

Should Christian Couples Use Contraception?

What the Bible, the Church's Witness, and Natural Law Have to Say about
Birth Control



by

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Introduction: *Don't Roman Catholics Believe That?*

The purpose of marriage is not to have pleasure and to be idle but to procreate and bring up children.

Birth control, that is, the frustration of conception or the limitation of the number of children by the use of artificial means, by drugs or unnatural practices, is a sin that has become widespread in modern civilization.

Everyone knows that the Roman Catholic Church is against contraception. So it would be reasonable to assume that the authors of the above quotations are Roman Catholics. But that is not the case. The author of the first quote is none other than Martin Luther¹ himself and the second quotation is from Dr. John H. C. Fritz, a professor at the Missouri Synod's seminary in St. Louis during the 1930's and 40's. The quote appears in a book on Pastoral Theology that was used to train Missouri Synod pastors for decades.²

It was quotes like these that led me, along with my wife, to study the issue of contraception (“birth control”) more closely. In this booklet I hope to guide you through what the Bible, the witness of the Church, and natural law teach us about God's will concerning contraception.

The Bible's Teaching on Contraception

Many Lutherans assume that Roman Catholics forbid birth control simply because it's a part of Roman Catholic tradition. But since Lutherans follow Scripture alone many Lutherans further assume that the Lutheran Church doesn't talk about birth control very much because the Bible doesn't talk about it. But is this the case?

In the beginning. . .

The very first Word of God to the very first husband and wife is recorded in the book of Genesis (1:27-28):

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

This first Word of God to humanity joined in marriage is a great blessing and expresses God's plan for human sexuality. God calls “being fruitful and multiplying” a blessing. Think of the other blessings the Lord gives in the Scriptures, such as, “Peace be with you” (John 20). What if

¹ Luther's Works, American Edition (LW), volume 5 page 363.

² John H. C. Fritz. *Pastoral Theology*, 2nd Edition (St. Louis: CPH, 1945), p 162.

our response to that blessing was, “Well, peace is a good thing – but we wouldn't want to much of it – or at least we wouldn't want to have too much of it right away. I think I'll wait a while before I accept the Lord's peace.”

That attitude is out of kilter. Peace is a blessing of God – and blessings are to be received with thanks. Being fruitful and multiplying is God's first wedding blessing: and it should also be received with thanks and not thwarted, delayed, or begrudged. For the Lord calls children a great blessing.

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Psalm 127:3-5)

This is God's blessing on marriage – being fruitful and multiplying, and this is central to the purpose of marriage. The prophet Malachi put it this way when speaking to the people of Israel:

The LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. (Malachi 2:14-15)

These considerations from the Word of God drove Martin Luther to say the following concerning the case of Onan in Genesis 38:9-10 ("But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he slew him also" (RSV).)

This is a most disgraceful sin. It is far more atrocious than incest and adultery. We call it unchastity, yes, a Sodomitic sin. For Onan goes in to her; that is, he lies with her and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination, spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed. Accordingly, it was a most disgraceful crime to produce semen and excite the woman, and to frustrate her at that very moment. (LW 7.20-21).³

Luther here compares Onan's sin to that of sodomy, that is, homosexual acts. This may seem somewhat extreme – but Onan and practitioners of homosexual acts have at least one thing in common: they seek to achieve the pleasure of sexual relations while purposely avoiding what God has attached to sexual pleasure and intimacy, namely parenthood. Luther sees this as breaking God's natural order: for Luther, sex and fruitfulness go together. The Committee on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod puts it this way, "Once the nature of the union of husband and wife is made a separate question from that of

³Luther, M. (1999, c1965). *Vol. 7: Luther's works, vol. 7 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 38-44* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ge 38:11). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

the relationship of parents and children, then the essence of marriage can be significantly obscured."⁴

Of course many people today have objections to this line of reasoning. Some say that this command to "be fruitful and multiply" is no longer in effect either because the world is "over-populated"⁵ or because a married couple feels that they do not have enough money to care for more than one or two children. Luther replies, "For most married people do not desire offspring. Indeed, they turn away from it and consider it better to live without children, because they are poor and do not have the means with which to support a household. . . . *But the purpose of marriage is not to have pleasure and to be idle but to procreate and bring up children, to support a household.* This, of course, is a huge burden full of great cares and toils. But you have been created by God to be a husband or a wife and that you may learn to bear these troubles."⁶

Christian History: Has it always been this way?

