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Het vraagstuk der bewuste geboortebeperking

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SUMMARY

The Problem of deliberate Birth-Control

1. In this study an attempt has been made to find an answer to the question of the attitude of Christian ethics towards the practice of birth-control. In order to come to the necessary restriction notice has only been taken of the point of view in orthodox Christian ethics in Holland. The conceptions of the R. C. Church and other forms of Christian ethics have deliberately been left out of consideration.

2. In the first chapter a survey has been given of the views in Christian ethics in Holland on this question in the first half of the present century. This shows that in the beginning of this century the practice of birth-control, but for reasons of health and then by means of complete abstention from sexual intercourse, was universally condemned. Gradually, however, a change in these views has set in, because, side by side with the medical indication, the medico-social, the social and eugenic indications were accepted by a growing number of moralists, while the use of contraceptive agents and devices was no longer considered objectionable in all cases.

3. In the second chapter an attempt has been made to get an insight into the actual practice and its causes. For this various available statistics and the returns of social researches could be made use of. Though there is always a highly subjective element in the motives for practising birth-control, the social indication proves to be an important factor. Birth-control is not only a question of mentality and physical condition, but also a question of social circumstances.

4. Therefore an attempt has been made to get some insight into the relation between the actual practice and the social dynamics. The change of the social structure proves to have been effective in the views on the most desirable size of the family. This development of the social dynamics and the consequent change in the moral conceptions of the people, which manifest themselves in the marriage praxis, has compelled ethics, at first quite unwillingly, to change its point of view.

5. Because various biblical data have played an important part in the determination of the standpoint of Christian ethics, these data have been investigated. The data which may be deemed important in this respect have been exhaustively examined. This showed that the status of woman in Israel

was mainly based on her significance for the procreation. Woman existed for marriage and marriage existed for the preservation of the race. The New Testament estimation of woman compares favourably with it, though in the New Testament, too, various traditional elements only to be understood in the framework of the age can be detected. We find in it reminiscences of her former subordinate position and the first symptoms of an ascetic view of life, in which woman could only be accepted because she was the indispensable link in the process of generation.

6. In the Ancient Church, however, she proves to have soon sunk back again into her subordinate position. The old motives of her exclusion from public life, of her destination for motherhood and her subordination to man, strongly assert themselves. The disqualification of sexual life in consequence of all kinds of ascetic conceptions has especially affected woman and more or less impressed on her the stamp of specific sinfulness. The Reformation has indeed brought to the fore again the positive significance of sexuality and marriage, but it has not succeeded in bringing about a general re-valuation of these two spheres of life. Apart from a few exceptions the Church has always advocated a patriarchal conception of life in the course of history and as part of it has judged marriage chiefly from its significance for the procreation. It has failed to make it sufficiently clear that marriage in its essence always is 'conjugium' and not 'matrimonium'. This has also influenced the interpretation of the biblical data.

7. Therefore Christian ethics had to make a complete break with a tradition of centuries, when it looked for a theological-ethical justification of the practice of contraception. In doing this it was also hampered by the fact that it had little interest in social questions and because it failed to take the ethical consequences of the doctrine of the justification by faith. Its conception of Gen. 1 : 28 as a divine command led it to simply identifying the practice of contraception with sin.

8. Against this every emphasis should be laid on the significance of the element of faith in the decision whether to apply birth-control or not. The responsibility of husband and wife to each other and to their children, which is no other than their responsibility to God, may be effective in faith in two directions. They may arrive in faith at a deliberate acceptance of children as a heritage of the Lord, but they may also decide in faith on the deliberate application of contraception. Also apart from the procreation the sexual intercourse of married people has sense as a form of expression of their mutual bond (Gen. 2 : 18-25). Matrimony is in a very particular sense the

place where husband and wife meet each other as man and fellow-man. The unio sexualis, merely as an agent of procreation, means a dehumanization of the sexual relationship and inevitably carries with it a degradation of woman.

9. The Church will have to spread these views in word and deed and should aim at a re-valuation of marriage and family-life. Also in wider connection, namely in the field of the Young Churches, it must not shirk these problems. Nor will this be possible, because by medical mission and various social measures the Church itself has stimulated the development of the social dynamics, which make the problem of birth-control acute and unavoidable (India, Eastern Asia, Africa).

10. This work becomes particularly important when it is seen as a sally-port of the Church for the further spread of the Gospel. By giving married people ethical guidance, it gets a chance to show present-day man what the liberty in Christ (Gal. 5 : 1) means in the actual situation in which he finds himself. The Church should not only be in the bible stall in the market-place but also behind the counter of the rubber-stuff shop. For that is one of the places where at present it can find man in distress.