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To Conceive or Not Conceive: A Christian Perspective on Family Planning

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Abstract

The issue of birth control has been a constant source of dissent between the Catholic Church and the secular world for much of history. However, the past year has seen an even more divisive conflict erupt over family planning in the United States, since the Affordable Care Act mandates that employers supply insurance coverage for birth control (Reuters, 2013). By contrast, China's government continues to dictate how many children each family can have. The current political and social climate of the world has seriously called into question what should be proper family planning. For the Christian, this is extremely important, as the family unit is emphasized in Scripture. In this paper, I will argue that a Christian view of family planning sees children as gifts, not as unfortunate by-products of sex, and is needed to serve God well in one's duty to his family.

Keywords

Family planning, Christian perspective

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To Conceive or Not Conceive: A Christian Perspective on Family Planning

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The issue of birth control has been a constant source of dissent between the Catholic Church and the secular world for much of history. However, the past year has seen an even more divisive conflict erupt over family planning in the United States, since the Affordable Care Act mandates that employers supply insurance coverage for birth control (Reuters, 2013). By contrast, China's government continues to dictate how many children each family can have. The current political and social climate of the world has seriously called into question what should be proper family planning. For the Christian, this is extremely important, as the family unit is emphasized in Scripture. In this paper, I will argue that a Christian view of family planning sees children as gifts, not as unfortunate by-products of sex, and is needed to serve God well in one's duty to his family.

Before discussing the specifics of responsible family planning, we should understand the need for it. 1 Timothy 5:8 says, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (ESV). Scripture is clear that family is important and that we have a great responsibility to take care of family members.

The Bible also specifically extols the value of children. "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Psalm 127:3). Children should be highly valued, and should be seen as gifts to us. Seeing children as just the by-products of sex is very detrimental and violates the spirit of such biblical texts.

With all this in mind, it is also crucial to see that truly caring for a child means making wise decisions so that one has the means, including emotional investment, financial resources, and time, to give good care. This may mean that a couple limits the number of children they have in order to best provide for each child's emotional, physical, and spiritual needs.

Of course, God is the ultimate Master; He can choose to bring a life into the world anytime He chooses, even if it defies human wisdom. It appears, however, that God has granted parents the responsibility for family planning. He has commanded His people, particularly in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, to make wise decisions, and this extends to building a family (Campbell, 1960). So we must decide what responsible family decision-making looks like.

The issue of birth control is controversial, inasmuch as hormonal methods might seem to deviate from the created plan as described in Scripture. The Catholic Church only condones natural family planning (NFP). Church father St. Augustine believed that sexuality is a sin and is only permitted for procreation (Campbell, 1960). However, we see in Scripture that there are more God-given purposes for sexual intimacy within a married couple than just

procreation. Song of Solomon demonstrates this principle, as there are countless references to the unitive aspect of sex, with arguably little or no mention of the procreative aspect. For example, 4:9-11 says, “You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips drip nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.” This is one example of the goodness and joy of sexual intimacy between a man and his wife on its own merits. Such intimacy stands on its own in marriage, and is not merely for producing children.

Just as childbearing is not the only purpose for sex, having children is not the defining feature of a marriage. God commands his people to “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), and procreation is an important part of humans’ mandate. However, “the idea that Christian hope is in eternal life rather than in many generations of their own genetic offspring is crucial. A marriage without children is already a true marriage because of the God-given nature of the covenant relationship” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 237).

Consider the couple who cannot have children because pregnancy would be too dangerous to the woman’s health. Since they cannot procreate, should they also never have sex? Are they inferior to other married couples who have children? From Song of Solomon and other Scriptures, we can conclude otherwise. According to theologian Karl Barth, being childless can also be a sort of calling that can allow a couple to be effective for the Kingdom in a special way that parents cannot (Blanchard, 2007). Marriage is an institution that honors God even apart from procreation.

So, if procreation is not the central purpose of marriage, then we must consider what kind of birth control may be used ethically. The Catholic Church only condones NFP, which determines when the woman is fertile based on her menstrual cycle and does not use any artificial methods to prevent pregnancy. This is a legitimate option for many couples, as abundant research supports its effectiveness.

However, some couples may choose artificial methods of birth control, such as barrier or certain hormonal methods. Since these two methods are not abortive, they should not be ethically forbidden for all Christians. The Catholic Church only permits NFP because it does not completely block the procreative aspect of sex. However, since the whole purpose of NFP is to purposefully avoid pregnancy, I see little difference between that and other methods. As discussed earlier, if a couple chooses to employ a contraceptive, they should still maintain the proper attitude about conceiving; that is, they should not view an unexpected baby as a problem but as an unplanned gift. Non-abortifacient contraceptives should be allowed if the couple chooses to use them in order to fulfill their duty to their family, and to fulfill a different role within the Kingdom. (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011; Sullivan, 2006; Warniment, 2012).

I would like to make two final comments here on choosing birth control methods. The first is that this decision, in my estimation, may be a situation similar to that which Romans 14

discusses. “The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:22-23). This passage refers to eating meat sacrificed to idols, an obstacle to some but not to others; however, it may apply also to birth control. Even if non-abortifacient contraceptives are permissible, which I argue here that they are, a couple may still choose to use NFP because of their own convictions. This seems right to me.

My second comment is about who should and should not make these decisions. Family planning should be left up to Christian parents, as they seek the Lord’s guidance in making the decision. It is wrong, therefore, for government entities, employers, or any others to dictate the number of children a couple may have. The parents have the primary responsibility in bringing up children, and neither the government nor any other party should have any say.

In conclusion, parents have a great responsibility in their decision-making about raising a family. There are a variety of views and approaches, from the Catholic Church’s condemnation of contraceptives to China’s government regulations on family size. I believe that from Scripture and other sources, we see that sex and marriage do not exist merely for procreation, and that the decision to use non-abortive birth control should be left up to the parents, who should be seeking the Lord’s guidance and wisdom, and a desire to honor Him above all.

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