At this point you may be asking: So Martin Luther was definitely against birth control and seemed to think that the Bible was against it as well. But is this just Luther's opinion of what the Bible said?

First, I would advise you to look at the Bible passages that have already been quoted. Let them speak for themselves aside from what Luther says and I think you'll have to agree that contraception simply does not fit into the Biblical world view.

On the other hand, it is always a good idea to see what those Christians who have gone before us have said on such weighty issues. When we look at Christians from the era of the early church up to the modern day we will see that the *unanimous* voice of all Christianity throughout history is that the Bible is against contraception.

The Early Church

St. John Chrysostom

Chrysostom means "golden-mouthed." John received this name for being an excellent preacher. He lived in the fourth and fifth centuries and become very influential – and remains so today. The Lutheran Confessions quote him on more than ten occasions (See AC XXIV.36 for

⁴ CTCR, "Christians and Procreative Choices: How do God's Chosen Choose?" September 1996.

⁵ Starting with Thomas Malthus in 1798 many doomsdayers have argued that world is over-populated. They point to the many famines in the world as proof. In reality the famines are not produced by over-population but by governmental corruption in the third world, wars, and simple human greed. To illustrate the fact that the world is not over-populated consider the following. The world currently has about 6,200,000,000 people. The state of Texas has an area of 268,601 square miles (7,488,166,118,400 square feet). This means that everyone in the entire world could stand in the state of Texas with 1,207 square feet all to themselves!

⁶Luther, M. (1999, c1968). *Vol. 5: Luther's works, vol. 5 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ge 30:25). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

example). St. John wrote this about what he called "medicines of sterility" (probably silphium, a plant native to Cyrene and widely used in the ancient world as a highly effective contraceptive and abortifacient, so effective that it was harvested to extinction), that is, drugs that like the modern birth control pill not only prevent conception but may also expel an embryonic human from the mother's womb⁷:

You see how drunkenness leads to whoredom, whoredom to adultery, adultery to murder; or rather to something even worse than murder. For I have no name to give it, since it does not take off the thing born, but prevents its being born. Why then dost thou abuse the gift of God, and fight with His laws? (*Homily 24 on the Epistle to the Romans*)

In another place, John writes more specifically about surgical means of birth control. In the ancient world this usually meant castration (see Deut. 23:1). Today a more refined technique, the vasectomy, is used:

...and that which is sweet, and universally desirable, the having of children, they esteem grievous and unwelcome. Many at least with this view have even paid money to be childless, and have mutilated nature, not only killing the newborn, but even acting to prevent their beginning to live. (*Homilies on Matthew, 391 A.D.*)

St. Epiphanius of Salamis

Epiphanius was bishop at Salamis and authored a book about heresies. He is quoted in the Lutheran Confessions four times (e.g. Ap. VIII.42). About some Egyptian heretics, he wrote:

They exercise genital acts, yet prevent the conceiving of children. Not in order to produce offspring, but to satisfy lust, are they eager for corruption. (*Medicine Chest Against Heresies, c. 375 A.D.*)

St. Augustine

Martin Luther was trained as an Augustinian monk and grew to love the writings of Augustine, a bishop who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. Indeed Augustine is the most influential Church Father in Western Christianity. He is quoted dozens of times in the Lutheran Confessions, often as an authority (e.g. Ap. II.22, 24). He wrote of those who wish to have sexual pleasure while avoiding parenting:

