

## **CHRISTIANS AND CONTRACEPTION: Convenience or Kingdom Thinking?**

**by Bart Garrett**

For you, does God ever become an afterthought? Sometimes I live my life bouncing from one thing to the next, making weighty decisions, moving forward on certain issues, and then occasionally I will pause to think, “Wait one minute... Where is God in all of this?” For so many of us who earnestly seek to live out the Christian faith, we think of God and his will as being “foundational,” undergirding all our actions and decisions. Yet foundations are unseen, they are taken for granted — when was the last time you went to a friend’s new house for dinner and stood outside the front door admiring the beauty and craftsmanship of the foundation? Likewise, God gets left out.

I found this to be true as Katie and I prepared to be married and the question of contraception, or family planning, arose. Unfortunately, in our decision to use a birth control pill, God was not consulted, nor were the ethical implications weighed. I was beginning graduate school, we were twenty-two years old, and the issues were matters of convenience and comfort: we certainly could not afford kids at this stage in life. Yet, about a year later, after a conversation with a friend, I was prompted to re-evaluate our decision to use birth control,<sup>1</sup> and more specifically, to investigate where God fit, or did not fit, into our family equation. One evening, in a time of prayer, I confessed to my Lord that I had not acknowledged him concerning this issue and I pleaded for his forgiveness. As Christians our highest calling is to bring God glory, and this responsibility is to be carried forth in all areas of our lives. Paul says it best in his first letter to those in the church of Corinth, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> God’s glory is at stake even in the mundane acts of eating and drinking, and so our lives should always be affixed upon bringing God the glory, or honor, or prestige, that is rightfully his. Thus, it is not foolish but prudent to ask ourselves, “How might we even drink orange juice to the glory of God?”

When Katie and I were preparing to leave seminary, our marriage looked like a 5,000 piece Jigsaw puzzle that had been dumped all over the floor. We were preparing to leave dear friends; we were selling one house and buying another one; we were leaving jobs; and Katie was due at any moment with our first child. It was stressful to say the least! One night the pressure became so great that it felt unbearable. We both began to panic, and felt as if life were about to spin out of control. As we began to share with one another, we discovered that this was exactly our problem. Both of us are, to use the cliché, “control freaks,” and our lives, because of the change and busyness, had become uncontrollable. Later that night, after the meltdown, Katie and I envisioned ourselves kneeling before the throne of our Father, casting our cares and anxieties one by one upon him. As Katie and I took turns releasing our fears to God, it dawned on me,

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<sup>1</sup> This term is the common term used to describe contraception, and this should tell us something. Our tendency is to be in control of everything that happens in our lives, when God demands surrender.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 10:31 (NIV).

“When we give God our worries, we are in fact giving him gifts, packages wrapped in beautiful wrapping paper and held together by elegant bows.” How can this be? Well, when God calls us to himself, he calls us to a life of full submission and surrender, to a life that is out of our control. When we attempt to control our own circumstances, God does not get the glory, yet when we relinquish control and rightfully give it back to God, then we are presenting him with precious gifts that bring him joy. Remember the words of our Savior: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus desires to bear our burdens, and he demonstrates this ultimately by bearing our cross!

Thus, my purpose in writing paper is two-fold. First, hopefully, I have underscored the supremacy that God should hold in *all* the decisions we make and things we do. More specifically, I want to challenge young married couples to evaluate their use of contraception not on the standard of personal convenience or comfort, but on the Word of God, desiring to bring him the glory due his name. Second, I want to explore the ethical implications involved in the use of contraception, as this is a question often raised by thoughtful and considerate Christian couples.

## What Is Ethical?

John Frame says that “the purpose of Scripture is ethical.”<sup>4</sup> Romans 15:4 and 2 Timothy 3:16,17 attest that the function of the Bible is to instruct and teach us how to live. More broadly, all of life is ethical. Our decisions, our behaviors, our thoughts, our involvement with other people — everything that we do carries with it an ethical or moral element. Frame teaches that three factors are in interplay as we strive to make proper ethical judgments: the world, the Law (Scripture), and the self. The world could be defined as the circumstances or present situations in which we live. The Law is the norm or standard or rule that governs our living. The self is our very existence, who we are and what we do. Thus, it is helpful when dealing with ethical quandaries or value judgments to ask three questions:

- 1) What is the situation, problem, or issue? (The World)
- 2) What does God’s Word say concerning it? (The Scripture)
- 3) What is my attitude? Do I have the maturity to make the right decision, the spiritual capacity to apply God’s Word to the situation? (The Self)<sup>5</sup>

Frame summarizes this interplay quite concisely when he writes, “In general, ethical judgment always involves the *application of a norm to a situation by a person.*”<sup>6</sup> Our discussion on family planning or contraception will adopt this paradigm.

