



Biblical Ethics

Reproductive Ethics
part 2: Contraception

April 28, 2024
Adult Sunday School
Lewis Lake Covenant Church

Contraception

Case Study: Adam lives in the mountains with his six younger brothers. After marrying Millie, his brothers want a wife of their own. One night they all go into town and each one kidnaps the girl he's fallen in love with. On their way back, an avalanche closes off any access from town to the homestead for the remainder of the winter. In the spring, Adam and Millie welcome their first child. When the pass opens and the fathers of the six kidnapped girls come to rescue their daughters, they hear a baby cry and wonder to whom it belongs. Upon asking, all the girls claim the child is theirs. Leveling their shotguns, the fathers force the six brothers to marry the six girls on the spot.

Why did the dads do this?

Were their actions ethical or not?

Does the girl's willingness/unwillingness matter?

Some historical notes about contraception:

1. "Egyptian papyri dating from 1900-1100BC show that Egyptian physicians offered prescriptions for the prevention of pregnancy. One document states that pregnancy may be prevented by a mixture containing acacia tips, bitter cucumber, dates, and honey placed in the uterus. Another papyrus recommends that pregnancy may be prevented by placing crocodile on moistened fibers in the opening of the uterus."

2. The (in)famous story of Onan in Genesis 38:6-10 is the one biblical example of birth control – except that’s not exactly what was happening or precisely why God was so angry with him.
3. “Aristotle believed that conception could be prevented by the application of cedar oil, ointment of lead, or frankincense and olive oil on the part of the body ‘where the seed falls.’”
4. “During the twelfth century the *Canon of Medicine* of the Arabian philosopher and physician Avicenna was translated into Latin, with its discussions of various spermicides, vaginal suppositories, potions, and abortifacients. Avicenna’s *Canon* dominated the field for some five hundred years; it was considered the standard medical textbook until the middle of the seventeenth century.”
5. “The condom appeared during the middle of the seventeenth century, but it was neither cheaply nor efficiently produced and initially did not win wide acceptance. Use of the condom became more widespread after the invention of vulcanized rubber in the nineteenth century.”
6. “American law and public opinion remained unfavorable to contraception for most of the nineteenth century. The federal Comstock law of 1873 made illegal the mailing or importation of contraceptives, and most American states forbade both their sale and advertisement.”

7. “By 1935, more than 200 different types of artificial contraceptive devices were in use in Western nations. In 1936 the courts overturned the earlier Comstock law. These changing practices reflected not only the proliferation in the number of contraceptive devices and increasing medical knowledge of the human reproductive system, but also changing social attitudes promoted by Margaret Sanger and other leaders of the American Birth Control League.”
8. “In 1965 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Griswold v. Connecticut* declared unconstitutional Connecticut’s nineteenth-century law prohibiting the use of contraceptives. In *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972) the Court went even further, voiding a Massachusetts law prohibiting the sale of contraceptive devices to the unmarried. By 1970 contraception we being funded... through the Family Planning Services and Population Research act... In little less than a century the practice of contraception moved from a position of illegality to one of official sponsorship by the federal government.”

Positions in church history

1. In reaction to the sexual licentiousness of their age, Augustine and other church fathers condemned sexual intercourse not intended to conceive children.

2. The Roman Catholic Church has consistently condemned all forms of artificial conception. However, in recent decades the RCC has embraced natural family planning, where a couple identifies those days the wife is likely to conceive and they abstain from intercourse.
3. Protestants have generally been more positive about marital sex for the sake of pleasure. Perhaps this is why they've generally been more open toward birth control?

Unbreakable building blocks for the foundation of an ethical system regarding contraception.

1. The Creation Mandate: Be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7)
 - a. God places humanity under moral obligation to bear children
 - b. The Bible sees children as the shared responsibility of a husband and a wife
 - i. Husbands and wives are under a moral responsibility to love, honor, and cling to one another, till death do them part.
 - ii. All sexual activity (and thus procreation) is to take place within marriage.
“Living together prior to marriage is one predictor of the likelihood of divorce.”

<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/legal/divorce/divorce-statistics/>

- iii. Children are to be born into a home with a mother and a father.
 - iv. God married the joys of sexuality and conception. To command one is to command both (1 Cor 7:3-5).
 - v. Fathers are under a moral responsibility to provide for their wives and their children (1 Tim 5:8)
 - vi. Mothers are under a moral responsibility to care for their children (Titus 2:3-5; 1 Tim 5:14)
- c. Children are God's gift to a husband and wife, and God's gifts should be embraced (Ps 127:3; Gen 48:9; Isa 8:18)
- note:* While our modern era understands conception from a purely biological and mechanical view, we should not discount the necessary, unique work of God in the creation of every child (Ps 139:13-16).
- d. Contemporary society sees children as primarily a woman's responsibility

Reasons:

- i. Normalization of pre-marital sex and multiple sexual partners has normalized men

walking away from their responsibilities as fathers and women walking away from their child's father.

