

The Rights and Wrongs of Contraception

This discussion is not about the use of contraceptives by single people, de-factos, and adulterers. If people think they are smart enough to be sexually impure without risking pregnancies by using the pill, condoms, or other devices, they are not smart enough to avoid God's judgment. The question is: Which means of avoiding pregnancy are legitimate for married couples?

When God created the world, He instructed human beings to bring the earth under their control (Genesis 1:28). So for centuries, human beings who did not want a pregnancy at a given time, and who knew that a woman was fertile during only part of her monthly cycle, avoided intercourse during those days. The only times when this method that could be called wrong were when people rejected God's blessings entirely, and did not want children at all. They were despising God's blessing of children in their marriage. We are talking here especially about couples that, under God, have "increased and multiplied", although it is impossible to say in general how many children constitute such a "multiplying." When a couple has "increased and multiplied" under God's blessing, it should not be considered a sin for the woman to have her tubes tied or for the husband to have his sperm-carrying ducts cut.

The Roman Catholic hierarchy condemns contraceptive measures such as the pill and condoms. It is at odds with many Roman Catholic lay people who have ignored them. One has to ask, What is the difference that would make the pill, for example, wrong? In laypersons' terms, the pill makes a woman's body act in some ways as if it were already pregnant, so that a pregnancy does not usually occur. What is so different between intercourse when contraceptive pills are being used, and intercourse during the infertile part of the cycle while a couple is using the "rhythm method" without expecting children, and intercourse after menopause? The fact that something is "artificial" does not decide the question, for people are using scientific knowledge about what God has made available in the world for their benefit, to "bring the earth under their control."

Part of the problem has been an inadequate assessment of the purposes of marriage. Under God's institution, marriage has three purposes, mutual companionship, the right use of sexuality between people who are "of one flesh", and human co-operation in God's continued creation of human life (Genesis 1:28, 2:18-24). If there is no prospect of children for an older couple, it is foolish to deny them marriage, or to try to prohibit sexual intercourse within their marriage. Living as one flesh should not be restricted to the times where a couple is open to the possibility of a pregnancy. If intercourse were permissible only when there was the prospect of a conception, it would also be forbidden during the infertile days of the monthly cycle and after menopause. The prohibition of any Israelite whose testicles had been crushed or whose penis had been cut off from entering the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:1) should be understood in the context of rules for holiness in the Old Testament. Illegitimate children were excluded too (verse 2). Such restrictions have not been applied in the New Testament.

What about the suggestion that sperm and ova should not be "wasted" when there is no prospect of a pregnancy? God's creation in this respect can even be called "wasteful." When a pregnancy occurs, only one sperm succeeds, and millions fail. Many periods for women pass without a pregnancy. There is no sin or sense of failure for human beings in this. Some people have quoted the case of Onan in support of the opposing view. God killed him after he had been having interrupted intercourse with Tamar. He released his sperm "on the ground" (Genesis 38:9-10). His sin was his refusal to play his part in the Hebrew custom, later sanctioned under the Law of Moses, in what we call "levirate marriage." This was a strict exception to the principle in the Law of Moses that forbade marriage within three degrees. A close relative, usually a brother of a deceased husband, was expected to raise a child for the widow, so that the inheritance of the deceased husband would continue. Onan wanted to avoid producing a child for his deceased brother Er. Under the Law of Moses it was a particular disgrace for a man to decline this special duty. He could refuse to marry his brother's widow if he wished, but his family was then called "The family of the man who had his sandal taken off" (Deuteronomy 25:7-10). That was the disgrace that the closer relative to Mahlon than Boaz incurred when he refused to marry Ruth (Ruth 4:7-10).

However, it is important to add that birth control measures for married couples are wrong when they flout God's command, "You shall not kill." The most obviously wrong kind of birth control is the destruction of little human lives through abortions. Christians must also avoid some intra-uterine devices, which expel an already fertilised ovum from the mother, for the same reasons as they oppose abortion. Then there is also the so-called "morning after" pill, RU486. People advocate its use because it seems such a convenient means of avoiding an unwanted pregnancy after they have been "imprudent." Some countries have banned RU486, and Christians should also use whatever means they have to resist its introduction and use. It is designed to expel, and therefore to kill, a fertilised ovum if conception occurs. Ethical prohibitions of the use of drugs that science has devised should be applied when they destroy human lives, originally created to bear God's own image.

The *Washington Times* on 19 April 2002 reported concern about the "abortion pill", RU-486. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Danco Laboratories, the New York firm that makes RU486, have issued warning letters to doctors. Six women had become seriously ill after taking RU-486, or mifepristone, with another drug, misoprostol, to end pregnancies. Misoprostol is a type of drug that causes contractions to help expel a little baby during an abortion. Three women later suffered bleeding caused by ruptured ectopic pregnancies, which occur when a fertilised egg is lodged outside the womb, often in a fallopian tube. One of those women had died from a haemorrhage. Two other women suffered severe systemic bacterial infections after taking these drugs, and one of them died. A sixth woman had a heart attack three days after using the combination of the two drugs, but recovered. In all of these cases, misoprostol had been taken vaginally, not orally, which was the approved way. The FDA said on its Web site: "At this time, it is unknown whether there is a causal relationship between any of these events and the use of Mifeprex [the brand name for RU-486] and misoprostol."

Concerned Women for America (CWA), a pro-life group that has been fiercely opposing RU-486, issued a statement blaming the abortion pill for the deaths and illnesses of the women. The CWA Senior Policy Director, Wendy Wright, said: "The FDA approved RU-486 under intense political pressure, and now women are suffering the consequences. RU-486 has only one purpose: to kill a human being. Now the evidence is in that women are also victims."

Danco has reminded doctors that RU486 and misoprostol are "not an effective treatment for terminating ectopic pregnancies." CWA had warned there would be heavy bleeding and other serious complications if RU-486 were approved. "RU-486 is harmful to women. Abortion lobbyists should stop putting their political agenda above women's health and end their advocacy and distribution of RU-486."

Our society has already gone a long way down the awful road of sanctioning abortive methods of birth control. Some warnings seem to be prompted only by fears for the health of the mothers. If such fears keep some women away from using abortive measures for birth control, at least we can be glad about that deterrent. Sadly, many people become concerned only when the health of mothers is at risk and show no concern at all for utterly defenceless little human lives. These double standards are serious, and must call down God's judgment. Right concern should have focussed primarily on the many little children who are being destroyed by abortive means of birth control.