

On Birth Control & Contraception

by D. Matthew Brown

Today, Christians, for the most part, are confronted with moral issues that are exponentially more complex than those issues that confronted Christians in past centuries. In particular, some advances in medical science, which were once witchery in the eyes of earlier Christians, have now received from modern Christians the all-encompassing umbrella of God's blessing. Evangelical Christians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in particular have embraced many forms of medical advance without question, though they, as well as the inventors of those advances, do not and cannot know the full scope of the consequences of those advances. As pharmaceutical remedies and functionality altering solutions are created and are accepted by the general population on a wide scale, time reveals complications and unforeseen side effects of the product that either was not known out of ignorance of the intricacies of the human body or was known but ignored for the sake of medical advance. In such a world, does the modern Christian find himself helpless to stand in the ethical dilemma that has been profusely grayed by modern medicine?

Perhaps at the head of the hushed medical advances of the recent centuries are the birth control pill and its variants. Since 1960, the birth control pill has been the most prescribed drug in the world (albeit only to half the population—women), and yet those who are professors of the Christian faith are for the most part ignorant of how the birth control pill works and are quite content to remain so.¹ Many evangelical Christians assume, and wrongly so, that if a drug is condoned by the government and is prescribed by a doctor that it falls under the umbrella of Christian liberty. Christians should, however, realize that the medical advances of the modern era have not ushered in an expansion of the realm of Christian liberty, but it has, on the other hand, hazed and complicated the ethical decisions that must be made and accounted for at the judgment seat of God. Christians cannot plead ignorance before God in the case of the birth control pill, because the facts are there if one chooses to search casually for them. By observing first God's value for human life in Scripture, then the medical effects of the birth control pill, and finally the positive affirmation that God is the Creator of all life from Scripture, an evangelical Christian can clearly see that the birth control pill and perhaps even birth control in general is not a God-honoring option.

God is a God Who Honors Life in General

¹ John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 30.

No study on the effects of the birth control pill (for reasons that will be further elaborated upon) would be complete without the underlying foundation that the God of the Bible is a God who cherishes and values human life. From God's creation of humans *imago dei* and the declaration thereof, God has fixed a value upon human life that surpasses all other physical existence.² Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the declaration of God to Noah after the Great Flood:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.³

The price of a wrongly destroyed human life is the life of the human who wrongly took it. God reiterates this emphatically in his writing of the great commandment, "You shall not murder," with his own finger.⁴ And more, the Hebrew word for murder also carries with it the connotation of not only killing out of blatant hatred or personal gain but also of killing due to carelessness or negligence of which ignorance would be included.⁵ Therefore Christians who desire to follow God in his esteeming of human life must only not kill another out hatred, etc., but they must not kill out of willing and reckless ignorance.

God is a God Who Values the Life of Children and Unborn Children

God's valuing of human life is not limited to adult humans who might pragmatically serve a role in a community, but God values the life of the children and the helpless. The most vivid picture of God's value and love for children is found in the statement and scene of Jesus Christ after his disciples had attempted to disallow some children from coming to him:

"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away.⁶

Jesus came into the world with the mission to preach the coming of the kingdom of heaven of which children are to be the partakers.⁷ To further express God's value of children, Jesus

² cf. Genesis 1:27.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), Genesis 9:6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Exodus 20:13.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 61n4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Matthew 19:14, 15.

⁷ cf. Matthew 4:17.

said to love your neighbor as yourself⁸, and then clarified the value of the term “neighbor,” as Dónal O’Mathúna writes concerning the unborn:

Determining how one ought to treat the unborn by first determining whether or not they are images of God, or persons, raises an old issue. Jesus confronted this when he was asked: “Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer [that Jesus answered] believed that once he knew who his neighbors were he would treat them accordingly. By implication, it would be ethical to treat non-neighbors differently. Jesus’ reply . . . clearly shows that all people are to be treated as neighbors. . . . The status of “neighbor” is something that is discovered as humans interact with one another . . . [and thus] the concern should be to act neighborly towards the fetus.⁹

David expresses God’s care for even the unborn child in Psalm 139, saying:

You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.¹⁰

God valued David’s life, as he does the life of every person, to the extent that he personally forms each one in their mother’s womb. And as well, Christ said that it would better to be cast into the depths of the sea with a millstone around one’s neck than to cause harm, especially spiritual harm, to one of God’s little ones.¹¹

The Birth Control Pill as an Abortifacient

For many Christians, to discuss the fact that God values all human life from conception to adulthood with the subject of the birth control pill seems out of place. Even though many Christians are ignorant to the actual workings of the birth control pill, many do understand a part of its workings. Popular spin proposes that the birth control pill does one thing—prevents ovulation. If this were the entire truth, the birth control pill could

⁸ cf. Matthew 22:39.