“Nearly 7 in 10 marriage dissolutions are initiated by the female partner.”

<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/legal/divorce/divorce-statistics/>

- ii. Cultural insistence that men have no say in whether a woman carries a child to term. Pregnancy is widely considered a matter of “Women’s rights.”

Q: How might this affect a man’s view of pregnancy?

- e. We recognize not all are called to marriage. (1 Cor 7:8)
- f. We recognize we live in a cursed world
 - i. The unfortunate reality of barrenness (Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth, etc.)
 - ii. The painful reality of childbirth
- g. Under normal circumstances, Christian couples should be open to receiving God’s gift of children.

Examples of possible exceptions:

- i. It is known that pregnancy poses a serious risk to a mother’s life.

note: in 2017, appx. 800 women/day globally

died due to pregnancy. In the US in 1900, mothers could expect a mortality rate of around 1% per pregnancy.

Ex: Multiple C-sections (another technologically inspired ethical situation!)

- ii. It is known one of the parents is terminally ill and will not be able to provide support for the child.
 - iii. It is known that, for whatever reason, a child conceived will miscarry.
2. The beginning of human life and the moral responsibility to protect it.
- Since every human life begins at fertilization, any contraception that destroys a fertilized embryo (e.g., abortifacients such as ‘morning after’ pills) is immoral. This is a red line a Christian cannot cross.
3. The natural state of the male & female body is fertile; the natural course of male and female is marriage, the natural course of marriage is intercourse, the natural result of intercourse is pregnancy.
- a. Contraception creates an unnatural state of infertility
 - b. While ‘unnatural’ states are not necessarily immoral, careful thought should be granted to the morality of consciously suppressing our natural design and function.

Things to consider

1. The effects of separating sex & children have changed society in ways difficult to grasp

The last two generations of Americans are “Aristotle’s Fish” regarding contraception: We expect fairly tight control over the timing and number of children.

2. Some side effects of contraception are medical
3. Some side effects are social and lifestyle
 - a. The modern view of women and their place in society presupposes that pregnancy and childbirth is a choice a woman makes, not the natural expectation of marriage.
 - b. The modern view of children places a heavier moral and legal responsibility upon mothers than fathers.
 - c. The modern view of women’s role in society since ~1960 is different than since creation because of the complete control over their reproduction.
 - d. The modern view of a successful member of society is generally non-gendered. Unless either gender can equally achieve such success, we tend to assume some kind of discrimination is happening. This can only begin to happen on a large scale if the commitments required in pregnancy can be avoided.

- e. In general, Western nations are entering an era of population decline because people aren't having enough children to 'replace' them.

“Japan has entered an era of full-fledged population decline. If current trends remain unchanged, the nation's population is expected to decline by about half from 124 million in 2023 to 63 million by 2100.”

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2024/04/26/japan/japans-shrinking-population/>

“The general fertility rate in the United States decreased by 3% from 2022, reaching a historic low. This marks the second consecutive year of decline, following a brief 1% increase from 2020 to 2021. From 2014 to 2020, the rate consistently decreased by 2% annually.”

<https://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs/2024/04/25/7597/>

“The current fertility rate for U.S. in 2024 is 1.786 births per woman”

<https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/USA/united-states/fertility-rate>

4. The command to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ does not mean, ‘thou shalt have as many children as possible.’
note: Some Evangelicals embrace a “quiverful” mentality (from Ps. 127:3) in which they shun any form of birth control, natural or artificial.
5. The Bible’s view of children is always positive.
6. To date, I have yet to meet any parent who regretted having a child, even (especially?) “surprises.”
7. Every moral event, including contraception, must be evaluated according to:
 - a. The act itself (what?)
 - b. The person performing the act (who?)
 - c. The goal of the act (why?)

Some contraception is immoral because of the act (ie. abortifacients), some may be immoral due to the person (ie. a man or woman trying to cover up an illicit affair), and some may be due to the goal (ie. avoiding pregnancy for purely selfish or material reasons). This also suggests that some contraception may be considered moral.

What was the one
God seeking?
Godly offspring.

-Malachi 2:15