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<sup>3</sup> Matt. 11:28-30

<sup>4</sup> Frame, John. *Pastoral and Social Ethics: An Outline*. (pg. 1 given in lecture at RTS, spring 2001)

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to John Frame and his teaching concerning how one may go about making ethical decisions or value judgments.

<sup>6</sup> Frame, John. *Pastoral and Social Ethics: An Outline*. (pg. 5 given in lecture at RTS, spring 2001)

## What Is the Situation? What Are the Issues? (The World)

A plethora of questions surface in regard to the issue of contraception and its ethical implications. Is it permissible to limit our family to *no* children at all? Or, does marriage constitute a willingness to bear children?<sup>7</sup> Is contraception a means that God gives us in order to free us up for greater service in his kingdom? What is the purpose of marriage? What is the purpose of sex itself? Is its only purpose procreation? If not, is procreation a major purpose? What role does the family play in God's plan?<sup>8</sup> Are some contraceptive devices abortive? Does God command us to procreate, or does he bless us with the gift of procreation? As one can see, this lone issue of contraception bears many questions of ethical consequence. These questions will be addressed in due course, but for now we will look at the norms of Scripture and what they teach on this topic.

## What Does God's Word Say about Contraception or Family Planning? (The Scripture)

I remember attending a worship service several years ago where a notable figure in college athletics was speaking. At one point during his message, he lifted his black leather Bible over his head and exclaimed, "This is life's playbook. Everything you need to know about life is found in this little black book." Of course, there is a sense in which this is a true statement. God's special revelation to us is whole and perfect, and does indeed accomplish the task of teaching us everything we need to know for life and godliness.<sup>9</sup> Yet, we must also admit that the Bible was written in an ancient time to a foreign people and concerned itself with circumstances, which today often seem strange to us. As Frame puts it, "Belief in biblical authority does not ... make everything simple."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, with God as our supreme, ethical standard, we trust that the Holy Spirit will direct us to make the necessary personal and epochal adjustments in deriving from the Scriptures useful applications concerning the use of contraception. Below I have listed the Scriptures that tend to surface in the study of this topic, and a comment or two about each of them:

### Genesis 1:28

This passage is commonly referred to as the "cultural mandate" wherein God calls Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." Herein arise two of the aforementioned questions. First, is this statement a command or a blessing? Second, what are God's purposes for sex, and more broadly for the

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<sup>7</sup> Paraphrase from "Is Birth Control Christian?" *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Grenz, Stanley. "Family Planning and the People of God," as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 35.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Pet. 1:3

<sup>10</sup> Frame, John. *Medical Ethics*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, pg. 4.

marriage relationship? Mary Pride, who has written extensively on home school advocacy and against the use of contraception,<sup>11</sup> says that Genesis 1:28 is a command, a mandate given by God calling his people to take part in physical and spiritual procreation. However, many theologians tend to note otherwise. For instance, Calvin Seminary's Raymond Van Leeuwen responds, "There are many things that can be said in response [to Mary Pride], but only one comment is essential, because it is utterly decisive: Genesis 1:28 is not a commandment, but a blessing... The text says, 'God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply."'"<sup>12</sup> Note also, M. O. Vincent's comments in a 1968 issue of *Christianity Today*. "Here we note that 'be fruitful and multiply' was given by God more as a blessing than a commandment, and certainly not as a curse... But God did not say whether we were to multiply by one, two or ten."<sup>13</sup> In addition to these comments, many reputable commentaries on Genesis (e.g. Keil/Delitzsch and John Calvin) attest to Genesis 1:28 being a blessing rather than a command. To be precise, the verbs are actually in the imperative mood, but an imperative may express varying degrees of volition, including a command, an expression of desire, an encouragement, etc. Further, the context does not permit us to take these words as a hard and fast requirement. They are meant as a blessing.<sup>14</sup> Finally, this statement is repeated by God in Genesis 9:1 and Genesis 35:11, both times in the context of blessing (blessing of Noah and Jacob).

