light of the above, upon what basis do Catholics oppose birth control?
2. How does their view of sex shape their policy?

¹ *Casti Conubii*

²Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 169

II. The Morality of Contraceptive Means:

A. BIRTH CONTROL METHODS WHICH DO NOT CAUSE ABORTION

1. **Continuous Abstinence** - The only method that is 100% effective at preventing pregnancy and disease.
2. **Periodic Abstinence or Fertility Awareness Methods** - Being abstinent on the days you may be fertile or using a "barrier" method of birth control (condoms, diaphragms, or cervical caps) on fertile days.
3. **The Male Condom** - Prevents sperm from reaching the egg.
4. **The Female Condom** - Worn by the woman, prevents sperm from reaching the egg.
5. **Diaphragm** - A shallow latex cup that prevents sperm from reaching the egg, requires a visit with your health care provider for proper fitting.
6. **Cervical Cap** - A thimble-shaped latex cup that prevents sperm from reaching the egg, requires a visit with your health care provider for proper fitting.
7. **Surgical Sterilization (Tubal Ligation or Vasectomy)** - Permanent surgical methods of birth control. Tubal ligations prevent a woman's eggs from going reaching her uterus. Vasectomies to prevent sperm from entering a woman during intercourse.

B. BIRTH CONTROL METHODS WHICH CAN CAUSE ABORTION

1. **Copper T IUD (Intrauterine Device)** - A small, copper-containing device that is shaped in the form of a "T." and placed inside the uterus by a health care provider. The copper arms prevent fertilization by keeping sperm from entering the fallopian tubes. *If fertilization does occur, the IUD would prevent the fertilized egg from implanting in the lining of the uterus.*
2. **Progestasert IUD (Intrauterine Device)** - A small plastic device that is shaped in the form of a "T." and placed inside the uterus by a health care provider. It contains the hormone progesterone, which causes the cervical mucus to thicken so sperm cannot reach the egg, *and so that a fertilized egg cannot successfully implant into the lining of the uterus.*
3. **The Mini-Pill** - The mini-pill only has one hormone, progestin, instead of both estrogen and progestin. Taken daily, the mini-pill reduces and thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm from reaching the egg. *It also prevents a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus (womb).*
4. **Emergency Contraception** - Consists of taking two doses of hormonal pills taken 12 hours apart and started within three days after having unprotected intercourse *to prevent a potentially fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus.*

C. BIRTH CONTROL METHODS THAT *MIGHT BE ABLE TO CAUSE AN ABORTION*

Within the pro-life community, there is much debate about the methods of birth control listed below. All of them function in basically the same way. They inject into a woman, by a variety of means, two hormones: estrogen and progestin. These work to 1) prevent ovulation, 2) thicken the mucus lining to prevent fertilization, and 3) make the uterus unsuitable for implantation (at least in theory). It is upon this last point where the differences of opinions lie. The first two mechanisms are contraceptive, and the third, if it occurs, is not. If you go to the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists³ website, you will find two different position papers on this subject. One portion of their membership believes that birth control pills are abortifacient, and the other portion believes that, while the condition of the uterus is altered, it does not thereby prevent implantation. If you want to get to the bottom of this issue for the sake of your own conscience, it will take some focused research, beginning with the papers above. Randy Alcorn also has a comprehensive and well-documented book available for purchase or download⁴ that argues that the birth control pill does cause abortions (Alcorn and his wife had used the pill before his painful discovery). If you're not willing to put the time in to research this issue for yourself, or if you start the research and decide there's too much information to sort through for you, there is only one safe conclusion. If you're not convinced in your own mind that the pill is *not* abortifacient, then the only course of action is to not use it.⁵

1. **Oral Contraceptives** - Also called "the pill," delivers hormones orally through a daily pill.
2. **Implant (Norplant and Norplant 2)** - This product was taken off the market in July 2002, delivers hormones via "rods" that are placed under the skin.
3. **Depo-Provera** - Hormones delivered through injections, or shots, in the buttocks or arm every three months.
4. **The Patch (Ortho Evra)** - Hormones delivered through a skin patch worn on the lower abdomen, buttocks, or upper body.
5. **The Hormonal Vaginal Contraceptive Ring (NuvaRing)** - Hormones delivered through a ring that is inserted the vagina for three weeks at a time.