The doctrine that the production of children is an evil, directly opposes the next precept, "Thou shall not commit adultery;" for those who believe this doctrine, in order that their wives may not conceive, are led to commit adultery even in marriage. They take wives, as

⁷ The pill allows a woman to ovulate some 3% of the time. If a baby is conceived during one of these times, the young child may be ejected from the womb (the so-called "third function" of the birth control pill). Thus the pill can cause an early term abortion. The pill has many other adverse health effects which go beyond the scope of this booklet, see Randy Alcorn, *Does the Birth Control Pill Cause Abortions?*, rev. ed., (Gresham, OR: Eternal Perspective Ministries, 1998). www.epm.org

the law declares, for the procreation of children; but from this erroneous fear of polluting the substance of the deity, their intercourse with their wives is not of a lawful character; and the production of children, which is the proper end of marriage, they seek to avoid.

(Against Faustus, c. 400 A.D.)

The Reformation

When the Church of Christ was attacked by error and vice during the middle ages, God graciously raised up men to Reform the Church and throw out its corruption. The most famous of these Reformers was Martin Luther. Second to him in historical stature was John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed Church (Presbyterians and Reformed).

Martin Luther

Of course, we've already heard quite a bit from Luther, but one more quotation is appropriate.

How great, therefore, the wickedness of human nature is! How many girls there are who prevent conception and kill, and expel tender fetuses, although procreation is the work of God! (LW 4:304, Commentary on Genesis 25)

Martin Chemnitz

Chemnitz was the greatest Lutheran theologian of the generation that formed a bridge between Luther and the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Here Chemnitz draws a distinction between contraception and abortion but condemns them both as contrary to God's will of life for the human race.

"The first and most heinous kind is the external deed itself. Scripture speaks of the shedding of blood, Rom. 3:15; Gen. 9:6. In Ex. 21:18–20 and Num. 25:7 certain instruments or weapons are mentioned, such as iron, rock, or club. Rev. 18:23 and Gal. 5:20 mention sorcery [actually Chemnitz notes here the Greek word *pharmakeia*, 'potions' – this was also an ancient word used for chemical contraceptives like silphium]. But in the Decalog it simply says, 'Thou shalt not kill,' without mentioning either the instruments or the circumstances of the crime. In Judg. 20:5 the wife of the Levite who was ravished by a mob of Gibeonites was said to have been 'murdered.' Pertinent here also are those things which hinder contraception, Gen. 38:9. Likewise, the matter of destroying the fetus in the womb, Ex. 21:22, 'If a pregnant woman is struck. . . .' I Kings 3:19 refers to those who in their sleep lie on and smother children." (*Loci Theologici*, Preus translation, vol. II, p. 406, first column.)

John Calvin

Lest we think that opposition to contraception was only a peculiarity of Lutheranism, we read this from the French Reformer John Calvin as he commented on the Onan incident (note again, how Calvin compares contraception and abortion):

The voluntary spilling of semen outside of intercourse between man and woman is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is doubly monstrous. For this is to extinguish the hope of the race and to kill before he is born the hoped-for offspring. The impiety is especially condemned, now by the Spirit through Moses' mouth, that Onan, as it were, by a violent abortion, no less cruelly than filthily cast upon the ground the offspring of his brother, torn from the maternal womb. Besides, in this way he tried, as far as he was able, to wipe out a part of the human race. If any woman ejects a foetus from her womb by drugs, it is reckoned a crime incapable of expiation and deservedly Onan incurred upon himself the same kind of punishment, infecting the earth by his semen, in order that Tamar might not conceive a future human being as an inhabitant of the earth. (Calvin's Commentary on Genesis 38:8-10)

John Wesley

While not a Reformer of the 16th century Reformation (he lived from 1703-1791), Wesley was profoundly influenced by Luther and Calvin and sought to reform the Anglican Church. This led to his founding of Methodism. Speaking, once again, on Gen 38:9-10, Wesley writes,

Those sins that dishonor the body are very displeasing to God, and the evidence of vile affections. Observe, the thing which Onan did displeased the Lord—and it is to be feared; thousands, especially of single persons, by this very thing, still displease the Lord, and destroy their own souls. (Wesley's *Commentary on Genesis*)

Modern Lutheranism and Wider Christianity

Nor should we think that opposition to contraception in Christianity ceased long ago. Indeed, leaders in Lutheranism and the Protestant denominations were uniformly opposed to contraception well into the 20th century.