Before we move on to the second question that this passage poses concerning the role of sex in marriage, we would be remiss not to mention one author's pertinent words concerning the proper application of Scripture in the context of a fallen world. Patricia Goodson, in writing on Genesis 1:28, notes that because this blessing was given to man before the Fall, it was God's untarnished and unblemished ideal for mankind. Now, in our state of fallenness, our actions are carried out "between God's ideal for mankind, and the circumstances and motivations generated by sin."<sup>15</sup> The "cultural mandate" or "cultural blessing" not only proclaims procreation, but also calls us to exercise dominion or authority or control over the creation. And so, while these two (dominion and procreation) are granted to us as complementary blessings, in a fallen world, they might sometimes operate as antagonists.

Allow me to explain by way of illustration. Let us suppose that the selfishness and gluttony of mankind has produced a scarcity of natural resources including water and food.<sup>16</sup> Thus, tension arises between the two blessings of God. On the one hand,

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance: *Let God Plan Your Family*.

<sup>12</sup> Van Leeuwen, Raymond C. "Breeding Stock or Lords of Creation," as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent, M. O., "A Christian View of Contraception," *Christianity Today*, Volume 13 (1968), pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, obeying God's commands is always a blessing.

<sup>15</sup> Goodson, Patricia. *Ethics of Contraception: A Recurring Debate*. Presbyterian. Volume 18: 34-49, pg. 44.

<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy here to mention that particularly in the 1950s and 1960s when much attention was given to the scare of overpopulation, many theologians strongly advocated birth control in an effort to control the rising population. See for example: Jewett, Paul King; "A Case for Birth Control," *Christian Century*, May 24, 1961. Volume: 78: 651,652. New statistics of the 1980s and 1990s would lead us to believe that the world is really not in danger of becoming overcrowded as some once thought.

God wants us to be fruitful and multiply, but on the other hand, God wants us to exercise prudent and wise management over his world. Thus, exercising dominion may be the proper understanding of the limitations of our world's natural resources and thus, making the choice to limit family size. Thus, careful prayer and discernment are essential in understanding the post-Fall relationship between these two blessings.

The second question that often arises upon discussion of this passage is the question, "What are the biblical purposes for Christian marriage?" Many advocate that because Genesis 1:28 is a "creation ordinance," the task of procreation or reproduction should be given primacy over the other aspects of marriage. Paul Jewett, a well-known commentator, remarks on Genesis 1:28 and reminds his readers that the Bible "is indeed the word of God today as when it was first given. It is therefore a sin to seek the treats of married love and to shun the responsibility of parenthood."<sup>17</sup> Our heritage of great Christian thinkers like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin shared the same sentiment: we should not enjoy the pleasures of sex aside from the responsibility of parenthood. Yet, the question remains, if it were a possibility in their day to limit the size of one's family or to delay the bearing of offspring for a season, would these men have thought otherwise? They operated in a time and context that unhealthily looked at sex as a base, physical pleasure that carried with it spiritual detriments.

Bruce Waltke, one of my professors in seminary, in an article entitled "The Old Testament and Birth Control," wrote of four gifts or blessings from God that one receives in marriage: company (Gen. 2:18; Ps. 68:6); unity (Gen. 2:24); pleasure (Gen. 3:16; Eccl. 9:9); and procreation (Gen. 1:28; Gen. 9:1,7; Jer. 31:27; 8:17; Ps. 128:3).<sup>18</sup> I would encourage the reader to take the time to study the aforementioned verses. The blessings in marriage are manifold, and are certainly even more numerous than the four mentioned here. More specifically, the act of sex itself is not solely an act of procreation. The Song of Solomon should attune us to this in that all eight of its chapters deal with sexual pleasure and fulfillment, yet nothing is mentioned about the purpose of procreation. Writer Stanley Grenz enlightens us concerning some of the other functions of sex: "sexual intercourse can fulfill other functions. It can serve as a beautiful statement of the covenant between husband and wife, as the reenactment, reaffirmation, and embodiment of the marriage vow. Or it can function as a celebrative expression of the submission of the partners to each other in all areas of marital life."<sup>19</sup>

To note an additional opinion, John Frame, my ethics professor in seminary, believes that "procreation in Scripture is not the only function of sexual activity, nor is it clearly a necessary function (else we would expect prohibitions against sexual activity

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<sup>17</sup> Jewett, Paul King. "A Case for Birth Control," *Christian Century*, May 24, 1961. Volume: 78: 651,652. (Note that in this article, Jewett is actually making a case for birth control, but raises this point here to demonstrate that some motivations for practicing birth control are good, while others may not be (i.e. to control the world's increasing population versus sheer convenience).)