D. If you knew that there was a one percent chance that your chosen birth control method could abort a fertilized egg, what should you do? Why?

E. Because knowledgeable pro-life doctors disagree on the potential for the birth control pill to be an abortifacient, how would you advise someone to proceed when considering whether or not to take it?

³ <http://www.aaplog.org/>

⁴ http://www.epm.org/books/does_the_birth_control_pill_cause_abortionsDetail.php

⁵ http://www.abort73.com/?/abortion_facts/which_birth_control_methods_cause_abortion/

Romans 14:5 One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.

III. The Two Christian Schools of Thought:

- A. **Against contraception:** Those who affirm so-called natural family planning believe that every act of sexual union should be open to the possibility of procreation. From this viewpoint, no method of birth control is allowed that either presents a barrier to fertilization or introduces hormones that make the uterus inhospitable to a maturing embryo.
- B. **Unopposed to contraception:** Other Christians believe that contraception may be used to limit the number of children born to a family as long as the method is not abortifacient (i.e., something that causes an abortion).⁶

IV. Against Contraception:

- A. **Natural Law:** Natural law dictates that everything in the universe has a final cause. When we look at God’s design for the sexual organs, we see that their “final cause” is the procreation of human beings. God created sex for the purpose of procreation. Following this logic, we should abstain from contraceptives because they inhibit our sexual organs from fulfilling their natural function.
- B. **Biblical Arguments:**

1. *Genesis 1:28 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.”*
 - How could this passage justify the prohibition of contraception?
2. *Genesis 38:6-10* ⁶ Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” ⁹ Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother’s wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰ But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.
 - How could this passage justify the prohibition of contraception?

⁶ <http://www.esvstudybible.org/articles/ethics>

3. *Deuteronomy 23:1* “No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.

- How could this passage justify the prohibition of contraception?

C. Contraception and Other Issues Related to Sexual Immorality: There is a concern that the church has drunk the Kool-Aid of the sexual revolution. Birth control has been key and crucial in changing our society’s sexual mores, as couples can now engage in intercourse without consequence. It used to be that the couples understood the potential of the act and would exercise greater caution in proceeding with it. But with the onset of effective contraception, promiscuity has little consequence. Sex can mean anything or nothing.

- According to this train of thought, why should we discourage the use of birth control?

D. Health Concerns: Some reject artificial contraceptive devices on the ground that many of them have negative side effects on health. For example, IUDs facilitate pelvic infections and occasionally perforate the uterus. They are also associated with ectopic pregnancies and spontaneous abortions. Birth control pills can cause such problems as breakthrough bleeding, nausea, breast tenderness and weight gain. They can also cause even more serious problems such as blood clots. The likelihood of these problems occurring increases for women over thirty-five. While these risks are generally low enough that many women consider the advantages to outweigh them, some feminist groups view the risks as unnecessary. Other forms of contraception do not have such adverse side effects and do not put such a burden on women. It is also argued that the increase in birth control devices (especially the pill) may be tied to the rise of venereal disease.⁷

V. Unopposed to Contraception:

A. Response to Natural Law: Natural law -- while helpful -- has its limitations. The natural course of nature is not necessarily superior to the “unnatural” way. This comes into the play when we look at the curse.

Genesis 3:16: To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you.”

⁷Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 173

1. If we accept what is “natural” how would we advise a pregnant mother considering an epidural to alleviate the pain of labor?
2. How might the following verse change our perspective on “technology”?

Genesis 1:28 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.”

What is natural is not necessarily what is preferred. In addition, it is tenuous to draw ethical convictions based upon natural phenomena. For instance, what are we to make of the fact that many women are aroused during periods when childbearing is impossible? Does this natural order suggest that there might be an additional purpose for sex?

B. Biblical Arguments:

As with all created things, God has an expressed purpose for sex within marriage.

1. Gen. 1:27-28:

²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 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.”

- a. According to this passage what is the purpose of sex?
- b. Is the command “*be fruitful and multiply*” a universal command? Does it apply to every post pubescent human on the planet? Why or why not? (Hint: Think through some biblical examples).