Dr. John H. C. Fritz

Dr. Fritz was a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and wrote *Pastoral Theology*, a textbook which was used for decades to train Missouri Synod pastors. In this book he speaks at length concerning contraception and how Lutheran pastors should discourage their use as sinful. Here is a small quote from his much longer discussion from the second edition of the book, which was printed in 1945.

Man has no right arbitrarily or definitely to limit the number of his offspring (birth control), especially not if done with artificial or unnatural means, Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3-6; Ps. 128:3,4; Gen. 38:9-10; Rom. 1:26-27. . . . Birth control, that is, the frustration of conception or the limitation of the number of children by the use of artificial means, by drugs or unnatural practices, is a sin. . . . Due to the fact that spiritual indifferentism and Modernism have made inroads into the church of our day and have dulled the conscience also in respect to Christian ethics, it is not surprising that birth control is advocated even by men and women in the churches of this modern age (op. cit. 162).

Dr. Walter A. Maier

Dr. Maier was not only a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, but he also founded the Lutheran Hour radio program. In 1931 he said,

Birth Control, as popularly understood today and involving the use of contraceptives, is one of the most repugnant of modern aberrations, representing a 20th century renewal of pagan bankruptcy (cited by J. F. Noll in *A Catechism on Birth Control, 6th edition*. (Huntington: OSV press, 1939) p. 31).

Concordia Pulpit

Concordia Pulpit is a resource for Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod pastors which suggests outlines for sermons. In 1939, *Concordia Pulpit*, Volume XI, included a “Series on the Christian Marriage Relation,” which contained the following:

The main purpose of marriage is the propagation of the human race. God Himself clearly stated this purpose: “Be fruitful,” etc. (both a command and a blessing bestowed upon the human family). Also Ps. 128:3,4; 127:3-5. . . . Various sinful methods of birth control. Abortion. . . .

Second sinful method, the sin of Onan, Gen. 38:9. Very common practice. (Catholic priest in this city told the writer that in the confessional he has learned this to be the most common practice among his people; guilty of the sin of birth control.) Today use of mechanical devices prevalent. Reasons: greed, career, enjoyment of life, lust, fear of labor and pain in childbirth. Additional proof for our position: voice of conscience; terrible consequences of this unnaturalness, such as impaired health physically and mentally.

Some who are not Christians place these practices on the same plane with self-abuse. Bernard Shaw: “Contraceptive practices are reciprocal masturbation.”

St. Augustine: “Contraception makes a prostitute out of the wife and an adulterer out of the husband.” Companionate marriage has been termed “licensed prostitution.”

Dr. Howard Kelly, perhaps America’s ablest gynecologist, neither a Lutheran nor a Catholic, uses these words: “All meddling with the sexual relation to secure facultative sterility degrades the wife to the level of a prostitute.” The preacher will be chiefly positive in this matter and show forth the blessings of parentage.

The Lutheran Witness

The Lutheran Witness is the official periodical of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and is written for the laity of the church. In decades past, contraception was often singled out for censure in its pages.