<sup>18</sup> Waltke, Bruce K. "The Old Testament and Birth Control," *Christianity Today*. Volume 13:3-6, November 8, 1968, pg. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz, Stanley. "Family Planning and the People of God," as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 38.

for women following menopause, etc.).”<sup>20</sup> Like menopause, there are other situations that may inhibit a married couple from procreating. Perhaps the couple is inexplicably sterile, or perhaps a couple shares a genetic code that would make reproduction unsafe or unhealthy for the progeny. Scripture clearly exhibits other functions of sex and marriage, and our personal experience demonstrates that some couples could not or should not bear children. Therefore, we cannot make the sweeping statement that procreation is the necessary or sole function of sex in marriage.

### **Genesis 38:8-10**

*“Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.’ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so he put him to death also.”*

Many opponents of birth control cite this passage as a judgment of God against Onan’s contraceptive act. However, upon closer examination we see that in fact God probably did not punish Onan for the act itself, but rather for the attitude of his heart. The context mentions the thoughts of Onan, that he “knew that the offspring would not be his, so ... he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother.” We might speculate that Moses mentioned Onan’s thoughts, and not merely his actions, in an effort to explain why God put him to death. If this act of contraception were punishable by death in and of itself, then there would be no need to explain Onan’s train of thought, i.e. that he envied his brother, and did not want to grant him the honor and respect of being a father. In this scenario, the Israelite readers would have known why God killed Onan: because the spilling of seed was punishable by death. Onan’s thoughts would not need to be mentioned. Yet, this does not appear to have been the case. Moses needed to explain Onan’s heart in order to justify God’s action of putting him to death; spilling semen is not in and of itself a sin.<sup>21</sup>

### **Isaiah 14:27 and Psalm 127:3-5**

*“For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” (Isa. 14:27).*

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<sup>20</sup> Frame, John. *Pastoral and Social Ethics* (Course Outline), pg. 228.

<sup>21</sup> I say this knowing that John Calvin, the greatest theologian in the history of the Christian Church, mentions in his commentary on Genesis that God was displeased with both of the actions of Onan — that he would harbor envy toward his brother in his heart and that he would spill his seed. But, as aforementioned, Calvin’s writings circulated in the church when it was believed that the supreme role and function of marriage was for the procreation of the world. In addition to this, ever since Augustine in the fourth century, sex was depicted in the church as being dirty and the physical pleasures that came from the sex act were equated with wantonness or immorality. Thus, sex only served the function of reproduction. We know from further study today, that sex is a beautiful act to be enjoyed in the context of the marriage relationship.

*“Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate” (Ps. 127:3-5).*

Lastly, the idea of God's sovereignty explicated by these passages in Isaiah and Psalms is appealed to in much of the writing used to oppose contraception. For instance, Mary Pride writes that if God displays his sovereignty by blessing humans with children, then we “usurp God's sovereignty” when we limit the number of children we bear or even space them out in an ordered fashion. Pride says that when we thwart God's sovereignty, we are “limiting God's opportunities to choose the best children for us.”<sup>22</sup> Yet Raymond Van Leeuwen points out that this is a mistaken notion of God's providence. He writes, “If God can use evil to accomplish good (Gen. 45:5-8), he can certainly use human actions that are morally neutral. God's sovereignty works in and through human actions and, if necessary, in spite of them.”<sup>23</sup> Now, whether or not human actions can ever be “morally neutral” is another issue altogether, but suffice it to say that the point is well taken. Anyone who equates the use of contraception with an effort to usurp God's sovereignty is ignorant of the omnipotence and sovereignty of God. God's decrees and his sovereign control and authority over his creation cannot and will not be thwarted by anyone or anything, whether good or evil.