⁹ John F. Kilner, et al. *Bioethics and the Future of Medicine: A Christian Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 205, 6.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), Psalm 139:13-16.

¹¹ cf. Matthew 18:6.

possibly be a viable option for Christians, insofar as it goes with respecting life as God respects life. Yet, contrary to popular spin, the birth control pill does three distinct things to prevent pregnancy not just one. First, the pill does prevent ovulation, but it does not do so all the time.¹² Secondly, the birth control pill creates an environment that is unfitting for sperm to reach an egg in case the attempt to abort ovulation fails. Thirdly and most objectionably, the birth control pill if ovulation does occur and sperm does find the egg and fertilize it, the birth control pill destabilizes the uterine wall and thus possibly aborts a fertilized egg.¹³ Though the chances for an aborted pregnancy by the birth control pill are small, they are very possible. Eight out of one hundred users of the birth control pill will become successfully pregnant while on the pill, which in turn raises the question, “If eight out of one hundred become pregnant, what is the percentage of those who conceive on birth control and have the conception aborted?”¹⁴ For a Christian who respects life and acknowledges that God is the giver of life, the possibility of killing a conceived child either carelessly or negligently while on the birth control pill is too risky a gamble.

The Birth Control Pill as a Destroyer of Health

Since 1960, the birth control pill has not only been the most prescribed drug in the world, but it has been one of the most heavily monitored.¹⁵ Medical research has revealed over the past several decades that the birth control pill has many and diverse side effects that are rarely reported by its propagandists. These effects are widespread and show up continually as new research is done but never without the birth control pill claiming some victims. Here are a just a few examples:

The results of thirty-four studies found that women who took the birth control pill for at least four years had at least a fifty-two percent increased risk of developing breast cancer before menopause.¹⁶ Another study shows that women on the birth control pill are forty percent more likely to suffer from menstrual cycle related migraine headaches.¹⁷ A Harvard study found a direct link between new birth

¹² Payne, Franklin E, *Making Biblical Decisions* (Escondido: Hosanna House, 1989), 42.

¹³ Tracy C. Shuman. (2006). *Sexual Health: Your Guide to Birth Control: The Pill*. Retrieved April 30, 2007 from <http://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/birth-control-pill>, 1.

¹⁴ The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2006). *ACOG Information Pamphlet: Birth Control Pills*. Retrieved April 30, 2007 from http://www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp021.cfm.

¹⁵ Davis, 30.

¹⁶ Amanda MacMillan, “Does the Pill cause breast cancer?” *Prevention* 59 (Feb 2007): 44.

¹⁷ Tanya Beers, “The Pill—A Real Headache,” *Prevention*, 59 (Jul 2006): 44.

control pills and blood clots that could cause death in the user.¹⁸ A study published in 1977 associated the birth control pill with a small but significant rise in blood pressure.¹⁹ A 1981 study showed that users of the birth control pill could face double to triple the chance of heart attacks as long as nine years after they cease taking the pill.²⁰ The list goes on and on.

In light of the many medical complications and illnesses that may arise from the use of the birth control pill, what is the Christian response in that regard? Christians are exhorted to be good stewards of what has been given to them, including their bodies.²¹ Furthermore, Paul the Apostle makes this very clear, saying:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.²²

Amid all the proven negative side effects and all the possible undiscovered side effects of the birth control pill, Christians are ultimately left with no choice if they are to be good stewards of that which God has entrusted them. Paul said that the body, the flesh, was bought by the blood of Christ and is therefore his and to be treated well. To take certain gambles and liberties with one's body without regard to the one who bought it is to claim one's autonomy and freedom from Christ rather than to submit to him.

Conforming to God's Desires

The problem with many modern evangelical Christians today is not that they have the wrong mindset with regard to children and contraception, but it is that they do not have the right mindset—God's mindset. The modern era and its "advances" have produced a culture that thinks contraceptively. At no other time in the history of the world has the idea that children are an option in marriage has been so widespread and the actual means by which that option is available is so abundant. It is safe to say that evangelical Christians as a whole have been radically shaped by the culture in this regard and that most scarcely know that they have been shaped thusly. The only answer for evangelical Christians in a

¹⁸ "New birth control pills associated with blood clots," *Harvard Heart Letter*, 6 (May 1996):7.

¹⁹ Davis, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ cf. Matthew 25:14-30.

²² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 1 Cor. 6:19, 20.

culture that makes birth control meritorious is to turn to God's two books, Nature and Scripture, and see how God views marriage and procreation.

The declaration from Nature regarding children is quite simple—sexual intercourse produces children. When a man a woman married before the widespread availability of birth control pills and other contraceptives, children were the natural result of that physical consummation. If a couple did not have children after they had been married for some time, it was viewed as something that was against nature, that something was out of order with either of the partners physically. Let us turn now to the twenty-first century and to a married couple who is in their early twenties who decide to have a child. That couple who has the child early in marriage is seen to be out of step by the society, the same society that also sees homosexuality as a valid sexual orientation.