In 1895 there were 17,000 more deaths than births [in France]. Thus this nation is dying out, and the cause is the sins against the sixth commandment, especially abortion and the prevention of pregnancy. . . .It is apparent, however, that this sin is a dreadful evil in our country. Where are the families blessed with many children? How does it come that the number of births is decreasing? Here the evil lies hidden. (*The Lutheran Witness*, October 7, 1899, pages 67–68)

'Be fruitful and multiply ' was a benediction which the merciful Creator pronounced upon the first couple and hence upon all couples, but in so many cases to-day husbands and wives consider it a burden, if not a positive curse to have children; and if they have any they maliciously design to have as few as possible. But the intended prevention of offspring at any time in wedlock is a willful frustration and a bold violation of a divinely ordained purpose of marriage and an offense against the moral law. (*The Lutheran Witness*, May 14, 1908, page 76)

'Birth control is immoral, degrading. . . .It is a perversion of a natural faculty' (quoted by *The Lutheran Witness*, June 16, 1917, page 196)

'Inconceivably distressing and disgusting' are the worlds applied by Dr. Howard Atwood Kelly of Johns Hopkins University to the methods of the birth–controllers who are again seeking a repeal of the laws which forbid the dissemination of birth–control information. . . .Dr. Kelly's opinion should be shared by every good citizen. (*The Lutheran Witness*, February 13, 1934, page 59)

The Lutheran

Missouri Synod Lutherans were not alone in the Lutheran world in their condemnation of contraception. Reacting to the Federal Council of Churches decision to allow contraception in 1931 (only the second time in Church history that any body of Christians made such a decision. See below.), the president of the United Lutheran Churches, Dr. F. H. Knubel, wrote in the April 2nd, 1931 edition of *The Lutheran*,

It is of prime significance that the present agitation for birth control occurs at a period which is notorious for looseness in sexual morality. This fact creates suspicion as to the motives for the agitation, and should warn true–minded men and women against the surrender of themselves as tools for unholy purposes.

The Presbyterian

Protestant theologians of various confessions also joined the Lutherans in opposition to birth control in the 20th century. Reacting to the same Federal Council of Churches decision to allow contraception in 1931, the editors of *The Presbyterian* wrote on April 2, 1931:

Its recent pronouncement of birth control should be enough reason, if there were no other, to withdraw support from that body, which declares that it speaks for the Presbyterian and other Protestant churches in ex cathedra statements.

Methodist Bishop Warren Chandler

The Methodist Church also reacted unfavorably to the Federal Council of Churches decision. On April 13th, 1931 Bishop Chandler of the Methodist Episcopal Church South wrote,

The whole disgusting movement rests on the assumption of man's sameness with the brutes. . . It certainly does not represent the Methodist Church, and I doubt if it represents any other Protestant Church.

If the Bible and the History of the Church are Against It: What Happened?

Although all Christians of all denominations stood together against contraception for 1,930 years, today birth control is an accepted part of life for the vast majority of American Christians. How did this happen? It is the old story of the Church caving in to the will of the world.

The first Christian church in all of history to sanction contraception was the Anglican Church, which at its 1930 Lambeth conference (August 14) declared that "other methods" besides abstinence might be used to prevent pregnancy. On March 12, 1931 the Federal Council of Churches (the forerunner of today's National Council of Churches) reached the same conclusion. As we saw above, this was met with fierce condemnation from Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and many other Christians.

However, once the birth control pill was introduced in the 1960's the Protestant churches that once so forcefully proclaimed the truth of Genesis 1:28, Psalm 127:4, and Malachi 2:14-15 slowly but surely stopped talking about the Biblical and traditional Christian teaching on birth control as more and more lay people starting using the pill. In much the same way that many churches have ceased condemning living together before marriage, the Protestant churches simply got tired of standing for the truth and eventually convinced themselves that the Scriptures quoted above no longer applied.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has stood somewhat more firmly than the average Protestant church. The LCMS has never declared that the teachings of Luther, Chemnitz, Prof. Fritz and Prof. Maier were wrong. But, on the other hand, the LCMS no longer publishes

official, doctrinally reviewed documents which condemn contraception either. Indeed the LCMS has no official position today regarding contraception. Today some pastors and professors of the LCMS see contraception as the modern secular world sees it: as something that married couples can use according to their own discretion. Other pastors and professors of the LCMS see contraception as the Early Church, Martin Luther, and the Missouri Synod of the 1930's and 40's saw it: as incompatible with the Biblical world view of fruitfulness in marriage as a blessing of God.