### **Excursus: Is All Contraception “Safe” for the Christian?**

I have attempted to prove Biblically and practically that family planning or the use of contraception is, in the very least, permissible for the Christian. I am not a staunch advocate for birth control, nor do I disagree with those who use it (I myself have used it), so I remain content in saying that its use is permissible. However, in our day and age, with all of its medical “advancements,” more ethical issues arise that complicate the landscape of family planning. It is prudent and pertinent for us as Christians to be aware of the different techniques and methods of contraception, and of the different ramifications associated with each. Many contraceptives that are readily available either by prescription or over-the-counter are, in effect, abortive substances. The term “contraception,” for many of these substances, is in fact a misnomer. By definition “contraception” refers to a substance or method that actually prevents conception, or the union of a sperm and egg to form a zygote. However, this prevention does not always occur, and some “contraceptive” devices or substances actually abort a zygote or embryo after fertilization has occurred. The discussion that follows is limited to the most common methods of birth control in our day, and whether or not they may be abortive.

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<sup>22</sup> Van Leeuwen, Raymond C. “Breeding Stock or Lords of Creation,” as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Van Leeuwen, Raymond C. “Breeding Stock or Lords of Creation,” as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 37.

## The IUD

The Intrauterine Device, or IUD, is a device that a doctor inserts into the womb. It is *not* a contraceptive. By this I mean that it does not prevent fertilization, nor does it disrupt the menstrual cycle. Instead it “creates a hostile environment by irritating and thinning the endometrium, the lining of the uterus.”<sup>24</sup> The report goes on to say, “Such a state of irritation leaves the uterine wall unprepared for the process of implantation when a newly conceived baby attempts to cleave to the wall of the uterus.” Thus, this method of contraception is actually abortive and should be avoided by Christians because it results in the destruction of an unborn child.

Here, it is important to note that medicine is “practice,” and that it is not a precise science. As we investigate many of these different birth control techniques, the verdict is still out on their abortifacient mechanisms, as *many* doctors on *many* sides are saying *many* different things about the mechanics of *many* different substances and devices. For example, much literature written on the IUD suggests that the copper enzyme actually kills the sperm, thus inhibiting fertilization. Yet, G. D. Searle, a company that sells this device, readily admits that its function is not contraceptive, but abortive: “The action of the IUDs would seem to be a simple local phenomenon. That these devices prevent nidation [implantation] of an already fertilized ovum has been accepted as the most likely mechanism of action.”<sup>25</sup> Please do not use my research as definitive. Diligently research a particular method of birth control that you might wish to use — ask a Christian doctor whom you respect what he thinks.

## Depo-Provera and RU-486

While RU-486 (commonly called the “day after pill”) has been grabbing the headlines of late, Depo-Provera is the more common of these two “anti-progesterones.” This form of contraception can be delivered orally, vaginally, or by injection. While RU-486 has been proven abortive and should be avoided by Christians, the verdict is still out on Depo-Provera. Some doctors say that it suppresses ovulation (contraceptive) while others contend that it creates a hostile environment in the uterus, ultimately starving the fertilized egg or zygote (abortive). This ambiguity should prompt Christians to avoid its usage.

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<sup>24</sup> This quote and other thoughts in this section on the medical ethics associated with contraception were taken from research done in an article entitled, “Understanding ‘Birth Control:’ What Every Christian Counselor Should Know” (<http://www.trosch.org/rwd/brthcntl.htm>), put out by the Christian Center For Bio-Ethics, P.O. Box 13656, Portland, OR 97213.

<sup>25</sup> Searle Laboratories, “For the patient: CU-7 brand of Intrauterine Copper Contraceptive,” Chicago: G.D. Searle Co., August 1, 1977, Pgs. 7-9.

## Norplant

Norplant is also an anti-progesterone drug. Like Depo-Provera, its mechanism might suppress ovulation, but could also cause irritation in the uterus, thereby starving the child. In addition to what seems to be an abortive act (irritating the uterus), many side effects (vision, migraines, and brain tumors) have been documented with the use of Norplant. The drug is actually ingested into the body through an implant usually under the arm, and can cause pain to the user. Because its precise action is unknown and side effects are so common, I would avoid using Norplant as a “safe” form of contraception.