2. Gen. 2:18-25:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.”

- How does this passage broaden God’s design for sex?

3. *Genesis 38:6-10* ⁶ Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹ Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰ But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.

- a. What was Onan's "duty" to his brother (v. 8)?
- b. Why did Onan waste his seed (v. 9)?
- c. Why is it dubious to claim that this passage forbids birth control?

Note: Onan was willing enough to marry his brother's wife and have sexual relations with her as the law demanded. However, by practicing *coitus interruptus* he showed his displeasure with the idea of raising up seed to his brother, seed for whom he would be personally responsible. He showed no concern for his brother or his brother's wife. His only concern was his own pleasure. In response to this perversion of the levirate institution, God killed him.⁸

4. *Deuteronomy 23:1* "No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.

- Does this passage necessarily forbid sterilization? Why or why not? Consider the note below:

Note: Eunuchs were forbidden because such willful mutilation (lit. in Heb., by crushing, which was the way such an act was generally performed) violated God's creation of man, was associated with idolatrous practices and was done by pagan parents to their children so that they might serve as eunuchs in the homes of the great (*cf. 25:11, 12*).⁹

⁸Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 177

lit. literally

Heb. Hebrew

⁹MacArthur, John Jr: *The MacArthur Study Bible*. electronic ed. Nashville : Word Pub., 1997, c1997, S. Dt 23:1

4. *Proverbs 5:15-19*

Drink water from your own cistern And fresh water from your own well. ¹⁶ Should your springs be dispersed abroad, Streams of water in the streets? ¹⁷ Let them be yours alone And not for strangers with you. ¹⁸ Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of your youth. ¹⁹ As a loving hind and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be exhilarated always with her love.

- How does this passage mitigate against the notion that sex is only for procreation?

5. *1 Corinthians 7:2-5:*

But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. ³ The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

- a. Why does Paul command the Corinthians to stop depriving each other?
- b. In view of the above answer what does this passage teach us about the purpose of sex?

C. Response To Contraception and Other Issues Related to Sexual Immorality:

1. If it is shown that automobiles are often associated with bank robberies, should we come to the conviction that automobiles are wrong? Why or why not?
2. Besides “promiscuity” what are some other usages of birth control? Consider the following passage?

1 Timothy 5:8 But 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.

D. Response to Health Concerns:

When birth control devices cause negative side effects, those who clearly understand those commands to be a good steward of their earthly body must cease and desist. In addition, if the birth control method aborts a fertilized egg, it terminates human life making its use morally wrong. Yet, the presence of such dangers rules out some methods of birth control, but certainly not all.

VI. Thought Question:

How would you respond to the objection, “*Psalm 127:3 and 5* state, ‘*Behold, children are a gift of the LORD; The fruit of the womb is a reward. . . How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; They shall not be ashamed, When they speak with their enemies in the gate.*’ Birth control prevents God from giving you little blessings”?

A. Does *Psalm 127* command couples to have children? Why or why not?

B. Consider the following passage:

Psalm 37:11 But the humble will inherit the land, And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

1. How does the psalmist regard prosperity?

2. Does this statement imply that we should do whatever we can to acquire more wealth?

C. Does the blessed nature of something mandate that we do all we can to have more?

D. Why is it dangerous to take a truth, such as the blessing of children, and translate it into a command that prohibits birth control?

VII. Conclusion:

In sum, nothing scriptural or otherwise prohibits all forms of birth control. In various circumstances (e.g., when there is the potential of transmitting a genetic disease or when the purpose of sex is something other than procreation), birth control is morally *permissible*. Contraception is seldom morally *obligatory*, though one might argue to mandate it in some instances to avoid the condemnation of **1 Tim 5:8**. On the other hand, contraceptive methods that are equivalent to abortion are not permissible. Finally, there are cases where failure to have children seems wrong. For example, when a couple has no children, no medical reason to avoid children, and is fully capable of conceiving and raising children but for purely selfish reasons (perhaps unwillingness to give up their freedom and take on the responsibility of children) or for fear of bringing children into such an evil world as ours refuses to have children, the practice of birth control is improperly motivated. Such couples should be encouraged to have children.¹⁰

¹⁰Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 179