But even those within the LCMS who would accept the use of contraception do so, as it were, uncomfortably, saying that contraception is unobjectionable only "within a marital union which is, as a whole, fruitful" (CTCR, *Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective*, 1981. p. 20).

Summary of Reasons Not to Use Birth Control

Biblical Reasons to avoid Contraception

From the beginning, God's Word shows fruitfulness within marriage to be a blessing which married couples should receive with thanksgiving: Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply." God speaks of children as his blessing and reward (Ps. 127) and states plainly in Malachi that he joins man and wife because he seeks offspring (2:15). Blessings from God are to be received with thanks – and the Bible could not be clearer in saying that children are a blessing. The one example in the Bible of someone refusing God's blessing of fruitfulness (Onan in Genesis 38) certainly paints that attitude in a negative light to say the least.

Reasons from the History of the Church to avoid Contraception

First, *the earliest Christian writers*, men more wise, holy, and learned in Scripture than we, thought that contraception was anti-Biblical and anti-Christian; see the Church Fathers listed above.

Second, *the leaders of the Reformation*, men more wise, holy, and learned in Scripture than we, thought that contraception was anti-Biblical and anti-Christian; see Martin Luther, Martin Chemnitz, and John Calvin above.

Third, it was *the unanimous opinion* of all of modern Christianity up to 1930 that Scripture forbids contraception, and even then only a few churches actually allowed it under secular pressure.

Consider this. What else did all Christian churches unanimously agree upon for 1,930 years? Nothing besides such doctrines as the Trinity and the divine and human natures of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even on such great issues as Baptism and the Lord's Supper there was much disagreement within Christianity over this time period. But on contraception the Church spoke with one voice: Fruitfulness in marriage is a blessing from God to be received with thanks, not a burden to be avoided except when we deem it to be a good thing. Was the whole Church wrong for all that time and the Anglican communion (the same church that first gave us women's ordination and gay priests) suddenly get it right in 1930?

Reasons from Natural Law to avoid Contraception

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. . . .For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Romans 1:19-20, 26-27

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Romans 2:14-15

Up to this point we have limited our discussion of God's will and contraception to the Bible and the Church's witness to the Bible. In these two famous Biblical passages from Paul's letter to the Romans, we are introduced to another witness to God's will: natural law.

Natural Law: What it is and What it isn't

Natural law does not mean, as it is sometimes misunderstood to mean, that humanity is prohibited from “interfering with nature.” Natural law does not say that we shouldn't use vaccines or other forms of healing medicine because they interfere with the “natural course” of death.

Rather, to say that there is a “natural law” is to say that there are moral precepts which human beings know “by nature” - or to put it in St. Paul's words, we know some things are right and some things are wrong because there is a “law written on our hearts” by God.

Natural law is very important for Christians because it helps us sort out the meaning of the Old Testament for us today. The Old Testament contains hundreds of regulations and laws from “Thou shalt not murder” down to don't eat shellfish or pork or get a tattoo. Which of these laws apply to Christians today and which were only for God's people in the Old Testament? Why do we say that “Thou shalt not murder” is still valid, but that we can have all the pork chops we like even though this is forbidden in the same Old Testament?

Martin Luther tackled this question in a famous sermon, “How Christians Should Regard Moses” in 1525,

Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to

commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. . . .