## The Pill

The birth control pill is the most common use of birth control. The pill comes in two predominant forms, the progestogen only pill and the combination pill (estrogen/progestogen). The *Physicians Desk Reference* is the most used reference tool for medical personnel. It states definitively that the progestogen pill does not prohibit conception, making it an abortifacient. So, the only pill that we will even consider here is the combination pill. Yet, note *The Physicians' Desk Reference* statement on this pill: “Combination oral contraceptives act by suppression of gonadotropins. Although the primary mechanism of this action is inhibition of ovulation, other alterations include changes in the cervical mucus (which increase the difficulty of sperm entry into the uterus) and the endometrium (which reduce the likelihood of implantation).”<sup>26</sup> This is where ethical lines get fuzzy. Many Christian doctors affirm that the combination pill is a “safe” form of birth control. However, others are concerned because it is unclear as to how the pill actually works. These doctors affirm the *Physicians Desk Reference* in citing that the primary action of the birth control pill is the inhibition of ovulation, yet the two other mechanisms, the thickening of the cervical mucus (prohibiting the life of sperm in the uterus) and the creation of a hostile environment in the uterus by thinning the endometrium, are also viable actions. Unfortunately, the last of these three actions is an abortive measure, which may occur 2% to 10% of the time.

In conclusion, with reference to the pill, what is *not* clear is how the pill actually works all of the time.<sup>27</sup> Thus, prayer and discernment are integral as a couple evaluates whether or not the pill should be used. On a personal note, Katie and I, as aforementioned, did make use of the combination pill for the first two years that we were married. However, after studying the data and wrestling with the Lord, I do not think we could use the pill anymore in good conscience or recommend it to others until further study is done. I say this with great hesitancy for fear that I may unwittingly bind the

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<sup>26</sup> *Physicians Desk Reference*, 55<sup>th</sup> edition, 2001, pg. 3397. (Special thanks to fellow seminary student Frank Cavalli who brought this source to my attention.)

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the aforementioned articles, much of my information was obtained via my brother-in-law, Dr. Scott St. Clair, who is a pediatrician at the University of Cincinnati Hospital. Scott also works with other Christian doctors at a medical clinic in downtown Cincinnati, providing medical care usually associated with pregnancy and contraception for those living in the inner city.

conscience of someone else, and also because the pill is so convenient and provides such a natural feel to the practice of birth control. When wrestling with issues of life and death while swimming in a sea of ethical ambiguity, my personal conviction is to tend toward a conservative side that is sure to preserve life rather than a more liberated approach that might very well be condoning the death of the unborn. Pray, study, and pray some more — may God grant you peace of mind and conscience whatever your decision might be.

### **One Last Consideration as We Explore Medical Advancement: The Beginning of Life**

The other factor in this medical discussion is when life actually begins. The above discussion on some of the different birth control measures assumes that life begins upon the fertilization of an egg by the sperm, what we call “conception.” Yet, the opinion on the beginning of life even among Christian doctors is quite varied. There is a phenomenon called, “twinning,” which is the unjoining of the egg and sperm that can occur until the third week of pregnancy. For this to occur, it is argued, demonstrates that the early formation of the zygote does not necessitate the presence of a living soul. In lieu of this observation, one Christian doctor, Dr. Shirley Barron, takes an interesting approach to the beginning of life. She writes, “I am intrigued by still another possibility, one perhaps hinted at by the Old Testament statement that ‘the life of every creature is its blood’ (Lev. 17:14). Could it be that individual life begins when the first primitive blood cells form, sometime in the fourth week after conception?”<sup>28</sup> She contends that during this time “cells, which will be able to carry oxygen, have begun to differentiate. These become primitive blood cells and begin to show traces of hemoglobin between days 23 and 25.”<sup>29</sup> Barron does not elaborate on the probability of this, but simply uses it to demonstrate that the waters are a bit muddy in regard to the question of the beginning of life. Some other factors that may suggest that life begins around the fourth week after conception are listed below:

- 1) About 50 percent of all fertilized eggs (zygotes) are abnormal. Most of these survive a few days, then disappear.
- 2) Mechanical or hormonal problems may make it impossible for zygotes to implant in the uterus, and they fall out within a week or so.
- 3) The aforementioned, “twinning.”

Again, my remarks here are far from definitive. These issues are ambiguous enough to warrant careful examination and fervent prayer. At this point in my investigation I am convinced that life begins at conception. The words of Psalm 139:13 and Jeremiah 1:5 are latent with language demonstrating God’s intimate knowledge of

<sup>28</sup>Barron, Shirley L. “Searching for Life’s Beginning,” as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 41.