Affirming that which nature teaches, Scripture is even more explicit. Going back to humans' creation *imago Dei*, God gives to humans two tasks at their creation. The first task is to be fruitful and multiply, and the second is dependent upon it, to subdue the earth and to have dominion over it.²³ Frank Payne rightly says that at the creation of the world, God gave to Adam and Eve seven mandates, two of which are inseparable: the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and the mandate of marriage.²⁴ God created marriage for procreation and procreation for marriage. There is no other context besides marriage by which to have children and no other context besides procreation on which to establish marriage.

Some evangelical Christians argue that the mandate given by God exists in the same category as the eating from any tree in the Garden of Eden except the Tree of Knowledge and therefore does not exist as it did after the fall of man. God however shows that his mandate to Adam was for both unfallen and fallen humans when he gives the same decree to Noah after the Flood.²⁵ It should be reiterated that God's purpose for marriage transcends the fall of man. Yes, marriage does indeed exist for companionship and is ultimately, as the Apostle Paul says, a shadow of Christ and the Church, but it is firstly the only created means by which to recreate human life. Christians should not so hastily indulge in one God-given part of marriage (sexual companionship) and ignore the other God-given part (procreation) out of selfish desires.

Besides commanding that humans procreate and fill the earth, God in Scripture reveals that children are a blessing and gift from God. The Psalmist writes:

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

²³ cf. Genesis 1:28.

²⁴ Payne, 13, 14.

²⁵ cf. Genesis 9:1-7.

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.²⁶

Indeed this is not an isolated passage of Scripture, but the whole of Scripture teaches that children are a blessing from God, and unfruitfulness is tantamount to being cursed. Rachel exclaimed this reality vividly in her cry to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" And Jacob rightly answers her, saying, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"²⁷ In the New Testament the same idea is expressed in the much belated conception of Elizabeth of John the Baptist when she says, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach from among people."²⁸

God declares by Scripture that children are a blessing from him, and to deny that by one's thoughts and one's actions, such as using the birth control pill, is the same as calling God a liar. Much too often children are viewed as a nuisance in the modern culture rather than a gift from God and a sign of his favor. Al Mohler on his radio commentary rightly says,

[American evangelicals] must start with a rejection of the contraceptive mentality that sees pregnancy and children as impositions to be avoided rather than as gifts to be received, loved, and nurtured. This contraceptive mentality is an insidious attack upon God's glory in creation, and the Creator's gift of procreation to the married couple.²⁹

Evangelical Christians, who claim by their words that they desire to be conformed to the image of Christ, must also conform their desires to God's desires. If God declares that children are a blessing from him, the mindset that says that children are not a blessing must be annihilated and replaced.

Along the same vein, some Christians, especially those who marry young, decide to use the birth control pill or other contraceptives, because they believe that they do not have sufficient means to support a child and that they would somehow be poor stewards of

²⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), Psalm 139:3-5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Genesis 30:1, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Luke 1:24.

²⁹ Albert Mohler, (May 8, 2006), "Can Christians Use Birth Control?" Retrieved April 30, 2007 from http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2006-05-08.

the little that God has given to them if they were to have a child. There are two things wrong with such an argument. First, the argument does not recognize that God is the sole giver of children, and it does not recognize him as the provider that he promises he is. Christ says clearly:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.³⁰

Christ promises that if Christians seek God's will first that everything that they need will be given to them even sustenance for their offspring. The second problem is that the argument ignores and devalues the procreative aspect of marriage. Young Christians who marry simply to quench the fire of their lust and desire not to have children should reevaluate their reason for marriage. The faithful Christian who marries must accept the natural and God-ordained consequences of the marital bond and not try to cheat the system especially by means as questionable as the birth control pill.

The Evangelical Christian Response to the Birth Control Pill

The birth control pill has profusely existed in the American culture for well over forty years, and, as a result, it has been widely accepted by Evangelical Christians, especially younger Christians, without a thought to its consequences. Evangelical Christians, however, cannot afford to continue moving forward with the culture wearing blinders to the reality of the birth control pill and yelling empty mantras of Christian liberty. The facts are there in secular and Christian research and are inescapable to any Christian that is willing to open his eyes. For the Christian, the stakes are too high. The birth control pill has been proven to act potentially as an abortifacient, and for a Christian to continue using such a method knowingly or unknowingly does not remove from him the responsibility of his actions. God declares throughout Scripture that he values human life more than any kind of life, for humans are made in the image of God, and he declares that anyone who takes a life by murder (which includes death by negligence and carelessness) shall be judged accordingly. Christians would be wise to use great precaution in all areas of medicine, especially in the use of the birth control pill, for medical complexity naturally creates ethical complexity.

³⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), Matthew 6:25, 33.