That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved from Exodus 20:1, where God himself speaks, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver – unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. (LW 35.164–165)

Thus it is this natural law – the moral law written on the hearts of all humanity – that illuminates and helps us understand the Scriptures; the same Scriptures which witness to, clarify, and make plain this same natural law. Natural law is also used in the Lutheran Confessions to help clarify our understanding of the moral law of Scripture and argue against those who would pervert it (Ap. XXIII.6, 60; Ap. IV.7; FC SD V.22; FC SD VII.46) - and Philip Melancthon (Luther's closest associate and author of large portions of the Lutheran Confessions) uses natural law to sort out who may marry whom.⁸

Natural Law & Contraception

How does all this apply to our thinking about contraception? One premise of natural law is that it is immoral to use things in a manner contrary to their God-given purpose – or to seek to impede their God-given purpose. For example, the purpose of food is to give strength and health to the body – thus gluttony is immoral because it uses food in a manner contrary to its purpose: food becomes a tool for mere pleasure and then self-destruction that damages the body as the glutton continues to stuff himself past the point of fullness again and again. In a like manner it would be immoral to prevent food from doing its duty of nourishing the body by forcing oneself to regurgitate after eating. This principle of natural law – that it is immoral to use something in a way that is contrary to its God-given and good purpose – is what lies behind Exodus 23:19, "You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk." It is perverse and immoral to use as an instrument of death that which is meant to give life to the young goat.

What is the purpose of sex? Clearly one purpose of sex is procreation. Another is as an expression of the unity God intends to be had between husband and wife in the one flesh union. Natural law thinkers usually call these two purposes the *procreative* purpose and the *unitive* purpose. To use sex in a manner that is contrary to either of these purposes or that separates them one from the other is in itself immoral.

For example, the unitive purpose of sex can be thought of as having several dimensions: companionship, intimacy, pleasure, etc. Now imagine any sexual act which is specifically designed to avoid or contradict this unitive purpose of sex. Could any such act ever in itself be godly? If I seek to remove the pleasure of sex by having an operation performed on my nervous system to block those sensations of pleasure, or by seeking to inflict pain on my wife – could that

⁸"We need to know that the laws in Leviticus which prohibit the mixing of persons, as listed there, are laws of nature and are binding on all nations." *Loci Communes*, trans. Preus. St. Louis: CPH, 1992: p. 247, column 2.

ever be godly? If I seek to have sex not for deep intimacy with my spouse, but rather seek to exclude intimacy from the act (by having sex with one's wife while she was unconscious) – could that ever be godly? Indeed, would it be godly for a husband and wife to subtract the unitive purpose away from sex so as to just have the procreative function? Never – for that is not human marriage but animal husbandry.

So likewise with the procreative purpose of sex. Actively seeking to frustrate this divine purpose of sex is intrinsically immoral - so goes the reasoning of the natural law. And this is nothing other than what was said above in relation to the Biblical witness: seeking to disassociate the pleasure of sex (an aspect of its unitive purpose) from the gift of children (its procreative purpose) is immoral because it tears away one blessing of God. Thus, the natural law gives witness to the Biblical revelation.

And consider this Biblical illumination of the natural law from Scripture:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:21-33)

So God created marriage in the Garden of Eden to be a picture of Christ's relation to the Church. Can you imagine Christ holding back any part of his person from his Bride the Church? Can you imagine the Church holding anything of her fullness back from Christ? As it is with Christ and the Church, so it must be with husband and wife: they give themselves to each other totally – including their fertility.

But what about the hard cases....

The Scriptures, the witness of Christian history and natural law to the Scriptures, all point to fruitfulness in marriage as a good blessing of God to be received with thanks. But in this broken world full of sin and death and disease we must say something more: what about the hard cases?

An Objection

Before we tackle those hard cases, we should mention an objection to the traditional understanding of the Scriptures that is related to how we should think about the hard cases. The

objection is this: What about sex between a husband and wife when one of them is known to be infertile? Would that be wrong since sexual pleasure (part of the unitive purpose of sex) has been separated from the procreative purpose of sex? The same goes for a woman while she is nursing or pregnant – she can't conceive, so by the reasoning given above, wouldn't sexual relations during that time be immoral?