<sup>29</sup>Barron, Shirley L. “Searching for Life’s Beginning,” as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 41.

us even before we were knit together in the womb. Frame affirms this position in his book *Medical Ethics*: “There is *nothing* in Scripture that even remotely suggests that the unborn child is anything *less than a human person from the moment of conception*.”<sup>30</sup> Until strong, persuasive medical evidence suggests otherwise, we as Christians should feel confident in affirming that life begins at the union of sperm and egg.

### **How should we evaluate this? What should our attitude be? (The Self)**

We have seen that, biblically speaking, the use of contraception is permissible. We have shown that the act of sex in marriage is not limited to the purpose of procreation, and thus that choosing to regulate reproduction is not in and of itself an immoral decision. However, modern medicine has developed the use of techniques that are deceptive in their nomenclature. Many are not actually contraceptive because they do not prevent conception from occurring, thus making them abortive. Christian doctors disagree on which forms of birth control might be abortive and which are “safe.” Thus, our ethical evaluations must be wise and guided by prayer. How should we then live? Frame often made a great statement in our Ethics classes in seminary: “Our goal is not to be as conservative as possible, nor to be as liberal as possible, but to be as biblical as possible.” Hopefully, this will be our mindset: that we would shirk the “party line,” and not concern ourselves with being labeled but with being godly.

I began this paper talking about my wife and I and our pilgrimage toward relinquishing control over our lives to God, and I plead with the reader to do the same. The voice of our culture that has seeped into the church beckons us toward ease, comfort, convenience, indulgence, and efficiency. Are any of these things innately bad? No. Yet, all must be subjected to the Lordship of Christ — none of us has the option of serving two masters.<sup>31</sup> The lies of the culture are widespread. Note the attitude conveyed in the following quote: “Others [Evangelicals], who may have drunk still more deeply at the springs of culture, have chosen to delay or avoid having children in order to establish themselves professionally and financially. For them, it seems, children are not always blessings, but are often hurdles in the hasty race toward success.”<sup>32</sup> In a “jet-pace” world, we all fall prey to this temptation. One writer comments, “The ease with which American Christians have begun to fend off children betrays a selfishness that corrupts our sense of Christian marriage.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps some great questions for reflection might be: If we found out tomorrow that we were pregnant, what would our attitude toward our baby be? What would our attitude toward God be? Would we balk at God’s sovereignty? Would we question his timing?

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<sup>30</sup> Frame, John. *Medical Ethics*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988, pg. 95.

<sup>31</sup> Matt. 6:24

<sup>32</sup> “Is Birth Control Christian?” *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Burtchaell, James Tunstead. “Make Room for Baby,” as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 44.

“Children are burdens. They are the heaviest burdens, since you can never calculate or control just what they are going to require from you?”<sup>34</sup> Instead of sighing when we read this statement, perhaps we should recognize that burdens usually become blessings in regard to our sanctification. God uses circumstances beyond our control to control us, and in effect to make us more like Christ. Think about the grace, compassion, forgiveness, and attitude of sacrifice that the Holy Spirit developed in you as you passed from singleness to marriage. Is he not also capable of doing this with children? Do not fall into the trap that Katie and I fell into early in our marriage, the trap that brings the false assurance that you are in control of your future. Do you find yourself responding to questions about your future family with answers like, “Well, we are going to wait three years, and then we will start having kids. We will space our kids 2.5 years apart and we will have four of them, two boys and two girls, alternating in gender”? If so, perhaps you have yet to attain to the maturity in Christ that would merit your practice of birth control. Remember, Paul said that while all things are permissible, not everything is beneficial.<sup>35</sup> Applied here, this means that if you cannot relinquish your future and your control of that future to God, then while birth control is ethically permissible, for you it is not beneficial. Perhaps it is time for us as a generation of young married couples to fall on our faces before a Sovereign and Good King and to ask him what we should do. It is time for us to be motivated by the desire to see God glorified and his Kingdom extended, and not by the convenience of our culture. Is birth control permissible? Yes, I think so. Is it always best? Of course not. Is it right for you, right here, right now, this way?<sup>36</sup> This is a question that you must answer for yourself, in the posture of humility before our wise Father and loving Lord. May God grant you His Spirit of grace as you wrestle with this issue under the Lordship of Christ.

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<sup>34</sup> Burtchaell, James Tunstead. “Make Room for Baby,” as found in a symposium on contraception in *Christianity Today*. Volume 35: 34-45, 11 November 1991, pg. 44.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor. 6:12

<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor. 6:12