No, such relations would not be immoral because the husband and wife are in no way seeking to thwart the God-given purposes of marriage or acting to prevent them. Rather, God in his Providence has allowed for these infertile times to occur. They are not the product of human evasion, plotting, or unthankfulness. Rather, they are result of God's active or permissive will. Think of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah was 'barren.' But that did not make their sexual relations irrelevant or unethical – but neither did it give them excuse to experiment with pagan notions of sexuality (sexual acts specifically designed by human beings not to be procreative). Rather, they were to continue in conjugal love always open to the gift of procreation should God change his mind and decide to give it - as one day he did.

The Hard Cases

But what about those hard cases in which it looks to us like fruitfulness and fertility and children would not be a blessing at all? What if we can't afford any more children? What about cases in which another pregnancy would almost certainly result in the grave endangerment of the mother or the child? What about couples who have predispositions to passing on fatal genetic diseases? Should these couples forgo sex altogether?

First off, let's make sure we're really talking about hard cases. There is certainly such a thing as grave poverty – but I don't think that applies to most (perhaps not to any) Americans. Our society overflows with wealth. What most folks mean when they say they “can't afford another child” is that they won't be able to have all the luxuries they have become used to. St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:6-10 “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”

So, if having another child would not in all likelihood lead to the starvation of your family or its endangerment by exposure to the elements (loss of 'food and clothing') I think it's fair to say that you don't meet the Biblical standard for poverty. If having another child means you have to sacrifice (get a less expensive house or car, quit smoking or going out to eat so much, buy your clothes at discount stores instead of department stores, sell your jewelry, send your kids to a state school instead of a private one, etc.) that is to be expected. Christians are called upon to sacrifice for godliness; to take up our crosses and follow the Lord.

But, as I said above, there are the hard cases: somewhere in the world real poverty does exist. Somewhere (and this is much more common) there is a couple for whom pregnancy is fraught

with very real and very grave dangers. These are heart-breaking situations which try the souls of Christians. What to do in such cases?

If you are facing one of these truly hard cases, proceed as you would with any other trying spiritual time: with prayers for wisdom and seeking counsel from God's Word with your pastor. There won't be any easy answers here and everything will need to be approached from a deep humility and trust in Christ. For example, if a woman's body has become damaged in such a way that pregnancy has become almost deadly to her – perhaps her womb will have to be closed surgically just as we would remove a gravely diseased hand or foot. That is a heavy cross for a couple to bear – and it is as far removed from “routine” tubal ligation for a couple who simply doesn't want any more kids as the east is removed from the west. In other situations, refraining from marital relations for a time will be more appropriate. There is no one size fits all answer to the hard cases – that's why they are called hard cases.

Conclusion

As the saying goes, hard cases make bad law. That there are, in this fallen world, harsh and dire circumstances that create real problems with how God intends human life to be is not an excuse for us to make excuses when those harsh and dire circumstances don't apply to us. For most American Christians at most times there is no hard case. Rather, we desire to limit our families not because we are pressed by dire circumstances beyond our control, but because we don't view children as a blessing the way the Bible speaks of them. The world encourages us to look at children as something to be weighed against earthly comforts and our desire for freedom and mobility and ease in our lives.

But Christians are called to be Biblical in their world view and not contaminated by the world's lies. So let me encourage you to ask yourself once again: Is my case really a hard one? If it is (and that would be exceedingly rare) seek godly counsel from your pastor. But if you are an average American Christian your case won't be a hard one. And if you find yourself in this situation, again prayerfully consider what the Scripture says and what the whole Christian Church has always understood them to say, and what the law of nature says as well. And then be encouraged to trust the Lord who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all: will he now not also give us all good things?

In short, the call of the Bible and the Christian Church against contraception is a call to faith. God is the giver of Life and he wants your marriage to be fruitful – do not turn away from his gifts! He knows when and how many children he wants to give you – trust him to be your heavenly Father and provide for all your needs.

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.
Proverbs 3:5**